

Interiors Theory Primer

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Summary Description

Everyone experiences interior spaces, and interior design is growing in significance as a professional and academic discipline. From the shift to working and living in more confined spaces brought on by the industrial revolution, to the current coronavirus crisis, life is increasingly defined by interior conditions. While there is an expanding body of literature that seeks to explain and theorize interior spaces and experiences, there has not—until now—been a cohesive attempt to organize and articulate the major ideas and themes. This book is intended to begin to map the disciplinary terrain of interiors, arguing both for its distinction as a field of inquiry, and for its many and varied connections to other fields. The primer draws upon a range of historic to contemporary scholarship and design project examples to introduce and understand a number of key areas of interest. Organized into three sections, the book addresses long-standing issues at the core of interiors, starting with questions of experience and inhabitation, before moving to emerging areas of concern such as virtuality, biophilia, and social justice. Each chapter introduces a specific topic of interiors, presents a succinct review of pertinent scholarship and design precedents, and concludes with suggestions for further reading related to each topic. In this way, the book provides a structure for readers to understand and engage the important contributions that comprise interiors theory.

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Introduction

PART I – CORE AREAS OF INTERIORS

At the heart of any inquiry into interiors are the intertwined issues of environment and experience. The ideas in the following chapters often overlap, but they attempt to tease apart a number of areas that comprise the social and psychological aspects of experience along with the physical and material conditions of environment.

1) Experience and Inhabitation

Interior experiences are beyond easy description and categorization. They are heterogenous, dynamic, and affective. They occur within a wide range of scales, phenomena, and material circumstances. They may be solitary and deeply psychological moments, familiar and casual social interactions, highly orchestrated and ritualistic pageants, or a wide range of other encounters. The point is that they involve a complex and layered host of physical, social, and psychological conditions. This chapter begins to tease apart these experiences, starting with the body and the way it moves, touches, responds, and eventually comes to know the environment. This cognition provides a basis for more elaborate psychological and social interactions with and within places. From this emerge ideas of dwelling and domesticity, as well as critical views of how places produce conforming habits and behaviors. At the same time this chapter introduces the basic material conditions that constitute space and place, forming the environmental scaffolding for physical actions and patterns of behavior. The chapter discusses key experiential ideas such as mobility and affordance as well as haptics and embodiment.

Key Ideas

perception, affordance, mobility, haptic, body, embodiment, place, dwelling, domesticity, repose, habitus, ritual

2) Place and Identity

Much scholarship has been devoted to the connections between place and identity, including recent work that explores intersections of race, gender, and class. Identity is often rooted in place and creates a sense of belonging, but experiences may cause identity to be confounded, contested, or dis-placed. Perhaps at the heart of this relationship between place and identity is the question of 'home'. For interiors, the relationship between place and identity is frequently made explicit in very material ways—choices of objects or décor that express and reinforce identity. On the other hand, many aspects of identity are sublimated or obscured by interior design, or may be contingent on circumstances or relationships. The discussion of this chapter looks at contemporary understandings of identity as socially constructed, drawing on research and scholarship that shows how place and identity are mutually formed (Proshansky, et al). This offers insights into longstanding issues such as status and luxury, gendered space, as well as where and why people have a sense of comfort.

Key ideas

place, placemaking, identity, race, gender, queer, class, intersectionality, status, branding, luxury, comfort, belonging, local, home

3) Psychological and Social Dimensions

Many designers are drawn to work on interiors projects because of the social and psychological dimensions they engage. It is interesting to think about and design for the interactions that happen in spaces. Shapes of rooms, configurations of furniture, and specific details of surfaces and objects contribute to what happens in a space and how it is perceived. This chapter looks at the scholarship and research that underpins our understanding—often intuitive—of how people behave and interact in places. Early scholarship showed that settings frame attitudes and behaviors (Barker), that perception and cognition work as people create mental images of spaces they are familiar with (Lynch, Gibson); and that people have a sense of space that is both personal and cultural (Sommer, Hall). Later scholarship has layered on further analysis and understanding of the social and cultural dimensions of place, which include dynamics of power and subjectivity. Through these lenses, we can understand issues related to interiors such as privacy, well-being, and lifestyle.

Key ideas

personal space, proxemics, behavior, cognition, mental map, culture, sacred, power, subjectivity, privacy, well-being, lifestyle

4) Furnishings and Objects

Connected to the previous sections, this chapter on the furnishings and objects of interior spaces considers issues of identity and status as well as aesthetics, which prefigure questions of style and taste. It likewise looks further into questions of comfort, and ideas of function, focusing on the body in both empirical terms (anthropometrics and ergonomics) as well as through the lens of critical theory. Furniture directly engages the body and becomes a site to consider how embodiment is spatialized, and interrogate how the body is conditioned through interior spaces and objects. Examples include kitchen and bathrooms that suggest how changing social norms are manifest in the built environment. This chapter also takes up materialist critiques of objects, along with questions of production and consumption. Furniture and objects are shown to be key elements in understanding a range of theories and discourses that come together in interiors.

Key ideas

style, taste, consumption, status, the body, anthropometrics, ergonomics, embodiment, furniture, comfort

5) Making and Materiality

Picking up on the thread of material conditions introduced in the discussion of furniture and objects, this chapter expands the issue to look at a range of interior elements and how they are designed, detailed, and experienced. It is through the materiality of the interior—including surfaces both hard and soft, architectural details and decorative trimmings—that design intent is manifested and lived experience becomes vivid. Specifically addressed is the issue of ornament and decoration, including contrasting historical views on these ideas, and how this is an area that distinguishes interiors from architecture. Digging further, this discussion looks at the processes that underly the assembled material expression to understand how policy and ideology, resource availability, production techniques, design decisions, and construction logics shape the built environment. These ideas help us understand the constructed (literally and figuratively) quality of interiors and how the built environment is fabricated and shapes experience.

Key ideas

surface, detail, ornament, bespoke, softness, decoration, resources, mass production, construction, fabrication, craft, customization

6) Atmosphere

Shapes of rooms, configurations of furniture, and specific details of surfaces and objects contribute to the perceptions, feelings, and activities in a space. Interiors theory often sums this up through the notion of “atmosphere” which hints at the mood and gestalt impression we have from a place. Atmosphere, as Baudrillard shows, operates in a number of registers simultaneously. Inhabitants gain a visceral impression of a space from the material objects and various sensory phenomena (light, color, sound, temperature, etc.). At the same time inhabitants construct a sense of how the space fits the psychological and social context—is the place “cool” and “on trend” or “dated” and disappointing? Underlying this is the issue of desire and expectations we bring from other places and contexts. This chapter looks at both the physical and sensory conditions of atmosphere as well as issues of desire and mediated experience that shape our feelings and perceptions of interiors.

Key ideas

light, color, sensory phenomena, total environment, affect, trend, taste, desire, mediated experience

7) Space

Space, as discussed in depth by Adrian Forty, is an idea that rose to prominence with modern architecture and design. While historically it is a concept belonging to the lexicon of architecture, the fundamental notion of architectural space—an enclosed volume—speaks directly to interior concerns. This chapter considers the formal qualities that define and articulate space (walls, floors, ceilings) as well as those that make space permeable and open (doors, windows, and other thresholds and apertures). Questions of inside and outside are considered, as well as the literal and metaphorical ideas of movement in space. The discussion also picks up on the idea of atmosphere and the phenomenological qualities that shape space (light and shadow). The discussion moves from the formal qualities to the lived experience of space, drawing upon the work of Henri Lefebvre, by looking at the specific boundaries and features that shape inhabitation. At issue becomes the flawed view of modernist space—homogenizing and alienating—in opposition to the lived, heterogeneous experience that interiors embraces.

Key ideas

enclosure, threshold, aperture, inside/outside, movement, atmosphere, phenomena, lived experience

PART II – META AREAS OF INTERIORS

The following chapters represent something of an interlude between areas of long-standing focus and emerging concern: a pause to consider the overarching questions and issues at stake in the discipline of interiors. These chapters deal with how the field of interiors is defined and presented, using a range of media and tools, to a variety of audiences.

8) Disciplinary and Professional Questions

The discourse of interiors is fraught with disciplinary questions, mostly centered on two intertwined issues. The first, the relationship between architecture and interiors—professionally, theoretically, spatially—largely shapes the second, which revolves around issues of gender—again encountered in the profession as well as in the theory literature and in lived experiences and spaces. These issues can be understood historically and through the canon of precedents that are taught and recognized by the discipline. Questions of professional status can also be seen in the codification of accreditation and licensing. Perhaps most interestingly, it is worth examining how these conditions have led interiors to have relatively porous professional boundaries, allowing for various collaborations and affiliations across art, design, media, and the social sciences, and a nimbleness in embracing trends and disciplinary disruptions. At the same time, it is clear that interiors has overwhelmingly served an elite and privileged segment of society. This chapter examines the scholarship around these issues of disciplinary boundaries, status, and praxis.

Key Ideas

disciplinary status and boundaries, historiography, design canon, licensing and accreditation, building codes, collaboration and interdisciplinarity, disruption, praxis,

9) Media and Representation

One area in which interiors has been especially adept is in the use of media to present and portray the work and personalities of designers and the environments they create. From early publications by Elsie de Wolfe, Ogden Codman, and others, to serial popular magazines such as *Architectural Digest*, to television shows on HGTV, to contemporary uses of social media such as Pinterest and Instagram, popular media has been an avenue for designers to engage a broad audience. In less direct, but equally influential ways, interiors have set the scenes for film and television, been the backdrop for historical events, and shaped the display of art exhibitions and retail products. All of these media venues, explicitly or implicitly, are avenues for the creation of desire and the establishment of style and taste. At the same time these modes represent alternatives to conventional design practice, opening diverse pathways to shifting cultural values. Likewise, it is important to look internally at the tools, technologies, and production techniques employed by designers to generate these visions. These considerations engage questions about what is ‘real’ and why/how does interiors employ strategies of artifice.

Key Ideas

media (print, television, social), theater, exhibition, display, technology, desire, style, taste, authentic/artificial

PART III – EMERGING AREAS OF INTERIORS

The following chapters present areas of interiors that are growing in interest and significance. While these areas connect to long-standing issues, they represent new directions or a developing body of scholarship and design work. These areas suggest how interiors may expand engagement with other disciplines and what concerns may occupy scholars and designers in the coming years. What we may perceive is that these new directions show a growing preoccupation with the twin issues of environmental ruination and an increasingly automated and digital world. Interiors, with its focus on human experience, offers unique insight into these looming crises.

10) Crisis and Justice

There are numerous large-scale global issues and specific local problems that can be perceived through interior environments, and engaged through interior practices. Arguably the issue of inequality underlies and connects many of these issues and crises, and suggests that efforts for social justice are (or must be) woven into understanding interiors through this lens. Questions of identity (see chapter 2), especially related to race and gender, also permeate contemporary interiors discourse, with many advocates for more diverse, equitable, and inclusive approaches to interiors. Also connecting back to chapter 2, some of these issues relate to conditions of displacement—refugee crises make this issue explicit, but many of the more subtle stresses of modern life are also linked by a lack of sense of belonging. Interiors has responded in many ways—sometimes perpetuating injustice by continuing to serve an elite clientele—but embedded in the discipline is a non-hegemonic approach that recognizes the value of diverse spaces and experiences.

Key ideas

inequality, social justice, agency, ethics, non-hegemonic practice, diversity/equity/inclusion, race, gender, belonging, displacement, refugee

11) Health and Well-Being

Related to the previous discussion of social and environmental crises is the issue of health, and an emerging and more comprehensive understanding of well-being. These notions incorporate both physical and mental health, as well as concerns about the connections people have with community and environment. Interiors, along with health-science disciplines, is at the forefront of this issue, as more and more time is spent indoors and questions of lifestyle are predominant. As discussed in chapter 3, interiors play a large role in shaping psychological and social dimensions of experience, which have been shown to be deeply connected to physical health and overall well-being. The coronavirus pandemic has further revealed how significant interior spaces are, both for people stuck inside during lock-down phases, and in preventing the spread of disease when social spaces are open for occupancy. Ideas from evidence-based design provide an avenue into these issues, as do standards from WELL Building, Fitwel, and the Center for Active Design, which are discussed in this chapter.

Key ideas

health, wellness / well-being, active design, lifestyle, disability, community, evidence-based design, pandemic

12) Nature and Biophilia

Nature is a complex and multi-dimensional issue for interiors, made more so by the pressing concerns of climate change and environmental degradation. For interiors, notions of 'natural' and 'artificial' imbue the discourse and raise questions of how values are constructed socially and in built form. Today, there are strong trends towards bringing natural elements (plants, shells, water, soil, rocks, etc.) inside to create a stronger connection between people and the natural environment, but it is worth discussing how and why similar examples were common in Victorian design. (The incorporation of these natural objects in the interior connect to issues raised in chapter 4.) Biophilia suggests a close relationship between people and natural processes, including learning from and integrating patterns of plant and animal life into design. These attitudes about nature connect to questions of identity and well-being. Viewed broadly, these trends are part of a larger embrace of sustainability and greater regard for how design impacts the world, accompanied by a more critical position on resource extraction and consumption.

Key Ideas

natural/artificial, biophilia, identity, well-being, environment, climate change, resources, consumption, greenwashing, resilience

13) Trans- and Post- Human Experience

A recent exhibition, *Designs for Different Futures*, brought to view many objects, spaces, and processes that suggest new and expanded modes of experience. People have long benefited from a variety of prosthetics and capacity-extending devices—artificial limbs and pacemakers are obvious examples, but clothing and smartphones as well as furniture and climate-controlled interiors might also be considered in this vein. The ideas of trans- and post- humanism suggest that the forward progression of technology will bring humanity to a new mode of being. This mode will likely involve and rely upon big data, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and automation, and it projects to fundamentally alter human interaction and experience. Interior design has begun to engage some of these questions, but many more remain within the realm of speculative design. One interesting aspect is the material conditions imagined and being explored by designers (many of which connect to ideas discussed in chapters 11, 12, and 14) and how they affect our health and our interrelationship with the multitude of objects that comprise our environments.

Key Ideas

prosthetics, life-extension, artificial intelligence, genetics, robotics, automation, big data, self-regulatory systems, speculative design, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Object-Oriented Ontology

14) Virtual

Virtual reality—and the accompanying hardware and software devices—tends to dominate contemporary notions of virtual experience, and is an important consideration for interiors as spaces that people inhabit, both virtually and physically. However, in considering the theoretical terrain of virtual experience, it is helpful to consider a longer trajectory—from theater, to film and television, to video games, as well as immersive and experiential environments—that the discipline of interiors is influential in shaping. Interiors has been long preoccupied with questions of ‘real’ and ‘artificial’ (as discussed in chapter 9) as well as the creation of atmosphere (see chapter 6) that takes inhabitants out of their specific place and time. Contemporary tools and experiences, such as online maps (especially Google Street View and Indoor Maps), video chatting, and augmented reality applications, make the virtual seem immediate, and often convey more information than would be available through ‘real’ spatial experiences.

Key Ideas

the body, real/authentic, fake/artificial, augmented reality, theater, film and television, video games, augmented reality,

15) Spaces Between and Beyond

This chapter looks at conditions that move beyond the boundaries of interiors, both spatially and as a disciplinary practice. In addition to previously noted (chapters 8 and 9) linkages with architecture, theater, and other spatial design disciplines, interiors readily connects with installation and performance art, film, and fashion. At the same time interiors collaborates with health and social sciences for improved outcomes in a variety of functional program types such as schools and hospitals. Perhaps most interesting is work being done by scholars and designers exploring new interiors terrain: public spaces, both inside and outside, understood in terms of experiential conditions such as scale, affordance, and threshold; mobile spaces, such as campers and boats, that suggest new ways of thinking about home and identity; temporary interventions, including retail and restaurant pop-ups, that bring vitality and fill old spaces in new ways; and activities that engage people in redefining and remaking places, such as community gardens or Park(ing) Day. These sites and projects mark an expanding field of inquiry, demonstrating the contributions of interiors theory and practice, while suggesting new areas of scholarship and collaboration.

Key Ideas

installation, performance, queering, collaboration, agency, public space, mobile space, temporary space, pop-ups, community, difference