


Chapter 18

Interior Designing in the Urban Environment: Practices for the 21st century

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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is a time of significant change to and in urban environments and cities. The momentous and unrelenting movement of people seeking refuge in cities other than their own; the impact of weather, pandemics, terrorism and war; the effect of technology; and the transformation of concepts such as public and private highlight the urgent need to think differently about cities in relation to inhabitation. It seems appropriate, indeed vital, to bring the expertise, techniques, and concerns of the interior designer and interior architect into the urban realm to attend to how people might inhabit the urban environment. This chapter curates a series of propositions that position the practice of interior design in the urban environment. Each proposition engages a different theoretical framework in relation to the concept of “interior” and, as a consequence, a different methodology.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has emerged as a period of significant change to urban environments and cities. For the first time in history there are more people living in urban environments than rural contexts: currently it is 55% with a projected increase to 68% by 2050. Further, significant numbers of people are seeking refuge in cities other than their own. The actual number of people is also increasing exponentially: in 1950 the total urban population was 751 million people; in 2018 it was 4.2 billion. In the most recent *Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, conducted by the United Nations every four years, it was predicted that by 2030, there will be 43 megacities with more than 10 million inhabitants (UN, 2018). This is a three-fold increase on the current number of megacities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7254-2.ch018

Interior Designing in the Urban Environment

In 2020, the COVID-19 virus transformed the urban environment at a global scale as physical distancing and lockdowns impacted cities culturally, socially, economically and politically. As the pandemic shut down cities and confined people to their immediate surroundings, the question of habitation was magnified. People became aware of aspects of urban life that were taken for granted, such as public space and sociability, and became sensitised to the way they inhabit the environment.

The increasing reference to conditions of “interior” and “interiority” in relation to the urban environment is symptomatic of this concern with inhabitation. *MONU* – a magazine on urbanism that focuses on “the city in a broad sense, including its politics, economy, geography, ecology, its social aspects as well as its physical structure and architecture” (Upmeyer, 2004) – ran an issue on the topic of “interior urbanism” in which contributing authors noted how “90% of our lives are spent inside. Urban life is an interior affair” (Cormier, 2014), and “the interior has grown to become an endless type of urban form” (Piper & Khamsi, 2014). A seminar presented by Yale’s School of Architecture titled *Interiority and the City* positions interiority as “a concept of increasing importance to architects in urban centres today. As populations increase, cities become denser, resources diminish, and economies sober, architects will need to confront new methods of space making” (Erdman, 2017).

Academic and artist Mark Pimlott, who has written extensively on the “public interior”, observes that “one must recognise the interior as a much broader category of experience than the room, or even the territory. The interior is everywhere” (Pimlott, 2019, p. 168). His book *The Public Interior as Idea and Project* (Pimlott, 2016) addresses the increasingly interiorized condition of contemporary cities produced through large, architectural public spaces such as shopping malls and airports “... to make the interior visible ... as a realm beyond the domestic, apparently centred on the self; ... the public interior, in producing the most influential spaces of our urbanized environment, is a realm of many possibilities” (Pimlott, 2018).

As Pimlott observes, the deployment and experimentation with conditions of interior and interiority in the urban environment can be found in contemporary as well as historical practices. An often-cited example is Camillo Sitte’s *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, first published in 1889, that argues for approaching cities as a series of continuous, furnished and decorated spatial enclosures, using artistic methods of arrangement and aesthetics at a time when urban planning was increasingly focused on the challenges of transportation (Sitte, 1965). During the 1950s and 1960s the Situationists rebelled against capitalism’s influence and sought to do this through constructing situations in the urban environment that aimed to “provide a décor and ambiance of such power that it would stimulate new sorts of behaviour, a glimpse into an improved future social life based upon human encounter and play” (Sadler, 1998, p. 105). The urban interventions of artist, designer and architect Ugo La Pietra, such as *Soggiorni Urbano* (Milan, 1989), converted the street into a living room in the street so that “living is being at home everywhere” (Rui, 2014, p. 211).

The provocation of interior design as an urban practice however is relatively recent. This is in part due to the expansion of the definition of “interior design” from a practice that is necessarily situated in an architectural context to one that focuses on the relation between people and their environment. In 2011, the International Federation of Interior Architects/Designers (IFI) held a global workshop with the aim of defining the profession and its value, relevance and identity. The outcome from the workshop was the *IFI Interiors Declaration*. In this document, the practitioner is defined as someone who “determines the relationship of people to spaces based on psychological and physical parameters, to improve the quality of life” (IFI, 2011). With a focus on the relational, the practice of the interior designer is no longer defined in advance by the condition of enclosure.

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