

## Di-vision/double vision

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**Abstract:** *The conference theme 'Between excess and austerity' indicates a division which has shaped the discipline of interior design during the twentieth century. This paper is the outcome of a desire to open up this binary relation which continually dogs the practice of interior design. The writings of Gilles Deleuze, in particular his attempt to 'overturn Platonism', are used as a tool to lever and open up possibilities for thinking differently. The immediate effect is that in between excess and austerity one encounters an 'and' – excess and austerity – hence the title of the paper 'di-vision/ double vision'. Rather than between or either/or, it is both. This produces a blurring of vision which problematises the distinction made between interior design and interior decoration based on questions of excess and austerity as one equated with ornamentation versus the essentialism of a minimal aesthetic. This paper considers three familiar modernist surfaces from the twentieth century. Looking through glasses provided by the writings of Deleuze, the Platonic nature of the surfaces is apparent but so too are other ways of viewing these surfaces – division becomes di-vision or double vision and the possibilities for other ways of thinking and doing proliferate. The question of excess and austerity shifts from one of 'to decorate or not?' to one where the binary is blurred and the between becomes 'and' rather than a between of moderation. This involves an epistemological shift from a search for essences and ideals to an encounter with surfaces where meaning and events happen in which the proliferating intensity of life can be both austere and excessive.*

**Keywords:** *Platonic division; Gilles Deleuze; Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos; Mies van der Rohe*

### Introduction

There is something provocative about the conference title 'Between excess and austerity'. On one hand it suggests moderation – for what else lies between excess and austerity? – on the other, it restates a binary that has plagued and dominated the shaping of interior design over the past century. Interior design as a discipline has defined itself as a practice in relation to notions of excess and austerity coupled with a distinction between interior decoration and architecture respectively. Its allegiance with architecture has produced a line of filiation with minimalism as a form of austerity in a binary opposition to ornamentation which was considered to be in excess of the modern surface.

The aim of this paper is to surface this division as one informed by Platonic ideals. In the process, a di-vision or double vision will also become apparent which disorients the

apparent self-given quality of the interiors that are produced by this division. Here one encounters the excess which lingers in the austerity of these surfaces and austerity in the excessiveness. This paper is an attempt to construct a platform of departure for interior design thinking and practice; to affect a shift in what appears to be dominating dichotomies and divisions that have shaped interior design as a discipline. Through different encounters, it aims to open up ideas and chances for different ways of designing and thinking about interiors.

The writings of Deleuze, in particular those that attempt to 'overturn Platonism', assist in this inter-rupting to produce a double vision. His writings are used in the spirit with which he advocated – like a pair of glasses, to look through and see the world. This paper is produced through an encounter with his writings – 'You should not try to find whether an idea is just or correct. You should look for a completely different idea, elsewhere, in another area, so that something passes between the two which is neither in one nor the other. Now, one does not generally find this idea alone; a chance is needed, or else someone gives you one. You don't have to be learned, to know or be familiar with a particular area, but to pick up this or that in areas which are very different. This is better than 'cut-up'. It is rather a 'pick-me-up' or 'pick-up' – in the dictionary = collecting up, chance, restarting of the motor, getting on to the wavelength; and then the sexual connotation of the word' (Deleuze & Parnet, 1987, p. 10). The immediate effect is one affecting the conference title – his propositions of the conjunctive poses 'and' rather than 'between' – excess and austerity, hence the title of this paper 'di-vision/double vision'. Rather than 'between' or the division of 'either/or', it is both – di-vision. The shift in this paper to di-vision or double vision from division and binaries is to entertain multiplicity, proliferation, intensities, differences and paradoxes of excess and austerity.

This paper argues that the dominant understanding of interior design in the twentieth century is shaped by the notion of an interior that is implicit in the Platonic division between inner and outer which distinguishes between the Ideal and the copy, essence and appearance, good and bad. The interior for Plato is a site of identification and recognition. Deleuze on the other hand embraces difference and that which is in excess of resemblance – the simulacra (Deleuze, 1990, p. 254). Simulacra are of 'no fixed identity, contradictory or disguised entities in which the dimension of an unlimited and illogical becoming is revealed, a dimension in which objects may be said to be simultaneously both hotter and colder, bigger and smaller, younger and older. Such objects escape the domination of the idea and as a result threaten both models and copies' (Bogue, 1989, p. 56). Deleuze's strategy is to make

'manifest what is latent in Plato: [and to] 'deny the primacy of an original over the copy, of a model over the image' and 'glorify the reign of simulacra and reflections" (Deleuze in Bogue, 1989, p. 57).

A site for the Platonic division is the surface as it has been a site of contestation between excess and austerity in the design of interiors. For example, the distinction between interior design and interior decoration could be argued as a distinction between surfaces, between excessive surfaces (interior decoration) and austere surfaces (interior design). It is also the site for Plato of the encounter with the Ideal – via the shadows that can be seen on the surface of the cave wall. Considered as such, the surface becomes a site of meaning and events where meaning is 'the surface effects of words' and events, 'the surface effects of things' (Bogue, 1989, p. 72). For Plato, and also Deleuze, this is a process of interiorisation – one of resemblance and identification for Plato; for Deleuze, one of difference. The former involves containment and enclosure, the latter conjunctions and proliferation.

This focus on surfaces shifts from the conventional focus on space in relation to interior design – the question of vision which this paper addresses is of necessity directed at the surface as it is where light becomes visible, vision possible and where meaning and events take place.

Surfaces constructed in the early twentieth century that divide, organise and order excess through austerity, truth and imitation will be discussed; specifically, Le Corbusier's whitewashed surface and Adolf Loos's theory of cladding. A third type of surface – Mies van der Rohe's reflective planes in the Barcelona Pavilion – are examples of modern surfaces that have also 'had tremendous impact on modern interior design' (Pile, 2000, p. 276). Its surfaces – both austere and excessive – challenge the Platonic division and the Platonic interior that accompanies it. The aim here is not to describe a lineage – to write a history – so much as to make apparent the Platonic presence on the surface and the interior produced. Each surface is a different encounter and each has occupied a seminal point in the discipline of interior design. Double vision – excess and austerity – blur: this paper is an intervention rather than a history – an inter-story if you like.

## **Division**

The division between decoration and minimalism articulated as a distinction between excess and reduction is informed by Platonism which privileges the Ideal, the essence and essential. According to Plato, in the world there are only copies – of which these are further divided into good copies and bad copies. The mind is able to determine which is good by identifying inner resemblance to the Ideal. The bad copy is one that does not resemble well (it includes

other qualities which are therefore in excess of the Ideal or the original). So constantly there is a process of division – between essence and appearance, good and bad, resemblance and semblance. Gilles Deleuze wrote, ‘The purpose of division then is not at all to divide a genus into species, but, more profoundly, to select lineages: to distinguish pretenders; to distinguish the pure from the impure, the authentic from the inauthentic’ (Deleuze, 1990, p. 254).

These notions of essence, authenticity and purity are familiar terms within a modernist discourse and are used in relation to interiors, both architectural and psychological. Decoration in relation to interior design and modern architecture has been equated with the inessential, applied, surplus, fake and imitative. It is deemed to obscure the truth of materials, cover over and mask the authentic. Viewed in relation to Platonism and notions of essence, purity and the Ideal, the pejorative positioning of decoration in relation to architecture and interior design can be understood as an equation with a bad copy – that is, with that which bears no resemblance to the Ideal and is therefore in excess of inner resemblance – simulacra.

The motivation for this and the dismissal of interior decoration can be perhaps found in the interior that is posited by Platonism: an ideal interior that seeks resemblance and identification. This becomes apparent in reading texts on architecture and noting the use of the word ‘interior’ in a variety of ways to include both physical architectural interior and the interior of the subject. The nature of dwelling for example is both physical and psychological (Heynen, 1999; Wigley, 2001). One could map interior design’s lineage with modern architecture rather than interior decoration as one of identification of the interior in a quest to identify and represent the modern subject.

In 1890 Hermann Bahr wrote *The Modern*: he spoke of a sense of disorientation amongst the younger generation due to the perceived fact that while the modern was present, it was not evident ‘in the spirit’. Bahr called for a purge of the old and an exorcism of falsehood in order to create the space for ‘... a new culture, a culture that would erase the difference between outward appearance and inner spirit and thus would be based on truth, beauty and harmony ... The ideal house should be a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would reveal the inner truth of its inhabitant: ‘... In a house like this I would see my own soul everywhere as in a mirror’ (Heynen, 1999, p. 72). This concept of the inner spirit is Platonic and the necessity for it to find resemblance (rather than disorientation) in the surfaces of modernity is critical to the lineage produced for interior design. This ideal interior of the modern subject is assumed as a pre-existing entity and has remained unquestioned – a given – in the production of surfaces which were to reflect the inner state of ‘modern man’. These surfaces were austere – excess lead to uncertainty, lack of clarity, simulacra.

## Surface

The surface, like a mirror, suggests an interior production – and an encounter with the surface, a process of interiorisation. Modernism, as a pursuit of ideals and essences, locates the Platonic interior as a state of inner resemblance. The surface becomes the site for recognition and identification; reflecting the image of the ‘soul’ back as a process of identification of inner resemblance. This may also explain the equation of the interior with notions of intimacy, comfort and security – as an enclosure of certainty. Excess cannot be contained and is therefore uncertain.

The interior is illuminated as opposed to the darkness of the unknown exterior. Hilde Heynen made a similar point: ‘The mimetic gesture of ‘enclosing oneself’ is parallel to the quest for identity and self-realisation that forms a basic characteristic of modernity’ (Heynen, 1999, p. 223). This mimetic gesture is performed on the architectural surfaces. It was a gesture that was carried out through a process of reduction towards an austerity of surface and one that constantly fought excess by dismissing the superfluous, superficial, inauthentic, decorative and difference. This links to the other major force in interior designs of the twentieth century – René Descartes and his declaration of certainty based on the subject as an interior mental state ‘I think therefore I am’.

This relation between outward conditions and inner sensibility was constantly negotiated on the modernist surface and is evident in the surfaces focused on in this paper. The surface becomes a site of engagement and encounter – of reflections and contestations – where events and meaning occur. Here the process of division, di-vision and double vision – between excess and austerity – becomes apparent. Yet this is not to say that interior design, as a discipline, is necessarily a discipline of surfaces. In fact, many would make the distinction that it is a discipline of space and this would be again to distinguish it from interior decoration.

A prioritising of surface over space is not new but it involves another epistemological shift where space is not a given or a thing but rather a relation between surfaces. J.J. Gibson in his book on visual perception took it one step further and wrote: ‘We live in an environment consisting of substances that are more or less substantial; of a medium, the gaseous atmosphere; and of the surfaces that separate the substances from the medium. We do not live in space’ (Gibson, 1972, p. 32). The writings of the architectural historian Gottfried Semper also posit the surface, in this case textiles, as the site of the production of space and in particular interior space. Mark Wigley said of Semper’s position – ‘... The interior is not defined by a continuous enclosure of walls but by folds, twists, and turns in an often discontinuous ornamental surface’ (Wigley, 2001, p. 11).

'Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial – out of profundity' [Friedrich Nietzsche, preface to second edition of *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft (The Gay Science)*, 1886 (Wigley, 2001, p. xxviii)].

### **Double vision**

The surface as a site of Platonic division is exemplified in the whitewashed surface of Le Corbusier. These surfaces are an expression of Platonic idealism – white, essential, pure sites of exclusion in the pursuit of certainty. The removal of decoration from the wall surface was the removal of 'a representational layer ... (as) civilisation is defined as the elimination of the 'superfluous' in favour of the 'essential' and the paradigm of inessential surplus is decoration' (Wigley, 2001, p. 2). It is a form of architectural hygiene to be carried out in the name of visual truth: "... *Everything is shown as it is*" [says Le Corbusier]' (Wigley, 2001, p. 3). All previous architectural surfaces are dismissed; the temporal and historical are whitewashed to reveal the timeless essence of the universal. The division is absolute or nothing and the encounter is deemed to be with the essential and the universally true. As an absolute surface it is a site of total projection. Yet gazing at these surfaces, the excess of white produces glare which affects the eyes, causing blurred vision when one looks away.

In contrast to the concept of liberated vision posed by Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos advocated cladding as the most appropriate surface for modernity and 'modern man'. For Loos, the surface could not adequately represent or resemble inner states as the relation between inner experience and outward forms could no longer be perfect in modern culture. Therefore the surface acted as a mask and an enclosure. 'The most cultured person is the one who can adapt to every circumstance and who is capable of responding in an appropriate fashion on all occasions and in every sort of company. This quality is achieved by imposing a deliberate partition or mask between inner and outer. The mask must be designed in such a way that the conventions are respected' (Heynen, 1999, p. 78). Austerity was expressed through ideas of decency or propriety rather than reduction and as is familiar through Loos's writings, decoration was equated with crime and excess. Loos constantly divided house and monument, art and useful objects, interior and exterior of the house, pleasure and utility. '... division, he argued, is fundamental to the modern condition' (Heynen, 1999, p. 95). The interior in contrast to the dumb mask – the surface of moderation that lies between austerity and excess – is one of intensities and excess, as exemplified in: the bedroom he designed for his wife Lina; the Josephine Baker project; the showroom of the Goldman & Salatsch

menswear store in Vienna. These interiors are composed of spectators and spatial encounters. 'The artist, or rather the architect, thinks first of the effect he is aiming at, then he constructs the image of the space he will create in his mind's eye. This effect is the sensation that the space produces in the spectator: which may be fear or fright ... respect ... pity ... the feeling of warmth, as in his own house ... forgetfulness, as in taverns' (Gravagnuolo, 1995, p. 23).

The Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe is both simultaneously excess and austere. The division becomes di-vision in which 'less is more'. Continually becoming and changing, these surfaces defy the Platonic division in that the inner is not a state of resemblance, identification or representation. Even in its role as the German Pavilion, there is no representation of its origin (although some have argued that the colours of the materials are the same as the German flag). Meaning is produced through an encounter with the pavilion's surfaces not so much as a question of division where one seeks identification but of proliferation. Everywhere reflections double the spatial dimensions creating spaces of mirror reflection and contradictory perceptions.

The pavilion's surfaces abound in reflections of light, people, and movement producing a disorientating, sensual experience of immersion. Paradoxically, the overwhelming sense of interiority produced is not one of enclosure but extension and openness. Caroline Constant writes of the pavilion's landscape quality and how it is aligned with notions of the picturesque where meaning is produced through movement and change rather than imposed. 'Despite its overwhelming interiority, the pavilion resists inhabitation. The role of the spectator is fleeting, transitory. The reflective surfaces of glass, polished marble and chromium-plated steel absorb any human presence, casting doubt even on the body's own substance, just as the pavilion's architectural language denies its metaphoric presence. The self merges with the other as fleeting ephemera in the cumulative layers of reflection' (Constant, 1990, pp. 50–51).

As with Le Corbusier and Loos, van der Rohe's surfaces are sites of encounter for the subject – 'the will of the epoch translated into space' – but for him, this subject was not a Platonic subject seeking certainty but rather one which was encountering change and proliferation; for van der Rohe, this is 'the intensification of life' (Constant, 1990, p. 53).

## **Conclusion**

The discipline of interior design has been and continues to be dominated by a discourse and conception of interior based on Platonic ideas of a pre-existing interior – the subject – and a pursuit of the essence of things. This paper has sought to bring this to the surface and to make it apparent while also suggesting through the re-viewing of some familiar surfaces

of modernism that divide as well as produce di-visions. Viewed as such, the surfaces of modernity offer a plurality of division – di-visions doubling vision – in an endless proliferation of possibilities of excess and austerity. Rather than between excess and austerity, it suggests excess and austerity simultaneously; to encounter in the surface not the division of exclusion in the search for essence but as van der Rohe advocated ‘the intensification of life’ and participation in a world which is endlessly changing, celebrating its excessive austerity and austere excesses.

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