

Representation of Reflection in Action

Scenarios towards a representation of topical artistic research in the field of Interior Design.

A dramatic discovery on the lack of theory..

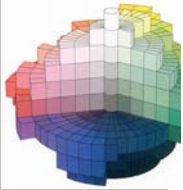
Since research is principal in art and design, Interior Designers become aware of their poor theoretical background. The magazine 'de Architect' devoted a whole issue on the theme in 2002. In the preface Janny Rodermond stressed that: "*Nonetheless our educational system lacks a comprehensive stockpile of information on the history of the interior and on current developments and assignments. Without such a source and its ongoing development Interior Architecture cannot shed its stylistic ornamental image.*"ⁱ The presented cases showed promising practices incorporating a variety of research in the process of design. Yet there were neither theories as basis nor concluding reflections to help developing theory. One might say Interior Design is based on the references of case studies like a 'science of jurisprudentia'.ⁱⁱ The well known cases seem to form a collective memory of references functioning as standards in practice-based research. Much of the interior architects live in the conviction that the quality of the interior space is hard to define and even impossible to photograph.

"*It cannot sincerely be represented, you have to go there!*" says Kees Spanjaardⁱⁱⁱ. And true, the human experience is so much celebrated in Interior Design that minor space is left for communicating thoughts behind the ideas. Wouldn't it be interesting to discuss what changes in culture and society have influenced the practice of interior design? Or to what extent the Interior Designers operate in awareness of this context? And what the significant philosophies, texts, events, cases have been that direct this engagement?

Attempts for a body of theory.

Evidently there are historical reviews, topical reflections, magazines full of case studies, discussions and symposia; Apparently, despite all the publications there is no general accepted body of texts considered as the theoretical basis for the profession. In the proximities of their Interior Design Theory Reader 'Intimus' Mark Taylor and Julieanne Preston remark that an inquiry of several readers used in art schools and universities learned there is no common collection of used essays, what in their ideas can be useful in the Interior Design reflection. "*Initial informal surveys of interior design/interior architecture and spatial art university programmes revealed that not only approaches, outlooks and pedagogical philosophy differ, but also the scope of theoretical texts rarely repeat or identify a distinct set of readings*".^{iv} All educators seem to borrow from different disciplines like geography, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and gender studies.

This immediately brings into discussion next two questions: 'Is there a effective



Despite the scientific colour systems, Ronald Hoofstede uses the complete range of historical colours in a random arrangement.

definition of Interior Design?’ and ‘What is in this field the relation between Theory and Practice?’ These questions are closely related and the discussion on Interior Design and the recognition of its domain evolved in mutual interaction and determined its identity. An outline of the evolution of these identities could serve as a context for attaining reasonable scenarios for the development of a body of theory.

Establishing and protecting the domain of Interior.

Deriving from the origin of the profession, either historically or more in terms of necessity the trace will lead to the craftsmanship. “*Since furnishing is made out of different materials a designer has to coordinate the cooperation of craftsmen*”,^v A simple explanation of the Interior Designer sounds. In the various European countries other craftsmanship’s were influential in the interior. In France and Britain more emphasis was paid on wall decoration and upholstery and consequently the Interior Designer, or decorator, coordinated the dressing of space. In Germany and Holland the interior design was more a coordination of carpentering, so the designer was entitled ‘Indoor Architect’. Not to mention Italy where up till now there is no Interior designer, only Architects or Product Designers.

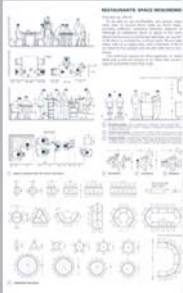
When the job of coordination became more professional Interior Designers attempted to distinguish themselves from the practical craftsmen and the commercial salesmen of interior equipment, branding themselves as a service profession. Not only they underlined the aesthetic and artistic specialty of the designers, moreover they proclaimed a whole doctrine of conventions to state how rationalized living improves the quality of life. The profession tried to establish itself in associations promoting the ideals, like in Holland “*goed wonen*”, ‘Wellness of Living’.

Similar to the Architects, Interior Designers organised themselves in professional organisations and spent lot of energy discussing the boundaries of their discipline. The position of the Interior Designer between Architect and Interior Decorator urged a difficult balance. By characterizing it as spatial profession ornamentation and styling were rejected. To set apart from the architectural domain emphasis on the human scale was stressed. Institutions to guard the profession formulated competences that had to be met by educational institutions. The deliberations on these entrance criteria to the profession resulted in a compromising composition of skills, knowledge and attitudes aiming for an all-round Interior Architect.

New approaches to the discipline.

In the meanwhile the practice of Interior Design was managed by a great variety of people with totally different background. Since the organisation of indoor space became more complex, and teamwork came up, it was not inevitably the Interior Designer in the leading position. Their artistic, aesthetic approach was no longer sufficient to match the commercial, logistic, economical or organisational dominant





Neufert catalogues all optimal conditions for laying sitting and standing; Jeroen van Hoogstraten just builds all combinations.

factors.

Currently the multidisciplinary of the actors in the field of Interior Design urges to come up with an approach to the profession that is more open to the uniqueness of the situation in case. In the context of globalization and postmodernism I like to expand a little on the complexity or fullness of the Interior and show how we could embrace actors of different origin and capacity that jump in, participate and so leave their traces with a new interpretation of the Interior. The way they analyse the circumstances in relation to space can be helpful to restructure the relation of research, theory and design in a relevant manner.

Effect of the Postmodern context.

Like we can see anywhere in postmodern times culture and commerce get entangled in the network of communication.^{vi} As Frederic Jameson argues the 'Globalization' is the effect of this worldwide network and could be assessed in perspective of the two domains mentioned: culturally and economically. Where the cultural effects are rejoiced for the exposure of cultural diversity, the economical consequence of universalisation is often regarded as threatening. Emanuell Castells in his analysis of the internet society introduced the notions of '*spaces of place*' and '*spaces of flow*'^{vii} to label the spaces like airports, conference rooms or hotel lobbies; these dynamic, grey, limitless non-places where the power of the new era resides, and on the contrary the spaces where the physical ambiance expressed identity. Interior Architects impulsively announced to protect the well-designed places and were repulsed by the so-called McDonaldization. Georg Ritzer elaborated on this idea and a whole set of oppositions under the categories '*Something*' and '*Nothing*' came up. It matches perfectly the aim of most Interior Designers to work in a unique, locally tied, time specific, humanized and enchanting way, and not generic, disconnected from time or locality, resulting in their eyes in a dehumanized and disenchanted design. Rem Koolhaas recalcitrantly however celebrated the city life and took the congestion as an opportunity to celebrate the generic^{viii}. Now it is interesting to see that in practice these oppositions are not so rigid. A design like 'Institute for sound and vision' Neutelings/Riedijk^{ix} manages to point the uniqueness in an interchangeable setting. The huge void connecting five basement stories of archiving with public functions above ground, identifies the location within the tension of a tomb and a theatre ready to adapt to different functioning. One might even suggest that the contradictory opposition is no longer valid in the postmodern culture, as Frederic Jameson states: "*Postmodernity has become the place for antinomies, omnipresent standardization accompanied by celebration of heterogeneities. The experience of contradiction, the fundamental figure of modernism becomes less serviceable as instrument of analysis.*"^xWhere a





contradiction serves as a starting point for argumentation and taking a stand to solve the situation, more inherent ways of juxtaposition invite to associate and playfully propose a position to reveal interesting options. This less rational but highly communicative way of design is found omnipresent nowadays particularly in product-design like 'Droog',^{xi} The medium itself has become the message totally in line with the globalisation as a communicational concept. *"The cybernetic revolution does not project connotations of an image but the technology itself. What we still call information is greatly technology."*^{xii}

Research integrated in the design process.

The shift from thinking in categories to taking perspectives is crucial in the development. The icon of modernism, the chair by Arne Jacobsen^{xiii} illustrates best how contradiction, categorisation and composition form the premises of functional design. The chair is divided in its two functional parts, a seat and a framework. The design process continually optimizes the designated functions. The seat ought to be warm and flexible and is made of plywood and the frame was required to be strong and so fabricated in metal. Even aesthetically the categorization was continued: the parts had to be divided clearly. The whole of the work was a composition, literally a put together, in an idealistic expression. For example the expression of floating was favorite in modernism because of its connotation of power over gravity and the sensation of walking on the moon^{xiv}. So the seat was painted colourful and the frame was chromed to dissolve in its reflections. In the post modern design not the idea of a function is rethought but the real case itself. The way of analysis is more based on perspective, rearrangement and scenario. The process does not start from a tabula rasa but celebrates the fullness. When Hella Jongerius was assigned to make an ideal home^{xv} she created a collection of layers filled with all possible choices of doors, plates, curtains and chairs. Likewise her colour collection for Vitra is built up from historical colours used by the company. She added transparent coloured sheets to increase the number of possibilities, and so the statement is something along the lines of: 'The ideal choice is constantly dealing with whatever occurs'.

Towards a representation of reflection in action.

Where the modernists love to project their ideal on a 'tabula rasa', in postmodern times different perspectives of the fullness of reality are taken as a means to reveal an insight in the unique case at hand. In this approach two shifts are crucial. First the experience of the spectator is prominent. There is no wish to come to an ever-valid analysis but more to arrive at a particular interesting option. Secondly the medium of mapping the



complete circumstances are decisive to arrive at a new understanding. The design is an attempt to reveal and elaborate on that understanding of the situation, so the act of design is mostly a rearrangement of existing facts rather than deliberately constructing forms following their predominated functioning.

Bearing in mind the shift from modernism to postmodernism, a reflection once again on the role of theory in Interior Design will clarify the unpleasant state of affairs. When the value of the Modernist manifestoes diminished and the profession struggled to define its domain it lacked to organise the new ideas and fall back on all that was left: the description of case studies. In the modern approach proactive theories had inspired the design, which were inherent to the modern approach of ideals articulated in manifestos. The text was the principal medium. Research to ideal settings resulted in handbooks with illustrations of simplified situations. A handbook like 'Neufert' collected all thinkable measures that were optimal in whatever circumstance. The criteria however were quite straightforward on function, and the drawings were based on plans or elevations showing the ultimate measurements or organisation of usage. The reports on best practices often illustrated with happy people in their modernist environment slowly took over the major role of reference when the functional approach was regarded too narrow-minded. To show the atmosphere in space the photographs depicted spaces without any living beings. Texts accompanied the visuals and mainly described the experience of an imaginary walk through the spaces presented. Plans became just a supportive tool to comprehend the orientation. The vision of the designer was hardly reported and many cases were presented as solution to the particular circumstances. This tendency in representation remained current while designers of different background introduced new processes in design. The instruments used for research like graphs mapping the situation on different parameters appeared in architectural reviews but did never manage to create a reconsideration of interior representation. Interviews with the designers questioning their intentions were the residual medium to compensate the content-less visual stories.

No wonder a body of theory for interior design is hard to compose, the media of research are not compatible anymore with the visual orientated case-study representation.

Conclusion

Research has always been an integrated part of artistic practice. The way it explicitly operates differs from time to time. When there is need for an overview of current research in Interior Design it is most relevant to respect the innovative area of practice that anticipate the globalized culture best. Suitable forms of representation need to be found for the performed reflection in action.

¹ Janny Rodermond; de Architect 2002 / 8, page 16.

¹ Annelies van Aller, personal conversation, Utrecht 2003.

¹ Kees Spanjaard, unpublished interview, Amsterdam 2007.

¹ Mark Taylor and Julieanne Preston, Intimus, Chichester, 2006

¹ Karel Boonzaaijer, personal conversation, Zeist, 1985.

¹ Frederic Jameson; Globalisation and Architecture, essay in The Domestic and the Foreign in Architecture, Rotterdam 2007.

¹ Manuel Castells; The Rise of the Network Society, Blackwell, Oxford, 1996.

¹ Georg Ritzer; Can Globalized Commercial Architecture be Anything but Highly McDonalized? essay in The Domestic and the Foreign in Architecture, Rotterdam 2007.

¹ Rem Koolhaas, The generic city, 010 Rotterdam 1995.

¹ Neutelings/Riedijk; Institute for Sound and Vision, Hilversum 2007.

¹ Frederic Jameson; Globalisation and Architecture, essay in The Domestic and the Foreign in Architecture, Rotterdam 2007.

¹ Frederic Jameson; ibid.

¹ Arne Jacobsen; Chair Series 7, Fritz Hansen 1955.

¹ Hella Jongerius; Furniture Fair IMM, Cologne, 2005