

The Social Production of Interiority: an Activity Theory approach

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ABSTRACT

Postmodern transformations in philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences have led to new ways of interpreting the social production of space and the spatialisation of social and cultural phenomena. Emergent discussions about interiors and interiority typically emphasise the social nature of space, while related research examines the complexities of socio-spatial phenomena. This paper contributes to this growing body of literature by introducing an alternative view of interiority. More specifically, the phenomenon of interiority is viewed as a by-product of the processes of the social production of space and the appropriation of space through instrumental activities and symbolic interaction. Interiority is seen as first emerging with considerations for comfort and convenience; later branching out to embrace concerns related to experience, productivity, and efficiency. More concretely, interiority can be viewed as providing the necessary conditions for social agents to undertake their activities, as well as protecting them from undesirable influences. Activity is perceived as the major mechanism for the appropriation of space and also for endowing it with the quality of interiority. By interpreting interiority this way, it becomes possible to dematerialise it and liberate it from the constraints of structures, building shells, and technical systems, as well as the problems associated with them. This alternative approach will facilitate the incorporation of knowledge and methodologies developed in the social sciences and cultural studies for the purpose of producing knowledge in the areas of design research, programming/briefing, and space planning.

INTRODUCTION

The emergent discourse on interiors and interiority presents us with a rare opportunity to benefit from a complex ecology of exploratory approaches and intellectual systems. Current developments bring together provocative ideas and imaginative visions. The community of scholars working in this thematic area has opened new avenues for envisaging, interpreting, and conceptualising interior phenomena. This paper is intended to introduce an innovative 'activity theory' perspective and to offer a complementary notion of interiority, constructed from an activity theory point of view.

BACKGROUND

With the advent of postmodernity, the interest towards space in philosophy, the humanities, and social sciences has increased considerably. Some of the most influential philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century are leading these developments. The works of Pierre Bourdieu,¹ Michel de Certeau,² Jacques Derrida,³ Michel Foucault,^{4,5} Bruno Latour,^{6,7} Henri Lefebvre,⁸ and many others have both signalled a new, socio-cultural turn in the studies of space, and have charted new areas and directions for disciplinary-level scholars. Postmodern philosophers have sparked exceptional interest in the study of space in many fields, including geography, architecture and interiors, urban planning, literature and film theory, history of art, organisational studies, and feminist studies and critical theory.

The concerns and considerations that constitute research agendas in philosophy and the humanities have strongly influenced the research programs of disciplinary scholars. The foremost thematic areas that intertwine space and social phenomena emphasise power, empowerment, hegemony, control, domination and a myriad of other interests that are gradually emerging from the main domains examined. As such, the postmodern turn has infused the study of space with new aspects, focal points, and pragmatic discourses.

Although many social philosophers and scholars are delving into issues of spatialisation of society and culture, most are concerned with the effects of spatial organisation of society on the phenomena of everyday life and the progress of our civilisation.^{9, 10} Much of this work is at the macro level, focusing on societal and geographical phenomena. However, with the spread of these ideas at disciplinary level, there has been an increase in scholarship about space and spatialisation in the humanities and the social sciences. This trend has made its way into areas like architecture and interiors, ethnography and cultural studies, literature and art history, and a number of similar fields. In architecture and interiors, this advancement is led by humanistically-minded scholars, feminist thinkers, and academics with backgrounds in literary studies and philosophy.

Current discussions about interiors and interiority closely follow this model and offer a myriad of insights into the making of interiors and the emergence of interiority.^{11, 12, 13} These debates emphasise the social nature of space, interiors, and interiority and investigate the intricacies and complexities of the socio-spatial phenomena. These perspectives fostered a number of new thematic circles and reinterpretations of classic concerns and concepts. For example, there are new ways of viewing the boundary phenomena, thresholds, and interstices, the dialectics of inside and outside, and the complex relationships among interiorities and exteriorities. There is also a marked drive to go beyond the discussions of Euclidean space and aesthetic concerns, and to instead engage in debates about the embodiment of space, inhabitation, population, and the ecology of social and spatial phenomena.

AGENDA AND DELIMITATIONS

The purpose of this paper is to initiate an alternative discourse on the ecology of socio-spatial phenomena with the objective of using this knowledge in design research, design programming/briefing, and evidence-based design. My goal is to highlight aspects and qualities of interiority that are rarely discussed and are complementary to most of the existing developments in this area. My objective is to construct a new vision about interiors and interiority that can be translated into disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses in order to utilise substantial parts of disciplinary knowledge that already exists in the social sciences and design theory. This new approach will help bridge the global vision of abstract philosophical ideas with the utilitarian requirements of field research and project-specific studies. In addition to the issues discussed below, there are many other topics that also deserve to be examined. However, due to space limitations, even the concerns presented in the present study are only partially examined.

METHODOLOGICAL GROUNDWORK

The conceptual basis for this study originates from several sources. Its foundation comes from Lefebvre's notions about the social production of space and the spatialisation of socio-cultural phenomena.¹⁴ Next, these notions are brought into operation by way of activity theory. This is possible because both intellectual platforms share a common foundation in dialectical/historical materialism that facilitates a smooth interface between them. Such an interface assists in the translation of the major philosophical positions at the disciplinary level. I use this interface to develop a conceptual apparatus that will enable me to reveal aspects and qualities of interiority rarely discussed, that are complementary to many existing developments in this area, and that are related to the social production of space.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF SPACE AS A GUIDING PRINCIPLE

Lefebvre has offered new insights, albeit at a very high level of abstraction, about the complexities of everyday life, urban habitat, and the role of space in the development of our civilisation.¹⁵ His treatises on the production of space have radicalised the fields of human geography, urban planning theory, culture studies, and sociology as his emphasis on the spatial dimension of socio-cultural phenomena has inspired scholars in these disciplines to consider more fundamentally the role of space in the trajectory of social processes. Setha Low builds upon Lefebvre's ideas and elaborates additional distinctions.¹⁶ She conceptualises the process of the social construction of space in relation to the social forces that shape the ways we interpret our environment. She constructs the concept of social production of space with a stronger materialist stance, referring to the social influences on the process of the material production of spatial structures.

I take into account the terminological considerations of both Lefebvre and Low and on that basis I develop my own somewhat different formulation. This means that I interpret the social construction of space as being predominantly about symbolic interaction, ascribing meanings, and construing reality, while the social production of space refers to the socio-cultural phenomena that influence the generation and use of space. Excluded from this formulation is the material production of space, which encompasses the social influences on delivering new facilities.¹⁷

ACTIVITY THEORY

Lefebvre and Low's ideas about the production of space are further interpreted from the perspective of activity theory. Activity theory is concerned with the interaction between humans (treated as subjects or social agents) and the object(s) of their interest. It postulates that a subject (social agent) interacts with the object with the help of a tool. The emphasis is on the facilitation, mediation, and ensuing relationships. Each basic category is further developed into several sub-categories. New categories are introduced to account for additional considerations. From this perspective, built environment can be treated as a tool that facilitates human activity. The interactional and mediating phenomena discussed in activity theory make it a productive methodological instrument for the study of people-environment relationships.

There is a myriad of activity models and frameworks intended for different purposes, some of them broader and more general, others more specific and discipline or problem-oriented.^{18, 19, 20} They are based on the legacy of a democratic interpretation of historical materialism and the works of Vygotsky.²¹ Different versions of this approach are referred to as Scandinavian activity theory, activity methodology, and systemic-structural activity theory. They are design-oriented and are well known in the fields of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), design of socio-technical systems, educational and instructional design, and organisational design.

The specific activity framework used in this treatise is developed for practical purposes such as providing guidance for the study of socio-spatial interactions. The development of the framework began with John Wade's idea for organising building user information in programmatic research.²² Wade postulates several major categories: person, purpose, behaviour, function, and object. He describes the typical information that falls under each category. More importantly, he also denotes the functional relationships that may exist between adjacent categories.

I developed and reinterpreted Wade's idea in more detail as I incorporated ideas from the activity theory perspective. My intent here is to understand the mechanisms of interaction

between people, their built environment, the ensuing socio-spatial relationships, and the emergent phenomena in these processes. This activity framework has several dimensions. One dimension includes the categories of agents, goals, activities, necessary conditions, and built environment. All these components are 'moulded' in particular ways by culture. The cultural aspect is not presented separately, but is infused within each of these categories. The term agent is very common in the social sciences and is related to the concept of agency. In this study it is used to denote entities capable of purposeful action, and range from individuals to organisations. Goals provide directions for activity. Activity itself can be viewed as a system of processes, ranging from physiological to socio-cultural. The way an activity is performed is shaped by culture and related phenomena. In the course of activity, agents develop needs for particular conditions. Agents also feel constraints and restrictions, have particular considerations, make decisions, and so forth. This component of the activity framework can be developed further to include perceptions, meanings, and the social construction of reality. Necessary conditions emerge in the activities and interactions of the agents with other agents and the (built) environment. Necessary conditions are an important category for this project. The built environment can be conceptualised regarding its physical features or the necessary conditions that it provides for the agents and their activities.

If we look at the chain of mediation in reverse order, the built environment provides particular conditions that are necessary for activity processes and social agents. These conditions facilitate activities and operations, increase productivity, efficiency, comfort, and convenience, and support the health, safety, and well-being of social agents. However, while providing necessary conditions, the built environment might also create obstacles, obstructions, constraints, and a number of unintended and undesired effects.

IN PURSUIT OF NECESSARY CONDITIONS: A GENEALOGY OF INTERIORITY FROM AN ACTIVITY PERSPECTIVE

A discussion of space, interiors, and interiority is complicated because of the variety of conceptualisations, meanings, connotations, nuances, and usages of the same words. There are many terminologies and parlances that are used in different paradigmatic traditions, discourses, and disciplines. The most common conceptualisations are referential, directional, and locational, like interior/exterior, in/out, inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, and so forth. Another group of conceptualisations emphasise enclosure, containment, void, and emptiness. Modernism in architecture and design has advanced the relational concept of space and notions about flow of spaces, interpenetrations, and degrees of transition between inside and outside. All these conceptualisations have emerged and have persevered because of particular disciplinary or practical needs. My intent is not to challenge them, but to develop and disseminate a complementary view on interiors and interiority. Social agents appropriate space during their everyday functioning. Activity is

the major mechanism for interaction. Activity processes can be organised conceptually by domains and levels that range from physiology and psychophysiology, through cognitive levels and personality aspects, to group interaction and the cultural determination of action. In relation to built environment, social agents perceive, make sense, develop, share, and negotiate meanings, evaluate, prioritise and set preferences. Agents are guided by social norms, rules, and schemata.²³

Social agents require particular conditions to support their functioning and activities. We can conceptually organise these conditions into several categories based on levels of activity processes and their constituent components. For example, the physiological level is crucial for the organismic functioning of humans. We can also envisage psychological, social-psychological (or group/interactional), operational, and cultural levels and aspects. The necessary conditions facilitate social activities and make them more efficient and productive. Agents need comfort and convenience for economy of effort, for saving their energy for more productive tasks or for recuperating faster after exhausting social action. Agents also want exciting experiences and aesthetic stimulation. In order to acquire the necessary conditions, people have created instruments to develop and sustain them. The easiest way is to demarcate or envelop a space in some way and then to control the conditions in that space. Depending on the necessary conditions that have to be produced and sustained, the demarcation or enveloping of space can be produced with different means, ranging from symbolic systems to material structures. In some cases, merely marking the landscape has been enough to allow activity processes to take place without conflicts. In other cases, it has been necessary to physically enclose a particular area and to hold the envelope with a support structure. Such enclosures and boundaries serve people by providing particular conditions for them and their activities. This is most obvious in extreme climates.

I would like to focus the reader's attention not on the buildings' structures, but on their ability to provide the necessary conditions for the activities of social agents. From this point of view, the key to the phenomenon of interiority is in the realm of the necessary conditions that these structures provide. In essence, the envelope, enclosure, or skin are nuisances because they require resources and labour, have considerable side effects, and create numerous problems. We wish to have all of the advantages that they bring without any of the problems they create. The built environment is not an ultimate goal by itself; it is rather only an instrument for providing the necessary conditions. In this respect, the ultimate interiority happens when it is produced without materials, boundaries, and enclosures. Thus, from this perspective, interiority is not about enclosure, containment, and boundaries, but about the necessary conditions - in the broadest sense possible. Interiority is a system of environmental qualities that supports social agents and their activities. Interiority emerges with considerations for comfort and convenience that later broaden to include delight, productivity and efficiency.

THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF INTERIORITY FROM AN ACTIVITY PERSPECTIVE :THE DIALECTICS OF SOCIAL PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The genealogical perspective is intended to relate environment, necessary conditions, and the phenomenon of interiority as it makes a case for the primacy of socio-spatial interactions and human needs in the process of interiorisation and the production of interiority. Once the structures and boundaries are built, people start interacting inside them and with them. The socio-spatial interactions become two-way processes and have multiple aspects. This perspective offers an insight into the multiple ways social agents appropriate space and interpret their activity situations and engage in the social construction and production of interiority.

From the activity theory point of view, interiority can be conceptualised as a system of qualities of space. As such, interiority is an emergent phenomenon. In everyday life, interiority emerges in the course of social appropriation of space. In its broadest sense, activity is the major mechanism of this appropriation. Human experience facilitates the construction of meaning and endows spaces with additional social qualities. Other socio-cultural phenomena contribute to this process as well. This position can be expanded in scope and depth depending upon one's scholarly objectives. The process of interiorisation and interiority can be further discussed in relation to social production and social construction of space. In this project, they are interpreted as two complementary visions that overlap and allow us to discuss somewhat different aspects. The processes of social production and social construction are intertwined because of the multi-faceted nature of human activity and the amalgam of objective and subjective phenomena. The conundrum of precise differentiation between such notions stems from the idiosyncrasy of symbolism and its embodiment in human activity.

In this project, I conceptualise the social production of interiority regarding the appropriation and use of space. By using space, people endow it with human qualities. In this line of thinking, the process of interiorisation and the notion of interiority can be envisaged in the light of spatialising human activity with all of its complexity, interactivity, and subjectivity. In comparison, I conceptualise the social construction of interiority in the sense of social construction of reality, with an emphasis on human experience, symbolism, interpretation, making sense of social reality, and developing personal and socially shared meanings and expectations. These processes are strongly influenced by socio-cultural factors, and by virtue of their nature are heavily loaded with subjectivity.

SPATIALISING ACTIVITY AND APPROPRIATING SPACE:THE SOCIAL PRODUCTION OF INTERIORITY

The ideas about embodiment of space and the spatialisation of society and culture can be revisited from an activity theory perspective with the intent of delving into the mechanisms of socio-spatial

interactions and the ensuing appropriation of space and production of interiority. The production of interiority happens during the appropriation of space in the process of its use. The development of activity structures in space can be interpreted as spatialisation of activity and the culture that shapes it. We can also say that the spatialisation of activity leads to the production of interiority. Conceptualisations like appropriation, use, activity and spatialisation provide viewpoints that allow us to construct in multiple dimensions a complex, intangible, and abstract phenomenon. As mentioned previously, the scope of this paper does not include the influence of social factors on facility development or the material production/construction of buildings and interiors.

By organising, developing, and executing their activities in real situations, people spatialise their activities and engage in the production of space. This conceptualisation can be interpreted from several aspects. One concerns the embodiment, materialisation, dimensioning, and production of an activity functional area. Another aspect concerns the method of performing the activity, which greatly impacts the organisation of material components. Although related, this goes beyond the embodiment of space and emphasises the cultural dimensions of both activity and space. The notion of spatialisation is important for understanding the process of interiorisation. The spatial-material dimensions of human activity generate needs for particular clearances among the boundaries and other large objects in the area of activity processes. By spatialising activity processes, we produce relationships between objects and boundaries and we produce space.

People require not only conditions to support basic physiological needs, but also conditions for managing social interaction, communication, and the amount of information. Several examples are privacy, territoriality, and density, as well as social status and its non-verbal communication. When considering the incarnations of higher-order human needs, the process of production of space becomes more complicated. The spatialisation of activity involves new mechanisms for providing for these needs: vanity screens, partitions, increased distance between workers, and so forth. The footprint of an activity and the activity area become much larger. Area size can vary depending on the introduction or removal of considerations, requirements, and restrictions.

The amelioration of space with the help of building structures resolves a host of problems, but it also creates a new problem and new tasks for designers – how to organise human activity and material components so that enclosures are used in the most efficient way, procuring optimal levels of comfort, convenience, and productivity. This becomes the core issue of space planning and, by implication, of architecture and interior design. From the opposite side, when we look at the people who interact with spatial-material environment, we see how they produce space. By virtue of their activity engagements, they also become co-creators and co-designers of space when they adjust and change current settings and adapt them to their needs. In this way, when people organise their action space, they transform the spatial-material structures into components of interiors, as well as the means for producing interiority.

When we interpret the social production of space in this way, there are several problems or tasks that emerge. From defining space and interiority, we move towards organising space. The problem with space organisation in enclosed, contained, and restricted areas is one of great importance. When we enclose space, we limit its size because we are limited by our resources. The limitation of size brings a number of side effects. Although the enclosure and the boundary offer us the benefits of a well-tempered environment, one that is well adapted to the processes of our bodies and activities, it may also generate side effects or undesirable outcomes. This is also part of the key to understanding the complaints associated with the confining, restricting, and controlling nature of interiors. Besides the social situations where such results are deliberately targeted, in the rest of the cases these are side effects of technical, technological, or financial restrictions.

NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING ACTIVITY SETTINGS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF INTERIORITY

From a complementary point of view, the social construction of interiority can be seen as a learned process. The notion of the interior is learned in the process of acculturation, the sharing of meanings, and the production of a system of conventions. People develop an understanding and a feeling about what is interior and what is exterior as a result of the use of space and the appropriation of space, but also as a result of communicating with each other and sharing, adjusting, and aligning perceptions, conceptualisations, and choice of words. This is a typical pattern of the social construction of reality. Because of the large number of aspects and degrees of transition between interiors and exteriors, the multitude of conventions is overwhelming. Anyone who has engaged in clarifying, relating, and organising the terminology about space has had first-hand experience with these problems.

People are acculturated and accustomed to particular perceptions and conventions of spaces and interiors in particular. Because the concept of interiority and the implication for inside-ness have a very strong referential function, people use it for communication and navigation in everyday life. Both through acculturation and personal experience, people become aware of particular features that produce interiority and start interpreting spaces on the basis of these features. As a result, people start developing a taxonomy of spaces and tacit references that they use for navigation when performing everyday tasks. Because the social construction of space is fluid, vague, and transient, there is great variety in the interpretations, and very different types of spaces are perceived and categorised as interior.

The social construction of interiority is a complex process that depends on the perception and sense-making of boundary features, degrees of enclosure, social conventions, behaviour rules, symbolism, verbal cues, and labelling of spaces. Interiority can be signified by any component of an enclosure that creates the perception for a deliberate segregation of space with the purpose of serving the users. In some cases, in order to communicate interiority, it is enough to mark the space and communicate its intended function. In this respect, interiority becomes about communication,

sending messages, and mediatisation. The interior becomes a medium by itself. The interior becomes the arena where users' and designers' intentions and desires for personal expression intermingle or clash or enter a complex dialogue of participatory co-designing or 'co-finishing.' The expressive aspect of interiority is very important.

The appropriation of space starts as purposeful behaviour that includes taking ownership of space. This complex and diverse process is completed through communication tactics, using symbolic behaviours and messages. The interior messages convey statements, warnings, status signs, rules of conduct, levels of control, ownership, and so forth.²⁴ The social construction of interiority contributes to shared rules and expectations, reduces ambivalence and uncertainty, and prevents conflict in the use of space.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The phenomenon of interiority emerges in the processes of the social production of space. This production itself occurs through the appropriation of space. Such an appropriation is achieved by instrumental activity and symbolic interaction. The process is based on the spatialisation of activities and cultural patterns. Thus activity becomes a major mechanism for appropriation of space and for endowing it with the quality of interiority. From this vantage point interiority can be seen as an assemblage of socio-spatial qualities. Alternatively, interiority can be envisaged as a system of necessary conditions for the social agents and their activities. In this approach to conceptualising interiority, we can dematerialise it and liberate it from the constraints of structures, building shell, and technical systems, as well as the problems associated with them.

This proposal does not exclude or preclude other perspectives. It is intended as a complementary point of view that will enhance, balance, and advance current approaches to interiors, interiorisation, and interiority. Applying such an approach to interiors and interiority allows us to translate our subjective experiences, feelings, visions, and insights into a more explicable system that can be communicated among several parties in the building development process. This approach is more concrete, pragmatic, and applicable than a number of other intellectual developments that exist at the philosophical level. The current conceptualisation of interiority makes the relationships between the philosophical and disciplinary levels more visible and helps to relate the philosophy and theory of interiors to planning, programming, and design practices.

The activity theory perspective on interiority fosters concerns regarding the organisation of space with the purpose to facilitate human activity. These concerns actualise most extensively in facilities programming and space planning. Programming is the major facility development phase for specifying necessary conditions and translating them into design requirements. If we agree that interiority is about necessary conditions provided through the organisation of space, symbolism, and experience, then interiority becomes intimately connected to programming and space planning.

Typical paper limits impose a number of difficult choices and lead to the exclusion of interesting and important issues. There are aspects that have been only briefly touched upon and issues that need to be developed in more detail. Similarly, there are notions that are implied, but not yet explicated and involved in the current discourse. That said, the perspective on interiority presented in this paper charts a number of possibilities for future research and development.

NOTES

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