



The Place of Interior Design

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“Your body is the ‘house of your soul’”—or so the saying goes. But what kind of body is this “house”? To begin with: is it male or female? How does gender figure in this common architectural trope?

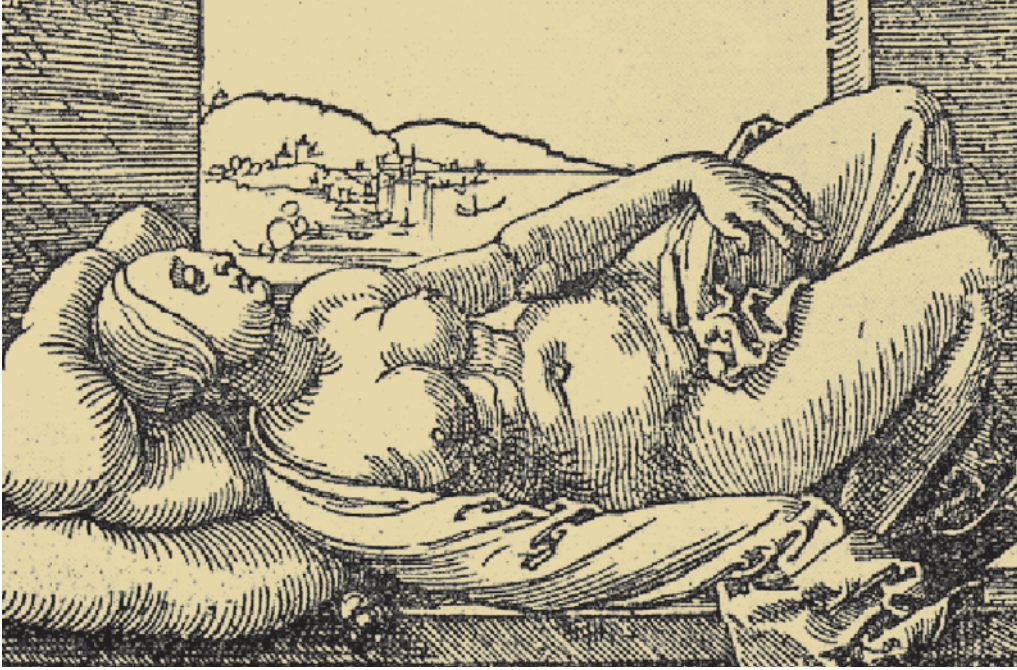
We all recognize the stereotype of the overtly feminine interior “decorator” (whether in the person with a “queer eye” or the second-career housewife) and the disdain shown for “her” when she is juxtaposed against the equally stereotyped, hyper-rational (read: “masculine” or “masterly”) architect. Where do these biases come from? When and how did they enter our perceptions of space and design?

Polemic for a History of Interior Design

“Before the twentieth century the profession of ‘interior decoration’ simply did not exist. Traditionally it was the upholsterer, cabinetmaker, or retailer who advised on the arrangement of interiors.” (Anne Massey, *Interior Design of the 20th Century*)

Many long-standing practices, concerns, ideologies, and events have contributed to the historical and present-day identity of interior design (encompassing the related fields of interior architecture and interior decoration). Ideas about hygiene and spatial efficiency, behavioral protocols, technological innovations in building systems, the changing social roles of women—all have provoked subtle and not-so-subtle shifts in our cultural aesthetic preferences, with material and spatial consequences.

Arguably, interior design’s professional history begins with early twentieth century Modernism. Newly-minted, nineteenth century consumers braved the Industrial Revolution and its mounting pressures of class awareness by cultivating an antidote in “privacy,” the expressed desire for which was nearly co-incident with Capitalism. Their newfound fascination with psychology (and, more generally, “interiority”) paved the way for a turn-of-the-century revolt against



senseless, uncoordinated material production and accumulation. With Modernism, “design” as we know it came into existence, calling for principles of economy, insisting on a continuum between object and environment.

The complication of this lineage is, of course, that it was Modern(ist) *architects* who placed new importance on total integrity of design, from detail, color, furniture, etc. to exterior structure. And in the early twentieth century it was architects, for the most part, who practiced what we now call interior design. It wasn’t until after the fall of Modernism (in the 1960s and 70s) that interior design officially branched away from architecture, ultimately receiving distinct professional and institutional recognition.

Yet to locate its history solely in relation to architects is to reduce interior design once again to the status of architecture’s *other*. The roots of interior design lie equally, and perhaps more palpably, with turn-of-the-century applied arts practitioners (industrial and graphic designers, photographers, furniture makers and textile artisans, etc.), who responded to industry *without* revolting—either through thoughtful resistance, by finding renewed inspiration in handcraft, or through collabora-

tive association—from those surrounding William Morris, to the Viennese *Werkstatte* and German *Werkbund* movements, to the Bauhaus and beyond. These roots may be further traced to the fine arts, most particularly to influences in painting and sculpture. The profession has thus, from its inception, incorporated a diverse range of inspirations and practices.

A Longer History: Theorizing Gender in Interior Design

We must look deeper, and elsewhere, to approach the question of gender directly.

In the early fourteenth century, a French surgeon named Henri de Mondeville used medieval “science” to account for the differences between men and women. His ideas gave voice—and gender—to the split that has come to characterize both the spaces we inhabit *and* how we think about their designs.

De Mondeville, like most of his European compatriots at the time, believed that women’s bodies were inadequately enclosed when compared with men’s. De Mondeville further speculated that the female body is in fact (yes, medically) a male body, turned inside out. This, he seemed to imply, explains why a woman requires another body, an architectural prosthetic, “to protect her soul.”

We’re in strange, preconscious territory here—a zone where female and male, femininity and masculinity, are fantastically aligned with “interior” and “exterior.” Yet, these gender/space alignments continue to influence the practices of interior design and architecture.

In his essay, “Untitled: The Housing of Gender,” Mark Wigley, Dean of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, argues that, in the gendering of domestic architecture, “The material of the body, considered as a house, is seen as feminine, but its physiological structure is male. Maleness is the structuring of the body.” We can recognize in this formulation the means by which architecture came to assimilate de Mondeville’s somewhat fantastical ideas.

By the late twentieth century, however, the lady doth counter-theorize—most vociferously. Feminist philosopher and spatial theorist Elizabeth Grosz, drawing inspiration from Luce Irigaray, protests in her 1995 essay, “Women, *Chora*, Dwelling”:

“[M]en place women in the position of being . . . the living representatives of corporeality, of domesticity, of the natural order that men have had to expel from their own self-representations, in order to construct themselves as above-



the-mundane, beyond the merely material. To sustain this fantasy of . . . pure self-determination in a systematic way, men have had to use women as the delegates of men's materiality."

She continues,

"This enclosure of women in men's physical space is not entirely different from the containment of women in men's conceptual universe, either: theory, in the terms in which we know it today, is . . . the consequence of a refusal to acknowledge that other perspectives, other modes of reason, other modes of construction and constitution are possible. Its singularity and status as true and objective depend on this disavowal."

What have been ignored, historically, in architecture's attachment to transparent rationality, are the notions of *difference*, *multiplicity*, and *relationship*—the very qualities evidenced through interior design's professional history. In architectural pedagogy, as in competition values, there is strong pressure to reduce the number of design concepts to *one*, or at least to organize any abundance of inspirations within a clear and *singular* hierarchy.

Yet, in the realm of the interior, designs

must employ a *variety* of approaches. A critical interior design practice takes into account conditions that may not fit neatly into diagrams or phrases, as well as those that do. It seeks to become conscious of all factors and aspects—conceptual, formal, material, socio-cultural, psychological, sensorial-perceptual, etc.—and understands the ways in which these may or may not be contributing to the experience of an interior, without precondition.

In practical terms, this results in a range of models for organizing design priorities—perhaps the most interesting of which is metaphorical. Metaphors make use of alternative conceptual structures, ones that are able to hold and give meaningful form to *more* than what logic and hierarchy alone would allow.

Repositioning Interior Design

Interpreting Albrecht Durer's sixteenth-century *Draftsman Drawing a Reclining Nude* through the polemical history outlined above, we might be tempted to position interior design as the "reclining nude," at least as viewed by architecture (the "draftsman"): flesh observed by intellect.

Perhaps, though, if we could modernize Durer's rendering, we might better locate

interior design more ambiguously, as the gridded frame itself—a representational system through which the body is rendered less vulnerable. And we might further insist that this frame be oriented *both* ways, that contemporary interior design practice bring together multiple and diverse aspects of environmental design: the pleasures and necessities of flesh *and* intellect.

Interior design, at its best, conceives and creates space from the inside out, from the viewpoint of the situated (if ever-fluidly defined) body. Seen in this orientation, the idea of boundary, or boundedness, is always a question of proximity, of layers—never of finitude—while architecture, historically, has "created" space by making objects to enclose and define it, to contain or limit it—by designing, in other words, from the outside facing in.

Because of the profession's attentions to corporeal, behavioral, and relational nuances of space, interior design attends not merely to materials and colors, furniture and light, but most especially to their *meanings* within use.

These priorities come with the body. After all, one's body—as the house of the soul—includes the mind as well, no matter whether male or female. ●