

The Public Interior: The meeting place for the urban and the interior

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ABSTRACT

Architect Manuel de Solà-Morales was one of the first designers to stress the importance of public interiors – places that are used as public spaces although they might belong to a private owner.¹ Examples are libraries, hospitals or shopping malls. However, included within the concept of the public interior are also publicly owned spaces such as arcades, passages and inner courtyards, as well as collective outdoor public areas that provide shelter such as bus shelters (Figure 1). These are spaces that Kristiaan Borret, the former city architect for Antwerp, describes as 'secondary public spaces'. They differ from the so called 'primary public spaces', that is to say the actual streets, market places and squares.² Complex interior environments are often subject to commercial logic or developer standards, factors that tend to make them less public. The layout of public interiors ought to be considered a challenging field of design and research, but this is not always the case. Where the 'primary public space', in particular, has long been the focus of research within the scholarly field of urban design and urbanism, existing research into public interiors proves to be fragmented. While 'toolboxes' for urban planners have been established, they lack the perspectives traditionally found in the field of interior architecture and interior design, such as user-relations, atmospheric variables and furniture design. Yet these considerations are particularly relevant to the conditions found within public interiors. Besides defining the term 'public interior', this paper aims to contribute to the development of an interdisciplinary design approach by exploring various methods for the analysis of 'the public interior' in the fields of urbanism, architecture, interior design and related academic fields.

INTRODUCTION

In the city today, the traditional dichotomy between the public and private domain is shifting radically. As the architect and urbanist Maurice Harteveld points out: 'In recent decades, the amount and proportion of public space within buildings has steadily increased, with much of it forming part of a larger interior and exterior pedestrian network.'³ Meeting places in the contemporary city are increasingly less limited to the traditional streets and squares. Moreover, an ever-greater number of buildings possess conditions that allow them to be claimed as internal public spaces, including shopping malls, train stations and care homes. For example, the once-vilified typology of the shopping mall, one of the defining features of suburban America, can be viewed as having provided



Above
Figure 1: Atelier Bow Wow, Canal Swimmer's Club, Bruges Triennial, 2015.
Example of a collective outdoor as a public interior. Photograph: Tine Poot.

an alternative 'sense of community' within outlying urban districts, many of which traditionally lacked a truly public centre.⁴ But also some enclosed public interiors receive the status of 'private interiors' because they are appropriated by a specific group of users, a process which is referred to as, 'parochialisation'.⁵ They also keep users away from the traditional public spaces. The need for an architectural discourse on contemporary public space that keeps pace with present-day urban development and life is therefore self-evident.

The terminology surrounding the increasing interiority of everyday life is diverse. This paper chooses to explain internal public spaces using the concept of the public interior.⁶ In the context of this paper, the word 'public' refers to two partially overlapping meanings: accessibility and ownership. Firstly, the term 'accessibility' denotes that these spaces are open to all. However, the accessibility of a public interior can be limited in time for practical reasons. To clarify, accessibility should be understood as permeability, being able to enter a space without hesitation and effort. As is often the case with the public interior, the entrance is so ambiguous that the surrounding streets seem to flow into the interior space and vice versa. Secondly, public accessibility has relations with ownership. As architect Marc Van Leent explains, we need to draw the distinction between formal and mental ownership.⁷ Both private and public parties can own a public interior; for it to be perceived as public space the mental ownership must lie with the users. A good example of these kind of spaces are the POPS – privately owned, public spaces.⁸ Due to a New



York zoning resolution in 1961 that gave private developers a floor-area bonus by providing POPS, many of these places were realised in the city. A very well known example is that of the IBM Plaza, a glass-covered pedestrian space that despite its dramatic dimensions is used as a quiet and peaceful refuge from its busy surroundings (Figure 2). However, mainly with private ownership, respective design problems arise in the form of developer standards and lack of spatial quality, according to architect Kristiaan Borret.

The growing conjunction between the concepts of 'public' and 'interior' highlights the complex relationship between urban and interior conditions. Phenomena related to the interior space can be seen to have a direct impact upon the urban environment. The reverse is also true: the urban scale clearly affects the design of the interior space.⁹ Evolution within the discipline of interior architecture also underscores the concept of the public interior: a field that once focused almost exclusively on the design of private spaces is now concerned with the relational conditions between the interior and the exterior.¹⁰ Despite the public interior representing the meeting point of two disciplines – the urban and the interior – an interdisciplinary, research-oriented approach towards the subject is still lacking.

We can roughly discern three kinds of disciplines that contribute to the design of the public interior. First, the public interior, as a contemporary type of public space, is an obvious research field within the disciplines of urban planning and design. Nevertheless, most research continues to focus upon the traditional public spaces such as streets, squares and parks.¹¹ Existing research into the public interior is fragmented, while the source material pertaining to public interior spaces generally relates to specific categories, for example shopping malls¹² or train stations.¹³ Second, very few questions seem to have been posed within the disciplines of interior architecture and design.¹⁴ Finally, the spatial turn¹⁵ in the social sciences and humanities has led to a recent proliferation of literature. Researchers working in the social sciences and humanities, for their part, have recently developed an interest in public spaces as a spatial framework for the study of human behaviour.¹⁶

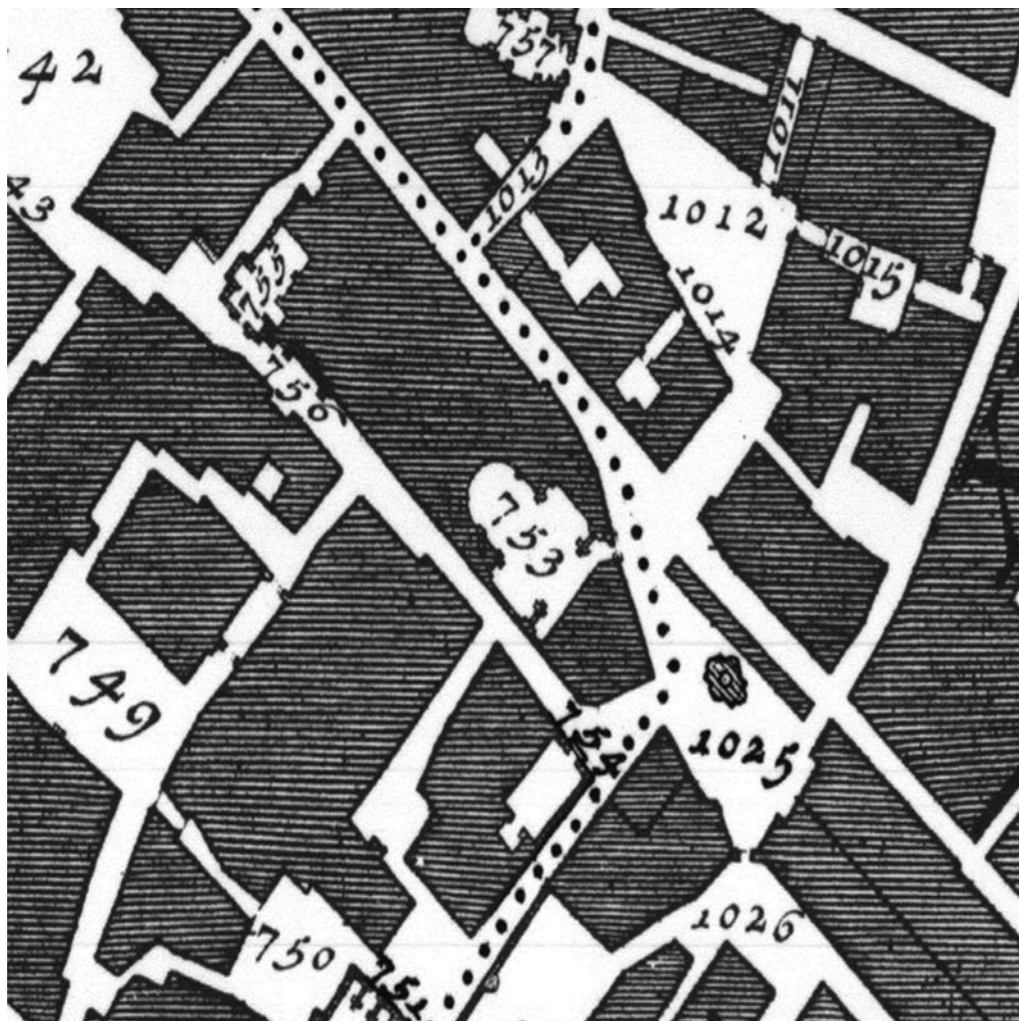
In order to design qualitative public interiors, we propose that it is necessary to develop design principles that, on the one hand, draw upon the expertise of (interior) architects and urban planners (who focus upon the material and physical space) and, on the other, the skills of environmental psychologists, social geographers and anthropologists (who are more involved with the social aspects and the use of spaces). The former disciplines may contribute to an understanding of the spatial components and typological characteristics of public spaces, as well as their interdependence and proportions, while the latter disciplines can provide information about how those (public) spaces are perceived and experienced.

Before discussing the different conditions of these complex spaces, be they urban or interior or both, and for the sake of completeness, it is important to situate the public interior within a historical context.

Opposite
Figure 2: POPS, IBM Plaza, New York, 2015. Photograph: Tine Poort.

THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF THE PUBLIC INTERIOR

The phenomenon of the public interior is not new and has its roots in the historical architectural discourse about public space. When looking at the now-famous ichnographic map of Rome drawn by the Italian architect and surveyor Giambattista Nolli in 1784, the eye is drawn to an irregularity in the city plan. Nolli used distinctive symbolic notation for his mapping: public (white) and private (shaded). In addition to the traditional squares and streets, the interiors of the important public buildings were also represented in white. This indicates that publicly accessible interiors were also considered to fall within the public realm. Nolli's interpretation of public life in eighteenth-century Rome thus illustrates an ambiguous boundary between public and private spaces (Figure 3).



The rise of a capitalistic, secular urban culture during the nineteenth century proved to be an important turning point in the perception of public space. The concept was expanded and public life was perceived as a 'performance'; symbolic language and references to masks underscored the theatrical metaphor.¹⁷ The arcades described by philosopher Walter Benjamin¹⁸ and architect Johan Geist¹⁹ can be considered as the material expression of nineteenth-century bourgeois society: the glass-roofed shopping streets combining exterior and interior features – the public theatrical sphere and the private sphere of bourgeois domestic space – into a single urban typology.

The erosion of this theatrical urbanity in the twentieth century was advanced as an argument for the narrative of profound loss that has dominated the architectural discourse for years.²⁰ Architectural critic Michael Sorkin, architect Rem Koolhaas and cultural philosopher Lieven De Cauter have all expressed dissatisfaction at the increasing privatisation of the public sphere through concepts such as 'Disneyfication',²¹ 'Junkspace'²² and 'capsularisation'.²³ These critiques of the contemporary situation, amongst others, lament the privatisation and homogenisation of public space. Privately owned public interior spaces are viewed primarily as venues for consumption, and as subject to developer standards.²⁴

Nevertheless, these contemporary public spaces play an important role in everyday urban life. The architect Manuel de Solà-Morales was probably one of the first protagonists in the architectural debate to appreciate the social meaning and value of semi-public spaces, or 'collective spaces', as he called them. He fine-tuned the phenomenon by means of the following definition:

The civic, architectural, urban and morphological richness of a contemporary city resides in the collective spaces that are not strictly public or private, but both simultaneously. These are public spaces that are used for private activities, or private spaces that allow for collective use, and they include the whole spectrum in between.²⁵

Here he is referring to spaces that are not per se publicly owned, but are experienced by most users as important public spaces (see the aforementioned concept of mental ownership).

The quality of a place, or its capacity to form an important part of the public realm, is not determined by it being denoted public or private. For example, the public library of the city of Genk has transcended its primary function as a library, since it also serves as a popular meeting place for the immigrant population, as anthropologist Ruth Soenen has shown (Figure 4).²⁶ Greater value should be accorded to the often-overlooked task of designing public interiors, and interconnections sought between these semi-public, enclosed spaces. This would enable these locations to play an integral role within the existing network of public spaces.

THE URBAN CONDITION

Within the field of urban design and urban development, public space and the urban condition are traditionally linked. The following quote from Borret explores the public interior from that theoretical background:

The traditional dichotomy between the private and the public is under review in the context of the city. All kinds of secondary forms of public space such as passages, accessible inner courtyards, collective outer spaces and public interior spaces blur the distinction with the primary public space of Antwerp, being the streets, squares and parks. The primary public space is in need of validation and consolidation without being diminished by the rise of the secondary public space.²⁷

Borret highlights the interrelationship between semi-public spaces, referred to as 'secondary public space', and the traditional public spaces, indicated with the term 'primary public space'. Yet a sense of negativity prevails: the implication being that poor-quality primary public spaces contribute to the shift towards privately-owned spaces, whilst the expansion of over-managed secondary public spaces undermines the traditional public space. When

Opposite

Figure 3: Giambattista Nolli, Map of Rome, 1784. Image courtesy: creativecommons.org



looked at more constructively, the interrelationship between the various types of urban public spaces should be investigated for its potential to function as a structuring element within cities.

Planning public spaces using network logic makes it possible to stimulate urban cohesion by augmenting the accessibility and permeability of both primary and secondary public spaces.²⁸ Network logic does not consider public interiors as isolated entities, but places greater focus upon the links between different public space typologies. The study of the spatial context of public interior spaces can reveal their contribution to the greater urban network.²⁹

Nevertheless, the design of interconnected public spaces within a network tends to be based upon a top-down approach, while spatial relationships are mainly investigated on a macro-spatial level.³⁰

In order to grasp the complex relationships between private and public space, we need to complement the top-down approach with a consistent bottom-up method i.e. a micro-spatial level.

Interestingly for the discipline of interior architecture, a certain branch within planning and architectural theory focuses on the micro-spatial level and addresses the relationship between private buildings and public spaces, such as the street. A micro-spatial analysis might focus, for example, on how entrances to buildings constitute streets, on the gradual transition between private and public spaces, or upon visibility.

When addressing the macro-to-micro view, we should mention Christopher Alexander and his *Pattern Language*.³¹ In the sequence of patterns, the entrance transition and the intimacy gradient are relevant to the connectedness of different kinds of public or semi-public spaces. Entrances are crucial elements in shaping the (gradual) transition between the outside world and (semi)-private interior spaces. And even: 'The experience of entering a building influences the way you feel inside the building.'³²

When the entrance of a public interior has no connection with an existing pedestrian route or when the entrance configuration is not visible enough, the interior loses its public feeling. Urbanist William H. Whyte³³ and urban planner Matthijs De Boer³⁴ stress the importance of the design of the entrance because of its filtering effect. Openness is not only a question of providing access but also a question of inviting people.³⁵ The pattern of the intimacy gradient draws the relationship between public and private areas of a building by indicating entrances, public and collective parts and more intimate areas. This kind of gradient resembles the territorial depth explained by architect and theorist John N. Habraken: 'Territorial depth is measured by the number of boundary crossings needed to move from the outer space to the innermost territory.'³⁶

THE INTERIOR CONDITION

Despite the strategic importance of interior architecture to the design of public interiors, far fewer theories and methodologies

seem to have been developed within the discipline. The public interior is the stage of many casual encounters. (Interior) architecture and planning also meet each other there. But their encounter is not casual; at least it should not be.³⁷

As highlighted in the introduction, the public interior as a contemporary public space is an obvious research terrain within the fields of urban planning and design. Located within a volume, which can range from a building block to a fully realised construction, the public interior greatly determines interior architecture. Thus the contribution of interior architecture to the public interior should be self-evident.

Interior architecture is a young and nascent academic discipline. As a consequence, the methods used for mapping interiority do not always follow traditional academic research methods. Originally, the discipline mainly focused on the private home, namely the interior of the private sphere. The field was gradually broadened to include the public space. In this respect, the focus on the public interior was a logical next step. Nowadays, the discipline has expanded to such an extent that it deals not only with space and objects, but user behaviour and the events that take place within that space.

Public interiors can vary in scale and accommodate a wide variety of activities. As a result, they tend to be regarded more as environments than interiors, yet they still constitute interior spaces. Their interiority can be used as a perspective through which different spatial layers can be dissected. Interior architect and academic Lois Weinthal, in her well-praised anthology, discerned eight layers ranging from the micro to macro scale: Body and perception; Clothing and identity; Furniture and objects; Surfaces and colour; Mapping the interior; Private chambers; Public performance; Bridging interior and exterior.³⁸

The latter two layers explore the realms of the private and public. The term 'performance' (the layer of Public performance) denotes the display of people and on a deeper level the display of the human body with the interior seen as a stage set. The performance layer could be understood as the act of watching

or being watched, for example. In arguing for an expanded consideration of the interior, the meeting between interior and exterior in the last layer is most provocative. Looking at the (public) interior as a layered environment casts it in a completely new light and allows interior architecture to develop a shared discourse across many other disciplines. For example, the public and the private are rather abstract conceptual layers that can be made tangible through social cues. Here sociology, anthropology and environmental psychology, to cite just a few disciplines, come to the foreground as practices in which the interior discourse can be embedded. Nevertheless the set of layers is very much focused on the experience of the individual, and too lightly equipped to deal with the many issues attendant upon the public interior. Emphasis should be on the interior not seen as an extension of the body but as an environment.

In any case, dealing with the interior as a layered environment benefits the design of public interiors. Academic Elena Giunta goes one step further and appoints interior space as an environmental system with three actors: bodies (both individuals and communities), objects, and spaces or systems of containers.³⁹ To summarise, the contribution of the interior disciplines lies in the model of an intimate dialogue between different layers within an interior environment or object/user/space relationships.

COMPLEMENTARY PERSPECTIVES

It is obvious that each academic discipline approaches the design of public interiors from its own unique standpoint. Until recently, in the social sciences and humanities, space was seen as a neutral background for the investigation of human behaviour. Only in more recent years, since the 'spatial turn', have scholars in the humanities and social sciences also started to conduct research into spatial issues. Nevertheless, the more informal public spaces were not perceived as playing a substantial role in urban public life. Public interiors were generally seen as exclusive, undemocratic and more private spaces. As previously mentioned, sociologist Lyn Lofland, in her book *A World of Strangers*,⁴⁰ pays attention to the opposite process, the privatisation of certain public spaces. She describes how people keep strangers at a distance through

Opposite

Figure 4: City Library, Genk, 2015. Photograph: Tine Poot.

the privatisation of the public realm. The neighbourhood spaces where they meet their equals are said to belong to the 'parochial domain'. But Lofland does not consider privatisation where there seems to be a possibility of interaction with strangers.

Anthropologist Ruth Soenen⁴¹ systematically collected data about semi-public (interior) spaces, ranging from commercial public locations such as different kinds of shops, to public interiors such as the tramway or the library. Building upon the theory and definition advanced by de Solà-Morales, Soenen's empirical research proved that an important part of our daily lives is played out within such spaces. She shows how anthropological research can contribute to the understanding of public interiors, which is a first step towards an empathic design of those spaces.

Urban and interior designers often lack the necessary skills to execute intensive ethnographic studies to understand spaces in depth, while social scientists often ignore the impact of the spatial dimension. The challenge is to translate these findings into spatial principles. Systematic observational fieldwork, coupled with a classification system for both activities and target groups, has the potential to make a vital contribution towards the design of qualitative public interiors.⁴² Behavioural mapping, for example, involves direct observations at eye level, from the perspective of the pedestrian. Systematic observation research is conducted to trace people's behaviour in relation to features of the physical environment. The merit of behavioural mapping is gathering knowledge to improve the design of similar spaces in the future. While one is in favour of the integration of design and social sciences, the translation of such findings into spatial or atmospheric principles is of course harder to be certain of.

CONCLUSION

The literature review conducted for this paper shows how the different perspectives relate to each other. The study of the interior tends to focus on one-to-one relationships (person-space) and less on community or a multitude of people. The literature from the social sciences is, on the contrary, preoccupied with that community (experience and needs

of the user, interactions, behaviour), while urban planning and design considers urban developments at large (flows, mobility, landmarks). Documenting public interior spaces is not a one-sided activity. An interdisciplinary approach can enrich the design of these spaces.

Designers must develop an interdisciplinary methodology that permits spatial analysis across different conditions, both urban and interior. This complementary method should provide a definition for all the relevant features that might be found, both physical and social. It is no longer relevant to categorise the public interior as falling with the realm of either an urban or interior space. Moreover, it can be argued that the public interior belongs more to the social space, defined by its public use. What is relevant, however, is that interior architecture approaches the public interior from other social relationships: people/object, people/space, people/people. As this paper argues, the public interior is endowed with both a public and intramural dimension. Just as importantly, it also possesses architectural, social, urban and anthropological aspects.

The following approaches are presented for consideration:

Designing public interiors using network logic

This approach underlines the potential of public interiors as a node within the physical network of a city. The creation of physical and social connectivity in the urban structure nourishes spatial coherence within the city, which in turn leads to urban cohesion. The innovative character of this approach relies on the consistent consideration of the impact of the 'second public space' on the 'first public space' (and vice versa) in every step of the design process.

Micro-spatial analysis

This method aims at defining the interrelationship between private spaces (or semi-public spaces) and adjacent public segments. Interconnectivity is sought on a micro-spatial level, which is supplementary to the macro-spatial network logic approach. Micro-spatial analysis focuses, for example, on issues such as the configuration and orientation of entrances, degrees

of permeability and the gradual transition between formal and informal spheres.

A relational approach to interiority

As already noted, interiors play an important role in the meanings and uses of contemporary public spaces in the twenty-first century city. Consequently, the interior perspective should encapsulate the substantial body of knowledge that exists on the range of scales found within interior spaces. The layer approach of Weinthal provides a new lens through which to consider public interiors. Nevertheless, in the light of the public interior an intimate study benefits from a more relational approach to the interior, here posed by Giunta as an environmental system; where not only the interaction between the human body and space, but also the interaction between the community, objects and space is studied intensively.

Behavioural mapping

By accepting that usage and social meaning or mental ownership determines the public nature of a space, rather than the formal ownership, the human scale can be incorporated into a holistic approach. While in-depth ethnographic studies are rarely possible, the design task of the public interior benefits from being informed by research conducted in adjacent disciplines such as anthropology and environmental psychology. The collaboration between social scientists and designers is crucial in terms of understanding how individuals interact with their surroundings.

This hybrid approach towards public interiors is not only reshaping the ways in which these spaces are designed, but also possesses the potential to create a specialist field within design where interior architects and urbanists meet. We need to envision a collective future in order to design inclusive, qualitative public interiors. It will be a challenge to bridge the study of social relations and connections, the connectedness of networks, and the actual quality and suggestiveness of spatial and material and representational design. The various agents of the public interior need a platform that offers the possibility of analysis of existing conditions and setting out of objectives for interaction with the public and necessary sympathies within design. This synthesis

seeks to contribute to a synthesis of techniques and disciplines and their media. Experts in the public interior should be able to easily zoom to different scales and domains, and be skilled in translating social and behavioural cues into spatial patterns.

NOTES

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