

Theory and Practice in Interior Architecture

Knowledge



Wim Marseille sits down to chat about the link between theory and practice in interior architecture. He talks about why the discipline has improved since the 90s and the sort of post-modernist environment the youngest generation of designers find themselves in after graduation.

By Gabrielle Kennedy /asdf 04-10-2009

This month **Aorta** curated **New Cargo**, an exhibition that focused on emerging interior architects in Utrecht as well as a symposium on the subject. **Wim Marseille**, programme leader of Spatial Design at **MaHKU**, was one of the participants.

Marseille's presentation was on the link between theory and practice in interior architecture – difficult territory to traverse. Interior architects work where stylists and architects do not; they design the spaces where we live and work, making the practice very human oriented. And like all things people based, its theoretical foundation is difficult to pinpoint.

"But the real problem is that, at least in a modernist sense, there is no real link between theory and practice," Marseille admits, "and you could even go so far to say that there are no main theories."

A proper body of modernist theory has never been built around interior architecture, or interior design (the name depends on which country you come from). "We instead learnt and borrowed from architecture and other types of sciences and non sciences," Marseille says. "It has become a practice of references."

On some levels architects and interior architects embrace comparable processes. They look around for inspiration, they relate and interpret. But the big difference is that architects work within, or at least have a strong awareness of certain factual typologies.

Even without a sound theoretical base though, interior architecture always enjoyed a very credible reputation, especially in the 60s and 70s. It wasn't until the 80s rolled around when the industry became more about agencies, clients and commissions that that credibility started to wane. "Everybody had an opinion and everybody from the president of the client company down wanted to be involved," says Marseille. "It became very complex and artistic conviction was no longer enough. You had to bring more to it, so things started to get a bit lost."

Then in the 90s, artists, light experts, facilitating managers, retail space designers and a myriad of other perspectives started to define things. “But I don’t see that more professional input as bad,” says Marseille. “To me, it lead to an enrichment of the discipline.”

An enriched industry that apparently skipped modernism to embrace a more post-modernist reality where rules and theories no longer matter. “It’s much more free now than when modernism dominated,” says Marseille. “Everything is practice based.”

When modernism shaped design thinking, practitioners remained focused on finding some sort of truth. Post-modernists, on the other hand, stay focused on finding a position. “What interior architects do now is to position themselves amongst other possibilities,” Marseille says. “The point is to try to create scenarios that show how things could be done against other propositions.”

Further fueling this approach is the reality that the youngest generation of interior architects face - they work very directly in a step-by-step process that leads them to various conclusions. “This makes the whole industry more iterative than ever before,” says Marseille. “It is two steps forward, one step back. Check and adapt. Check and adapt. It is very inclusive and very post-modern.”

And this suits the way the industry now works whereby commissions are mostly based on competitions. A complete design has to be pitched before it has been properly researched meaning it has to be flexible.

This type of on-the-job thinking further complicates that precarious link between theory and practice in the world of interior architecture. “When theories are developed during the actual design practice, how do you communicate them,” Marseille asks. “I think post-modern theory is there, it does exist, and it makes sense when a designer is actually designing, but there is no habit of talking or writing about it to a culturally or professionally interested audience. Nobody has the attitude to do this. I’d say that a designer can not express theories even to himself because it is sensed and felt, not learnt.”

So a link between theory and practice in interior architecture does exist. It’s just that the way it is evolving reflects the more post-modernist, reference-based environment of sub-cultures and networks that today’s graduates stumble into after leaving their design academies.

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