narrative research + the
built environment
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## Abstract

Narration or story telling is proposed as a process which enables researchers in interior design/architecture to deal with the crux of environmental design — experience and relationships. This approach addresses the limitations of more superficial understandings of the built environment represented by discussions of form or appearance. Narration generally occurs as written or verbal accounts, but it may also involve graphical representations, stained glass, movement, dance, or music (Barthes: 1979). How narrative inquiry is of value in the study of interior architecture, and consequently for research into the built environment is discussed in this paper with specific attention to identifying how these concepts may be applicable for research focusing on environmental interpretation and the construction of meaning.

## Narration as a way of knowing

We live our lives as stories and most of these are played out within interior environments. Interior design and architecture therefore are professions that directly effect how we live out our everyday encounters in the world. By studying people's stories we — as designers — may come to understand the place of our designs in the way people interpret and know the world.

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## Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry has one major advantage for interior design over other forms of data collection. It captures in a first hand way what it is to experience the environmental setting as it is lived out. Although there are various research approaches that provide insights into the relationship between people and environments, data which does not directly address the experience of the environment fails to address one of the essential roles of the interior designer. That role is the creation of environments that engender or support the meaningful connections between people and the physical environment. Narrative inquiry serves that end. It provides data, which may in turn be incorporated with other approaches such as phenomenological studies or semiotic studies.

IDEA

Why do we need to study design in this manner? Integral to everyone's experiences is the built environment — public spaces, buildings, interiors, and the objects that are present within them. Of primary importance: the environment, which may define spatial relationships and/or indicate types of functions, interactions, or inhabitants. It may also provide backdrops, props, memories, and/or ambience. These effects may be present consciously as part of a person's activities, or they may be taken for granted. Consequently, when interiors are designed, it is not just physical objects that are provided. Opportunities for relationships and interactions between people and environments and between people and people are incorporated.

Consequently the relationship between the environment and people determine the outcome of our design practices. If the outcome of design is understood simply as the integration of built form, enclosed space, and decorative elements, then an essential aspect of design is overlooked. The outcome of the design process is not simply a building or interior, but an environmental situation. Its use and meaning however, varies for each individual — designer and non-designer. Narratives are one way of capturing our experiences of and within the environment. Experiences are spoken about, written about, or performed as part of our everyday existence. These in turn capture relationships and interactions embedded in the encounter rather than just the outward appearances of a place or a place as a setting.

Researching the built environment provides opportunities for designers to gain insights and knowledge about the places that they or others have designed. It is however difficult to remove the training and education one has had over a professional life. Everyone comes to a setting with personal, practical knowledge, and judgements are therefore coloured by beliefs of what an environment or design should encompass for a particular setting. Because of these insights the designer is in fact an 'expert' with a critical

daguerre - right

eye. Simultaneously however the designer is an outsider. Brower (1988) describes how the tourist or visitor does not engage or even see an environment in the same manner as a local or inhabitant. In this way the designer is a 'novice'. By constructing a narrative of the situation the design researcher and/or designer practitioner is potentially able to capture a story of the environmental situation that involves the built form and that encompasses these frameworks of novice and of expert across time. Storying also frees the researcher from understanding the situation within one time frame as a narrative crosses the temporal boundaries. Narrative inquiry therefore deals with the crux of environmental design — experience and relationships — rather than the superficial aspects represented by the more common discussions of form or appearance. It is potentially a means to gather rich and meaningful data to inform future design practice and education.

## An environmental situation: unravelling the 'design outcome'

Although it would appear that there is potential for the use of narrative inquiry in the area of architectural design there has been limited application of this approach in the field. Due to the diversity of the concept 'narrative', and its potential as a process of inquiry for designer/researchers, an explanation of the term narrative and a general overview of the conception of 'narrative inquiry' is provided for the reader who may have limited exposure to the methodology. The application of narrative inquiry was demonstrated in a study of cafes in Paris. The accompanying insertions from the diary records outline the experience of 'being there' and the integration of the built environment within one particular venue. The cafe was 'discovered' as part of a walk through the research site — a local Parisian shopping centre.

## Narrative: more than a story

Life experiences are recorded in storied form (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994). 'Experience is not — indeed cannot be — reproduced in speech or writing, and must instead be narrated' (Brodkey, 1987). The form of the narrative will

be dependent upon who the narrator is and the theoretical framework/s s/he abides to. Experience is therefore seen as an aspect of narration, and the narrative is part of the experience as people live what has been termed storied lives. Dewey (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994) stated that the study of experience was the study of life. It is therefore impossible to remove one facet from the remaining aspects of life. For example my life as a designer, student, academic, researcher, wife, female, Australian and so on, will influence how I narrate my experiences and experience my experiences of the Parisian cafes.

Narratology is the study of narratives and of narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (1990; 1994) define narrative study as the 'study of human experiences'. Narratives may be investigated in terms of content and/or structure, thereby revealing concepts such as development of identity, power-struggles, or other social realities (Franzosi, 1998; Ezzy, 1998; Grummet 1991; Barthes, 1977). Narratives are:

> '...one way to study how people imagine life to be, for themselves and for others. And the stories people tell about themselves and one another twice encode culture, in that stories are at once practices and artifacts of culture...' (Brodkey 1987:46)

Narrative inquiry incorporates two interrelated concepts (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994): one is the phenomenon or 'the structured quality of experience', the story; the second is the method of inquiry, called narrative — 'the patterns of inquiry for its (the story's) study'(Brodkey 1987: 416). Narrative research involves a form of inquiry (Hones, 1998).

Diaries (or journals), photographic analysis, and participant observation, are some of the forms of data collection relevant for the exploration of the built environment that I incorporated into the Parisian study. It was difficult to 'compartmentalise' recordings in regard to predetermined categories such as researcher, designer expert, individual, resident, and so on; the

experience flowed from one aspect to another as 'it' saw fit, rather than I as the researcher originally intended; thereby reflecting what in fact happens in life-as-it-is-lived. Each of the journal records may be taken as an individual story, but they may also be combined to form a narrative that is continually evolving through this process. It may also be combined with 'stories' from other sources (such as academic literature in this field), to form an additional overarching narrative.

Through the narrative, buildings and interiors are no longer seen simply as artefacts, static objects, or settings that are used for a particular function. Instead they are part of how people know, and live in, the world. It is these experiences that are of importance to designers — interior and architectural. An understanding of the experiences and environmental meanings for people challenges the designer as he/she sets upon the task of designing the next addition to the built environment, to re-evaluate what it is that is being designed — the object and/or the experience?

**Analysis**
The Parisian location made what is normally implicit in my everyday life explicit due to its 'strangeness'. The encounters with the built environment were as a novice, an outsider, and as an expert. The expertise had been generated within another culture — my local domain. This allowed new understandings to be sought in an evolutionary way that would enable a shift from 'the normal' or 'expert' viewpoints that are taken-for-granted in my home domain. What is evident from my stories, recorded as diary and journal entries, is the absence of purely descriptive accounts of the physical environment and/or functional accounts. Instead, the examples indicated how people may encounter the environment, not as a removed individuals, but as people in place in an interdependent situation. The evolution of my thought from my initial encounters to a more sensitive and inclusive interpretation also highlighted how the researcher/designer is brought to an understanding of the built environment through the process which challenges the definition of interior architecture as 'a-building-in-use'.

diary entry - right

dessert which was [illegible] which the girl
had to carry the length of restaurant
& therefore was seen by all — & I wondered
— say everyone looked. [For one did not
see]. I followed [unit] to find it was
not the same.

There was never a time when I was
not conscious of the environment —
Instead it was a continual case of
observing, participating & just looking

In contrast to everyone the last group
who had to queue outside took the
table adjacent to the door. They had to
wait while the table change over occurred.
They received their menus & shortly after
began to survey the interior. The bodily
movement, [illegible] gestures, eye movement,
facial expression implied they — old
but especially the [several] middle aged women —
thought they had a right to do that & it
[needed] to come up to their approval. I
wanted to know why they were here, why
they'd been prepared to [queue/wait], & if they
had been here before. They were well
dressed; [illegible], clothing were obviously
expensive & considered.

In contrast the 3 who had arrived after
me had selected a table from the options
presented. They were a group of 2 young
women & a man in his mid 30s. They
were fashionably yet casually dressed
middle aged [illegible] with [illegible] hair.
The man was bearded, a little overweight,
& wondering? [blue] clothing. The
young one slid into her seat, followed
by the man. The other sat opposite
[slinging] her coat into her chair,

using the adjacent [seat] for her bag.
She turned to sit across the seat so
that the table of 4 was [claimed] &
they presented an image of being
available in the space without
being self-conscious about it. They
arrived, settled in, & presided over
the hour to engaged in conversation
[showing] with no interest in anyone
else.
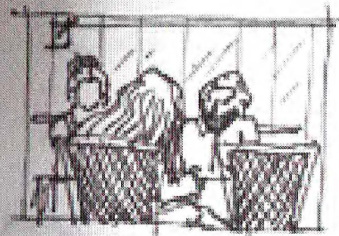


interaction
withdrawn
in space.
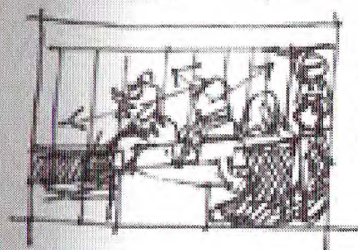


interaction
self conscious
placed — [set up]
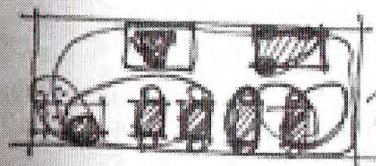


variations between
original groupings.

I followed the others
example when paying
[going] to the counter.
Glasses were on the counter
the [dinner] — plates, [light]
etc weren't finished — or
rather there didn't seem

The stories (or accounts) are read and reread to reveal the concepts arising. Each concept is coded and the interrelationships between the codes identified. One concept may present in different ways across visits and within a visit. For example in the French cafés and restaurants issues of identity, control, and choice were identified. These were in turn related to the concepts of boundedness, spatiality, and positioning. These latter concepts are directly related to the physical environment and its design. Elements of the physical design exist in relationships with social, individual, and material aspects of our culture. The way we experience and interpret environments depend on these relationships. Consequently what we design is an influence in the social dynamic and personal understandings of our world.

## Conclusions
Narrative inquiry is a recognised research methodology that has not been used extensively within the disciplines of architecture and interior design. Because of the nature of these fields — the design of environments which results (intentionally or unintentionally) in an interdependency between objects and human beings as they go about all their daily activities — it would appear that there is great potential to develop the methodology to this task. By doing so the designer is forced to consider the environment he/she is creating or evaluating as an experience. The codes, regulations, functional demands, site characteristics, and other contextual parameters are no longer isolated criteria or aspects of a designed environment. They are in fact part of the environmental experience. An experience which has spatial and temporal dimensions which are in turn part of what the architecture is and how it is defined through such encounters.

Embedded within a narrative are many individual stories and associated discourses that inform and add to its meaning. Some of these stories belong to the researcher (or also potentially to the designer as inquirer). The methodology deals with the crux of environmental design — experience

caraibe sketches - right
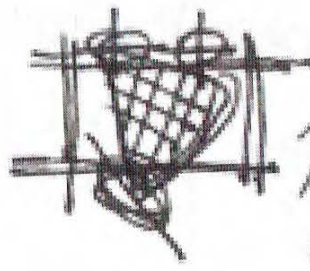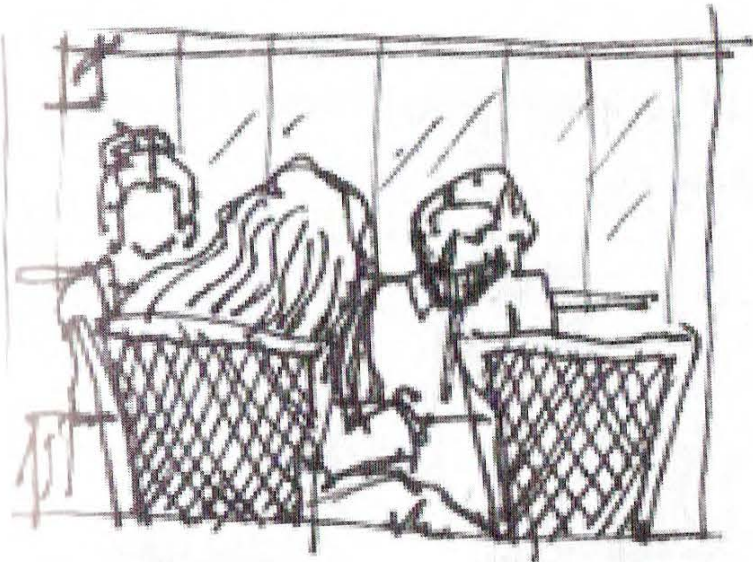
interaction
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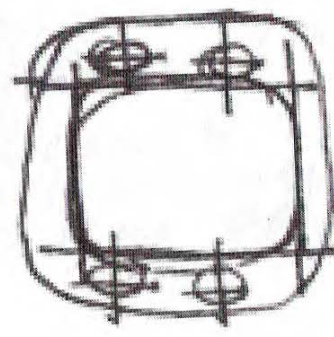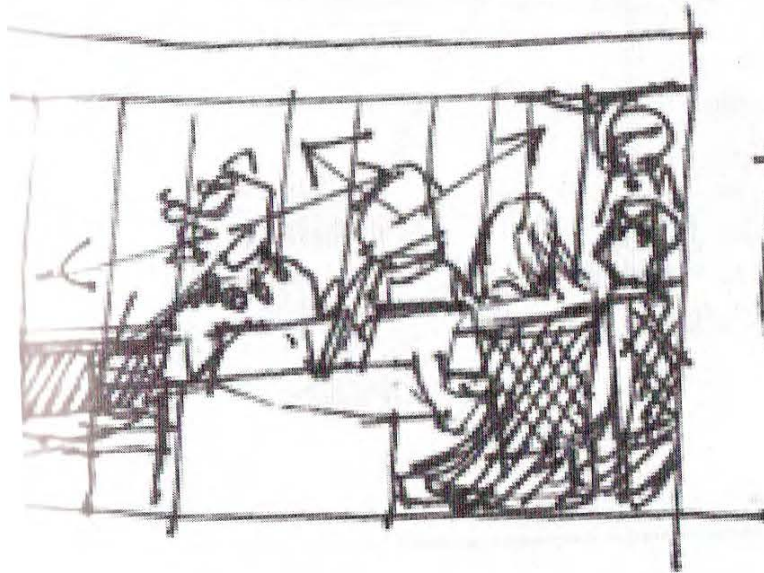
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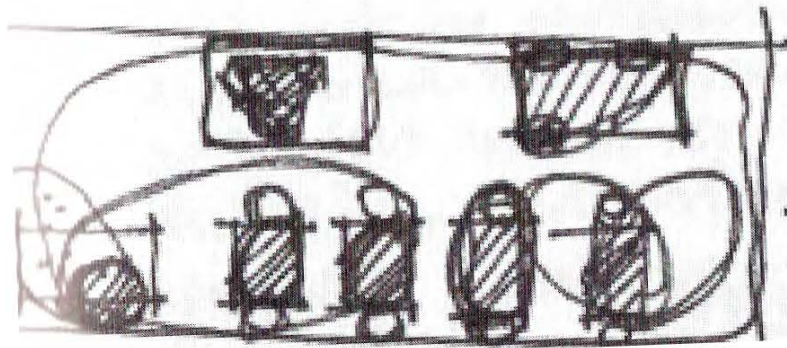
variations between
original groupings.

and relationships. Through knowledge of the narrative inquiry process and the findings arising — an understanding of environmental situations embedded in experience and relationships — the definitions of architecture and interior design which are limited to built forms providing particular functions may be challenged. I therefore propose that narrative inquiry is a relevant and important methodology for inquiry in the fields of architecture and interior design. It has a role to play in enhancing our understanding of what it is that designers actually design when confronted by the task of creating an interior or a building.

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left - caraibe scene