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INTERIORITY





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Interiority

by Marie Frier

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Didactic exercise
Fall Semester
2010

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Interior worlds: “your word”

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Paper

Using our senses we intuitively recognize the inviting interiority of the precisely orchestrated interiors of, for example, Mackintosh, Loos, Le Corbusier, Wright, Schindler, Aalto and Fehn. In the sensuousness of these works, we experience how building envelope and furniture merge as a result of a deliberate engagement with functionality and scenography in the transformation of the building envelope into furnishing spatial elements inviting the inhabitant

to see, touch, hear, smell and taste home. Such detailed spatial engagement with the intangible concept of home is, however, easily disregarded within the increasingly complex practical, economic, and climatic realm of architecture leaving our houses as raw constructions. Consequently, this paper investigates whether the perceived interior qualities of the previously mentioned works can be articulated and activated as principles in a future positioning of interi-

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ority within today's practical realm. A preliminary research result discusses interiority (1) as a theory and design methodology for transforming the actual structural and economic elements of construction into furnishing details, signifying home.

The increasingly complex processes affecting society today pose new demands on architectural practice. Especially within domestic architecture, where prefab processes have for over a century been envisioned as the means for achieving a general improvement of the ordinary dwelling, the sensuous furnishing aspects of architecture are often pushed in the background, leaving the produced houses as raw constructions rather than sensuous inviting homes. (2) Consequently, it seems that one of the greatest challenges for architecture as a discipline is to increase our involvement with industry, herein our ability to actualize, communicate, and develop the sensuous aspects of home within the

processes preconditioning practice. The question is, however, how to define and articulate the rather intangible concept of home. Through our sensuous perception we intuitively recognize the soft upholstered interiority of furniture, described by Praz as a precondition for our experience of a place as home: (3) an interiority which is our claim, can be rediscovered as a spatial discipline interrelating building envelope and furniture in the precisely orchestrated Functionalist interiors of, for example, Mackintosh, Loos, Le Corbusier, Wright, Schindler, Aalto and Fehn. Here details such as built-in seats and niches create points of actual sensuous interaction with the house, details in which wall and chair merge

as a result of a deliberate engagement with functionality and scenography inviting the inhabitant to see, touch, hear, smell and taste the interiority of the house as home. Not only do they provide for functionality embracing the senses, it is our belief that they also stage the complex pleasures of the mind such as in Mackintosh's choreographed meeting of male and female in precisely defined niches demarked by his high-backed chairs. These works can be considered total works of art, built under conditions which are radically different from the ones governing the ordinary dwelling. However, it is our hypothesis that they contain crucial principles necessary in attempting to spatially define the intangible concept of home. (4) Consequently, it is the goal of this paper to investigate how the perceived interiority of these works, having kept their relevance in the present, can be articulated and activated in a future positioning of interiority as an architectural theory and design method for transforming the structural and economical elements of construction into home in the ordinary dwelling. Methodologically this is pursued by attempting to utilize interiority as an analysis-method, pursuing a testing of the particular hypothesis that a single furnishing element contains the seed for

constructing a home in its entirety. (5)

Interiority as an analysis-method

In Unwin's *Analyzing Architecture* his notion of "architecture as identification of place" has led to a listing of specialized analysis-parameters; stratification, transition, hierarchy, etc. (6) In a similar manner von Meiss and Arnheim uses notions such as order, disorder, solid, hollow etc. in describing architecture. (7) However, rather than attempting to describe the architectural work and the instruments at play in their entirety, it has been our strategy here, to look at architecture-analysis in a more immediate manner; from the point of view of the chair. Herein we use interiority as a critical perspective through which to dissect the spatial principles governing our sensuous experience of home. In this matter we have begun

by zooming in, first on the concept of furniture, hereafter on the building envelope and finally their interrelation, interiority, using Corbusier's *Villa Stein* as an analysis-example. (8)

Furniture

As described by Lucie-Smith there exist an endless number of furniture variations, dining-tables, sofas, bookcases etc. However, all of which derive from one of the four typologies; pieces on which to sit, put things, sleep or recline and pieces in which to store things. (9) One could say that furniture unfolds a sensuous invitation, "serving our bodies and possessions" to use the words of Abercrombie, who defines two basic typologies of furniture; one serving our bodies, sofas, chairs, and beds, and one serving our possessions, shelves, tables and closets

as illustrated in fig. 1. (10) Pieces of furniture are mobile elements wherein our bodies and our things can rest upon surfaces and inside cavities, often upholstered, offering a soft encounter. Brayer

has argued that a chair is immediately inhabitable, “a symbol of the dwelling”, as an effect of this particular softness and proximity to the human body. (11) However, there are also differences between chair and house.

Building envelope

In opposition to the mobility of furniture the building envelope once erected is in general fixed. Rather than supporting and serving our bodies and possessions, it shields us against the weather, basically consisting of floor, wall, roof, window, and door as exemplified in fig. 2. However, as described by Semper in his studies on the origins of construction the house evolved first and foremost as an enclosure preconditioned and derived from the technique of weaving. (12) Thus, whereas in general we think of the house as a framework large enough for us to stand up and walk around in, it derives from the principle of dressing, describing a proximity to the human body even more intimate than that of furniture and opposing the raw constructions making up our houses today. We cannot only conclude that the softness of furniture preconditions our experience of a place as a home as stated by Praz, but also that the actual technique for constructing the house derives from this particular intimacy. Thus, rather than looking at furniture as a mobile addition to the fixed building envelope and an autonomous discipline, we can begin to look at furniture, building envelope and construction as being interrelated architectural dimensions of the home.

Interiority

In interrelating furniture and building envelope as proposed above, both are transformed. Rather than being mobile

the chair is now contextualized accentuating particular qualities of the house. The chair is no longer just a piece on which to sit, it becomes a place in which to sit. Likewise the house is no longer a raw construction, but contains sensuous spatial elements inviting the inhabitant to sense the house as a home; places in which to sit, eat, sleep, bathe and synthesize as illustrated in fig. 3. Thus, after having zoomed in, first on furniture, subsequently on the building envelope, we can now attempt an actual formulation and testing of interiority as an analysis method. Looking at Villa Stein as an example, we can hereby direct our analysis to particular spatial elements, points of encounter between furniture (sofa, chair, bed, shelves, table, and closet) and building envelope (floor, wall, roof, window, and door). Fig. 4 shows how the spaces in Villa Stein actually evolve from the principle of a shelf. In creating a curvature contrasting the rigid constructive framework of the house, the shelf interacts with the wall in the creation of niches, bookcases, and seats, further slicing a hole in floor and roof, creating a visual contact to the storey below. One example is how the seat created by the shelf directs the inhabitants' attention towards the small window opposite the seat. Another is how the shelf wraps around the wall to the right creating a cavity serving as a sideboard on one side and as a decoration-shelf on the other. Thus, not only does Le Corbusier provide for functionality and sensuous encounters in the creation of a place to sit and to eat, but also for places of synthesis, for displaying our object trouvé, (13) objects signifying the complexity of the mind. We cannot only conclude that it is in this

particular and deliberate transformation of the building envelope into furnishing spatial elements that the seeds for constructing the home in its entirety are to be found: But also that the specialized instruments governing architecture as a discipline are hereby made physical, and articulate.

Discussion

In returning to our examples, the works of Mackintosh, Loos, Le Corbusier, Wright, Schindler, Aalto and Fehn, we can conclude that they do not solely represent an exclusivity unknown of the ordinary dwelling; they also contain precise and prosaic principles of interiority, thus making the significance of home physical and articulate both for the senses and the mind. The future challenge, however, is how to relate these principles to the structural and economic means of construction; plate, shear wall, beam, column, bolt and screw, illustrated in fig. 5.

We close the paper by proposing a development of interiority as a theory and design method for transforming the actual structural elements of construction into furnishing details, asking whether it is possible for the softness of upholstery to evolve directly within the economy of construction? This is a challenge which not only requires a passionate engagement with the concept of home, but also with the practical realm of the ordinary dwelling: an inherent and increasing architectural challenge, which may be utopian in its destination, but which is nevertheless captivating and necessary.

The work presented in this paper is partly financed by the Danish housing manufacturer Boel Living A/S. In addition Boel Living A/S is our project partner offering not only a view into the practical realm of prefabrication but also an actual and engaging context for pursuing a practical testing of theory, a matter discussed further in a paper recently published in Design Principles&Practices – An International Journal, vol. 4, i. 2. The support is gratefully acknowledged.

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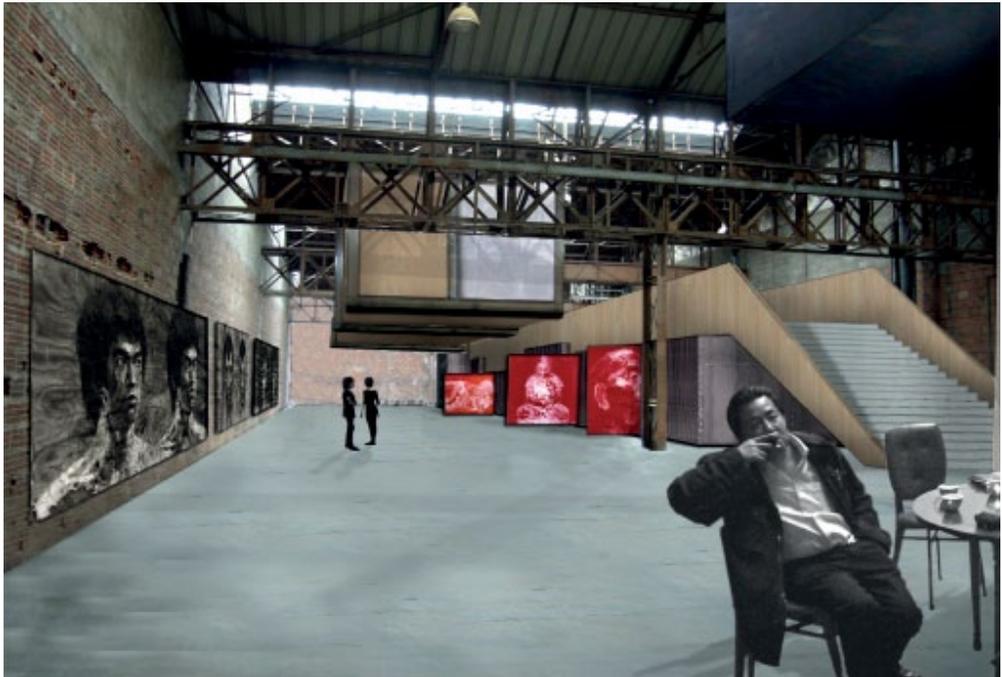
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Atelier Yan Pei Ming, Paris (France)
Studiometrico
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