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idea journal

(extra) ordinary interiors:
practising critical reflection

vol. 18, no. 01

2021

the journal of IDEA: the interior design +
interior architecture educators association



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interior architecture educators association**

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ISSN 2208-9217

eISBN 978-3-88778-918-3

Published by Art Architecture Design Research (AADR): aadr.info.

AADR publishes research with an emphasis on the relationship between critical theory and creative practice. AADR Curatorial Editor: Dr Rochus Urban Hinkel, Melbourne.

IDEA (Interior Design/Interior Architecture Educators Association)
ACN 135 337 236; ABN 56 135 337 236

Registered at the National Library of Australia

idea journal is published by AADR and is distributed through common ebook platforms. Selected articles are available online as open source at time of publication, and the whole issue is made open access on the *idea journal* website one year after its date of publication.



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cover image

Lying motionless, listless. Consuming time; being present, each moment folds into another. Surfaces becoming expanses of inflections of hue. Normality expands into a stream of observing luminosity. Still image from video by Chora Carleton, 2021.

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Correspondence regarding this publication should be addressed to:

Dr Lynn Churchill
c/o *idea journal*
Interior Architecture
Curtin University
GPO Box U1987
Perth 6845
Western Australia

l.churchill@curtin.edu.au

this issue's provocation

(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'?⁰¹ 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.'"⁰²

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.⁰³ 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.⁰⁴

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.⁰⁵ 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.

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lovers in an upstairs room: a layered portrait of a soft interior(ity)

Maria Gil Ulldemolins

Hasselt University

0000-0001-9497-9659

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.'⁰¹

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?

cite as:

Gil Ulldemolins, Maria, 'Lovers in an Upstairs Room: A Layered Portrait of a Soft Interior(ity),' *idea journal* 18, no.01 (2021): 49-64, <https://doi.org/10.37113/ij.v18i01.416>.

keywords:

interiority, interior, domesticity, shunga, soft architecture



Figure 01:
Kitagawa Utamaro's 1788 *Lovers in
an Upstairs Room*.





In the image,

This visual essay is an attempt to illustrate my interiority with a Japanese teahouse. We can barely intuit the tatami mats, but 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 of architectural and design features, is an one, completely private, but necessarily connected atmosphere. It's the weather that is good enough for the open side of the to the outer world and others.

a woodblock print from 1788,¹ 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. Beyond the balcony, the top of a tree - we are on a first or second floor. Besides the couple, a forgotten tray with drinks and a bowl of noodles. The room, though, more than a concrete set 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.

Interior architecture scholar Christine McCarthy writes in

‘Towards a Definition of Interiority’ that interiority is
 ‘theoretical and immaterial,’³ The body of the woman in the image is mostly
 ‘mobile and promiscuous.’⁴ It is defined by a black kimono with a pattern of small
 ‘intimate criss-crossed symbol -s, lattices, grids. It is
 with,’ but defiant of, ‘particular interiors.’⁵ meant to represent a well,² to my absolute surprise.
 Her
 The interiority I am mass, then, is
 trying to describe sheer liquidity.
 here uses The end of one
 of artist Kitagawa Utamaro’s *shunga* the robe, draped around her waist, raised, is piling behind
 her body. prints The well pattern is meant to relate to the idea of
 from his collection *Poems of the Pillow.* good fortune. I cannot help, though, to think that she is
 Shunga, abundance, spring images, melting with desire
 (like in Anne Carson’s
Eros the Bittersweet:
 “Eros is
 traditionally
 ”the melter of limbs”⁸).
 or images of the palace in spring,⁶ is one of the many names
 for erotic *ukiyo-e*, images of the floating world, which emerged
 in the Edo period.⁷



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.’⁹ 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

Beneath the patterned kimono, she wears is subjectivity spatial, a red underlayer. There is a thin strip of it on her back, desire, and more as the clothes slide off her, and we can also see it pooling beneath what may be an architecture of holding her right sleeve. The red layer is like an the association of force can emerge. exuberance of sensuality — it connects her figure with between self and other.’¹⁰

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
 'Desire, space, and control
 a sash, now loose, with flowers
 coincide in interiority,¹¹ like tiny orgasmic
 fireworks bursts, trapped
 writes McCarthy. Saint Teresa of Ávila, a Spanish nun
 who lived in a sick body, locked in a monastery, pattern made with
 developed, over two-hundred years before Utamaro's golden chains.
 met on the upstairs room of a teahouse, a lovers
 vision of her mystical
 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.¹²



If I bring up desire to describe my interiority, if
 two long-gone lovers to explain the space I am, is because I am a
 open not only to
 like the balcony in the image, but to others, to the person
 my domesticity and ecstasy
 with. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in
Space, talks about ‘the dialectics of
 the non-I [growing] more flexible, [feeling] that fields
 are with-me,

Touching the skin, both hers, and his, is a plain,
 I invoke
 light layer, of which we only see
 porous structure,
 slivers,
 the elements,
 a river,
 I share
 fluid,
 yes,
 again.
The Poetics of
 the I and
 and meadows
 in the with-me, with-us.’¹⁵
 Intersubjective,
 as Benjamin puts it.¹⁴



His kimono, dark, has a contrasting, geometric,

Going back to Bachelard, he holds that

interlocking
imagination,
on his chest,

pattern with just one flower
on the right side. The pattern is

which is an interior feature, can lead us

beyond ourselves,

daydreaming, 'outside the immediate world to a

known
world that bears
specifically,

as *sayagata*,¹⁵ and it, too, represents good fortune. More
it means

the mark

'the inseparability
of infinity.'¹⁷
and the many,
each of us
liquid,
the power to create
infinite.

of the one
continuity and multiplicity.'¹⁶ She is

That inside

and he — he is

lies

means that 'immensity is

within

ourselves.'¹⁸ Or, as Benjamin proposes, the exploration of 'one's own

inner life' can be understood 'as a creative activity.'¹⁹

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
 or a
 and how
 of an architectural drawing,
 or a computer screen might be spatial and
 If having an interiority makes us human, having
 allows us, in turn,
 and conceive of such interiority. This is, of course,
 trying to do here.

He is
 a dollhouse,
 wearing the finest
 novel's description
 It ripples
 the two dimensions
 from his shoulder
 a shadow,
 draped over her bent
 interior.²⁰
 crosses
 cultural references
 pattern multiplies,
 to understand
 itself
 part of what I am
 a snowstorm
 between the two.

also
 outer fabric, grey, too, dotted all over.
 and goes across, ends
 leg, which, in turn,
 his. The dense
 accumulates, folded over
 many times in the embodied back-and-forth,
 between the two.

It is not only images that can help us
It recycles, iterates,
builds itself with any material at hand, scrappy.
Not only resourceful but wise, citational,
exemplifying itself
(a novel's description, as mentioned earlier). Bachelard,
observe the interdependence
between inside and outside,
describes the exchange as follows: 'Entrapped in being,
we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are
being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being,
thing is
so much talk; a chaplet of sojourning,
with

imagine interiority.
'Its beak firmly caught
calls and recalls,
in the clamshell
the snipe cannot
even,
fly away
with others' words
on an autumn evening.'²¹
observing
hardly outside of
every-
circuitous,
roundabout,
recurrent,
a refrain
endless

verses.'²²



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

I started by describing the glimpses of the room in the print. The floor mats, balcony, the tree in the outside.



then, she suggested description as a practice. So I have taken and contrasted them with descriptions of in the teahouse.

As I quoted one last element, mystical blinds Saint Teresa's descriptions can still see my own very secular anchor the two lovers as if they were a column.

There is though, that intrigues me as a beholder. The at the very left of the picture. So delicate, you the branch behind them, count the leaves. Yet, they the image with their verticality,

I do not know It is yellow, and yellow is pretty much
 only reserved to solids,
 that the result is mystical, but it is interconnected, accessories are yellow (they offer
 expansive. Robertson begins the hair-do). Some of
 in bed: "The worn cotton sheets her manifesto is yellow, too (one must nourish
 the foodstuff of our little beds the physical body, after all). I cannot help but imagine that in the
 floating world, where
 had the blurred flow, and bodies melt, the materiality of
 texture of silk crêpe and when we lay against them little yellow details
 holds reality, an architecture of stability, a place to rest one's eyes,
 in the evening we'd rub, rhythmically,
 one foot against the soothing
 ecstatic with
 folds of fabric,
 all the minutia.
 waiting for sleep.²³ And she pretty much ends it horizontally,
 describing
 the many elements of being.
 When she says
 we are 'leaky cloths.'²⁴ 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.'²⁵

acknowledgements

There were several iterations with this piece, and I am seriously indebted to many for their feedback: Kris Pint, Nadia Sels, Patrícia Domingues, and Marta Gil Ulldemolins all made time to look at it and offer all sorts of assistance. The IDEA editors were exceptionally kind and attentive, and I am especially grateful to Julieanna Preston for all the time she poured into making this work better. I also want to put forward Tania Hershman's endlessly inventive book *and what if we were all allowed to disappear* as an influence. If it did not exist, I do not think I would have created the text-couples in this essay.

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, 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>.

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All other figures:

All collages and digital photographs by author, 2021.

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