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(extra) ordinary interiors: practising critical reflection
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the journal of IDEA: the interior design + interior architecture educators association
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the journal of IDEA: the interior design + interior architecture educators association
about

IDEA (Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association) was formed in 1996 for the advancement and advocacy of education by encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture education and research within Australasia.

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The objectives of IDEA are:

1. Objects

3.1 The general object of IDEA is the advancement of education by:

(a) encouraging and supporting excellence in interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research globally and with specific focus on Oceania; and

(b) being an authority on, and advocate for, interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research.

3.2 The specific objects of IDEA are:

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(b) to support the rich diversity of individual programs within the higher education sector;

(c) to create collaboration between programs in the higher education sector;

(d) to foster an attitude of lifelong learning;

(e) to encourage staff and student exchange between programs;

(f) to provide recognition for excellence in the advancement of interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education; and

(g) to foster, publish and disseminate peer reviewed interior design/interior architecture/spatial design research.

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(Extra) Ordinary Interiors calls for contributions from academics, research students and practitioners that demonstrate contemporary modes of criticality and reflection on specific interior environments in ways that expand upon that which is ordinary (of the everyday, common, banal, or taken for granted).

This theme has two agendas: First, the desire to amplify critical reflection as a key practice of the disciplines associated with this journal’s readership. In short, to prompt interior designers, interior architects, and spatial designers to be more proactive and experimental in asserting their specialist knowledge and expertise as critical commentary. This asks authors to reconsider the role of critique and criticism in their scholarly and creative works, or, to demonstrate how to reflect critically upon a design and to locate the design’s relation to material, political, social, cultural, historical and geographical concerns. Such an enterprise may reveal whether models of criticality centred on judgement, authority and historicism are relevant, constructive, insightful or generative, or, as Bruno Latour poses, have they ‘run out of steam’? This exercise may prompt some to revisit key thinkers who pose new discursive, visual and temporal models for critical practice in this recent age of criticality. We draw your attention to Critical Spatial Practice by Nikolaus Hirsch and Markus Miessen, which asks for thinking “about ‘space’ without necessarily intervening in it physically, but trying to sensitise, promote, develop and foster an attitude towards contemporary spatial production, its triggers, driving forces, effects and affects... [to] speculate on the modalities of production and potential benefits of the role of ‘the outsider’.

We also look to Jane Rendell’s introduction to Critical Architecture, which asserts that criticism and design are linked together by virtue of their shared interests in invoking social change. Whether it takes written, built or speculative form, criticism is an action, which according to Roland Barthes, is a calling into crisis, a moment where existing definitions, disciplinary boundaries and assumptions about normativity are put into question.

The second agenda of this journal issue takes heed of the ordinary, and how, in its intense observation, what is normal or often taken for granted exceeds itself, becomes extra or more ordinary. Everyday spaces such as supermarkets, service stations, laundry mats, hardware stores, parks and four-way street intersections, and banal gestures such as washing the dishes, walking the dog or street sweeping become subject to critical scrutiny and introspection. Xavier de Maistre’s Voyage Around My Room, Julio Cortázar’s Around the Day in Eighty Worlds, and Virginia Woolf’s The Waves are but a few historic examples that draw out critical depth and aesthetic meaning about ordinary interiors, interiors understood in the most liberal sense. What new actions to the crisis of critical commentary lurk restlessly in ordinary interiors?

While a nostalgic or romantic response to this journal’s theme may dwell on interior situations with no special or distinctive features, or explore the persistence and abundance of ordinary interiors, even commonplace spaces, noticed or not, it can not be denied that recent pandemic events world-wide have flung the many facets of everyday life into crisis, including long-standing notions of proximity, intimacy, hapticity, privacy, freedom and rights to access ‘essential’ services. For many, the world has become home and home has become an internal world, an interior contaminated or augmented by virtual technologies serving as lifelines to a previous highly social and diversified lifestyle. As the interior of one’s domestic space finds coincidence with one’s isolation bubble, many are finding that interiority and interiors are conflating to take on new meaning, new function, and new configuration. Ordinary scenes of dead flies on windowsills, sun rays pointing to poor house-keeping habits, mounting bags of uncollected rubbish and recycling, shuffling of mattresses, improvised work surfaces, revised chores rubrics, commandeering of the bathroom, and the commodity of headphones and adapters highlight an intensified condition.

Authors are prompted to practice a form of critical reflection on one (extra) ordinary interior.

**This issue’s provocation**

**References**

- **03** Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill, Murray Fraser and Mark Dorrian (Eds), Critical Architecture (Oxon UK, USA and Canada: Routledge, 2007), 4.
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lovers in an upstairs room: a layered portrait of a soft interior(ity)

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abstract
The 2020-21 pandemic threw many of us into a forced exploration of our domestic interiors. For some, the limited contact with the exterior world provoked a need for a refuge and escape: the recurrence of the interior eventually gave way to our interiorities. Looking for ways to simultaneously materialise and circumvent a spatial, intimate, and spiritual sense of self, this visual essay borrows the sumptuous patterns and textures of the interior in Kitagawa Utamaro’s 1788 erotic print, Lovers in an Upstairs Room (Figure 01). These, cut-out as inspired by the block-printing process, have been layered with my own absolutely mundane, domestic setting.

At the same time, two fragmentary voices, one ekphrastic and one auto-theoretical, mirror the print and the graphic layering, creating a third text by overlapping. These voices host a multiplicity of others: from the mystical classic The Interior Castle, 1577, by the sickly, cloistered, Spanish nun Teresa of Ávila, which describes an ecstatic topography of the soul; to Canadian poet Lisa Robertson’s 2003 ‘Soft Architecture: A Manifesto’, which calls for softness as a form of resistance; and for description as a mystical practice: ‘Practice description. Description is mystical.’

Can the crash of voices, cultures, and imagery add up to one particular description? Can this description of one’s interiority at a very specific time build connections between tangible and immaterial, ordinary and extraordinary? Can there be a secular, soft topography of the self, of one’s interior castle, able to resist the advances of a hostile reality?
lovers in an upstairs room: a layered portrait of a soft interior(ity)

Maria Gil Ulldemolins

Visual Essay

Figure 01: Kitagawa Utamaro’s 1788 Lovers in an Upstairs Room.
lovers in an upstairs room: a layered portrait of a soft interior(ity)

maria gil ulldemolins

visual essay
This visual essay is an attempt to illustrate my interiority with an interior that is not mine in any way. For interiority is a spatial sense of self, completely ordinary, yet extraordinary when it comes to being described, impossible, being besides the particular room, to each concrete set atmosphere, and others. One, completely private, but necessarily connected to the outer world.

In the image, a woodblock print from 1788, a couple is lying on the floor of a Japanese teahouse. We can barely intuit the tatami mats, but can see, along the whole side of the room, a big balcony. The balcony, the top of a tree - we are on a first or second floor. The couple, a forgotten tray with drinks and a bowl of noodles. The though, more than a couple of architectural and design features, is an atmosphere. It’s the weather that is good enough for the open side of the room and vaporous clothes. It’s the lack of hurry, or, at least, the suspension of time that allows for the encounter. It’s the limited palette of colours (black, red, a touch of yellow). It is, of course, the couple.

But as much as they occupy space in the image, they are difficult to pin down. They are so immerse in each other, all we see are some flashes of limbs, her nape and elaborate hair-do, her left hand holding his face, his left hand pressing her shoulder closer. If you look very, very carefully, you might spot his right eye staring directly at her face. The rest of the figures, the rest of the room, really, is the layers, and layers of fabrics in different shades and patterns.
The body of the woman in the image is mostly defined by a black kimono with a pattern of small criss-crossed symbols—lattices, grids. It is meant to represent a well, to my absolute surprise. Her mass, then, is sheer liquidity. The end of the robe, draped around her waist, raised, is piling behind her body. The well pattern is meant to relate to the idea of abundance, good fortune. I cannot help, though, to think that she is melting with desire.

Interior architecture scholar Christine McCarthy writes in ‘Towards a Definition of Interiority’ that interiority is ‘theoretical and immaterial,’ ‘mobile and promiscuous.’ It is with, but defiant of, ‘particular interiors.’ Her mass, then, is sheer liquidity. The interiority I am trying to describe here uses one of artist Kitagawa Utamaro’s shunga prints from his collection of artist Kitagawa Utamaro’s shunga prints, which emerged in the Edo period. Shunga, or images of the palace in spring, is one of the many names for erotic ukiyo-e, images of the floating world, which emerged in the Edo period. (like in Anne Carson’s Eros the Bittersweet: “Eros is traditionally the melter of limbs” 

Poems of the Pillow, spring images, melting with desire.

Abundance, good fortune. I cannot help, though, to think that she is melting with desire.

Eros is traditionally "the melter of limbs".

...
My interiority, particularly after ten months of different levels of domestic lock-down due to the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020-21, wants to materialise itself through something different to its own monotony.

Find itself through visual aggregation and layering.

Find some softness.

Invent a new atmosphere.
Psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin proposes that not only room-like, interior — ‘having an inside.’ She proposes that particularly female desire, is an architecture — and sharing: ‘It seems to me that what is experientially female is desire with a space, a place within the self, from which This space is in turn connected to the space between self and other.’

Beneath the patterned kimono, she wears a red underlayer, desire, and as the clothes slide off her, and we can also see it pooling beneath what may be an architecture of holding right sleeve. The red layer is like an exuberance of sensuality — it connects her figure with the tray of refreshments to be consumed, it is the colour of the inside of the body, and it frames her ass for those of us peeping into the scene.

I could not describe my interiority without desire — my partner's skin, the dog’s pursuit of the perfect spot, plants bursting out new leaves, or even, simply, the inviting plushness of the furniture in the room.

Desire is life’s stubborn persistence. A constant hum. A pulsating space that I can both inhabit and be, my own castle, like an unholy mystic.
She also wears a sash, now loose, with flowers like tiny orgasmic fireworks bursts, trapped inside a diamond pattern made with golden chains.

writes McCarthy. Saint Teresa of Ávila, a Spanish nun who lived in a sick body, locked in a monastery, developed, over two-hundred years before Utamaro’s lovers met on the upstairs room of a teahouse, a mystical vision of her soul dwelling in a castle of many rooms.

Not only did her soul roam the architecture of the Castle, looking for the Divine Bridegroom to join him in ecstasy — she was clear that her soul was these rooms: ‘I seem rather to be talking nonsense, for, if this castle is the soul, there can clearly be no question of our entering it. For we ourselves are the castle: and it would be absurd to tell someone to enter a room when he was in it already! But you must understand that there are many ways of “being” in a place. Many souls remain in the outer court of the castle ... ; they are not interested in entering it, and have no idea what there is in that wonderful place, or who dwells in it, or even how many rooms it has.’
Touching the skin, both hers, and his, is a plain, light layer, of which we only see slivers, from their shoulders down to their legs, a river, fluid, yes, again.

If I bring up desire to describe my interiority, if I invoke two long-gone lovers to explain the space I am, is because I am a porous structure, slivers, the elements, a river, I share fluid, my domesticity and ecstasy yes, again. If I use the balcony in the image, but to others, to the person with. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in *Space,* talks about ‘the dialectics of the non-I [growing] more flexible, [feeling] that fields are with-me, in the with-me, with-us.’

Intersubjective, as Benjamin puts it.
His kimono, dark, has a contrasting, geometric, interlocking pattern with just one flower on his chest, on the right side. The pattern is known as sayagata, and it, too, represents good fortune. More specifically, it means ‘the inseparability of the one and the many, continuity and multiplicity.’ She is liquid, and he — he is infinite.

Going back to Bachelard, he holds that imagination, which is an interior feature, can lead us beyond ourselves, daydreaming, ‘outside the immediate world to a known world that bears the mark of infinity,’ and the many, each of us lies within the power to create immensity is as a creative activity.’
The association between a creative practice and interiority resonates through all my references. It allows for the visualisation of thought, emotion, and soul, as in Saint Teresa’s architecture. McCarthy, too mentions creative imagination as a form of dwelling. She refers to

'how one might occupy a dollhouse, or a novel’s description and how the two dimensions of an architectural drawing, a shadow, or a computer screen might be spatial and interior.'

If having an interiority makes us human, having cultural references allows us, in turn, to understand itself many times in the embodied back-and-forth, and conceive of such interiority. This is, of course, part of what I am trying to do here.
The fan in his hand reads a verse by poet Yadoya no Meshimori:

"Its beak firmly caught in the clamshell the snipe cannot even fly away on an autumn evening."[21]

It is not only images that can help us imagine interiority. It recycles, iterates, builds itself with any material at hand, scrappy, calls and recalls, the snipe cannot evend fly away with others' words on an autumn evening.[21]

Not only resourceful but wise, citational, exemplifying itself, the interdependence builds itself with any material at hand, scrappy.

Not only resourceful but wise, citational, exemplifying itself (a novel’s description, as mentioned earlier). Bachelard, observing the interdependence between inside and outside, describes the exchange as follows: 'Entrained in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, every-thing is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent.

so much talk; a chaplet of sojourning, a refrain with endless verses.'[22]
I started by describing the glimpses of the room in the print. The floor mats, the balcony, the tree in the nondescript outside.

Earlier, I placed Lisa Robertson and her ‘Soft Architecture: A Manifesto’ right at the core of this proposal.

There is one last element, though, that intrigues me as a beholder. The blinds at the very left of the picture. So delicate, you can still see the branch behind them, count the leaves. Yet, they anchor the image with their verticality, as if they were a column.

As I quoted then, she suggested description as a mystical practice. So I have taken Saint Teresa’s descriptions and contrasted them with my own very secular anchor: the two lovers as if they were descriptions of the two lovers in the teahouse.
It is yellow, and yellow is pretty much only reserved to solids, in this print. Her hair accessories are yellow (they offer structural support to the hair-do). Some of the foodstuff is yellow, too (one must nourish the physical body, after all). I cannot help but imagine that in the floating world, where clothes flow, and bodies melt, the materiality of little yellow details holds reality, an architecture of stability, a place to rest one’s eyes,

I do not know that the result is mystical, but it is interconnected, expansive. Robertson begins in bed: “The worn cotton sheets had the blurred texture of silk crêpe and when we lay against them in the evening we’d rub, rhythmically, one foot against the soothing folds of fabric, waiting for sleep.” And she pretty much ends it horizontally, describing the many elements of being.

When she says we are ‘leaky cloths.’ I look at Utamaro’s figures, at Teresa’s habit-soul-castle, at my own room and inner self, and cannot help but agree.

Let us end, too, by laying ourselves out, feet touching whatever softness they can find.

“The work of the [Soft Architect] paradoxically recompiles the metaphysics of surface, performing a horizontal research which greets shreds of fibre, pigment flakes, the bleaching of light, proofs of lint, ink, spore, liquid and pixilation, the strange, frail, leaky cloths and sketching and gestures which we are.”
acknowledgements
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author biography
*Maria Gil Ulldemolins* is a PhD researcher in the Architecture and Arts faculty of Hasselt University, Belgium. She is one of the co-founders of *Passage*, [projectpassage.net](http://projectpassage.net), a research line and peer-reviewed journal for autotheoretical and other performative, hybrid scholarly writing.

Image Credits

**Figure 01:** Kitagawa Utamaro, *Lovers in an Upstairs Room*, woodblock print, 1788.

Photograph of the print available via the British Museum under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license, accessed January 4, 2021, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/275845001](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/275845001).

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**All other figures:** All collages and digital photographs by author, 2021.
notes


5. McCarthy, 'Toward a Definition of Interiority,' 112.

6. McCarthy, 'Toward a Definition of Interiority,' 112.


12. McCarthy, 'Toward a Definition of Interiority,' 113.


15. Benjamin, 'A Desire of One's Own,' 92


17. Oliveros, 'Untitled.'


20. Benjamin, 'A Desire of One's Own,' 96.


22. 'shunga; print.'


