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Architecture's Inside

by **Mohsen Mostafavi**

Why is architecture so often represented only from the outside? Do architects just pay more attention to the outside? Or is it perhaps because the external view of a building provides the image of a totality, an image that in its flatness is easier to comprehend than one of the interior? Photographs of the interior can require more attention. They are frequently fragments of a larger entity, like a room, with the added complexities of spatial depth and variations in light and color, materials, and surfaces. Along with the particularities of the occupation of space, they often record the ordinariness of the everyday. To see the interior through the camera is to see it once removed—an artifice that says as much about our attitude towards the conditions surrounding the subject as it does about the subject being depicted.

In contrast to architects' emphasis on physical description, artists have given more attention to the interior as a situation, a site of events and affects. The filmmaker Chantal Akerman, for example, often focuses on everyday situations of the interior: washing and cleaning, conversations with her mother about their family history, or the unlit, silent corridors of a cheap institutional building like Hotel Monterey in her 1972 film of that title. In her work, the interior is the site of routines. Through the duration and repetition of these routines, the interior assumes an order, albeit one that coexists with chaos, disorder, and trauma. As Maurice Blanchot wrote in "Everyday Speech," "The everyday is platitude, ... but this banality is also what is most important if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived—at the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence and all regularity."¹

The artist's approach may ironically reveal more about an interior's physical characteristics than does the architect's. In 1927, Marcel Duchamp modified the door to his studio in Paris so that it operated between two adjacent openings; when it opened in one direction, it closed in another. Duchamp's door leads to the condition of the

room never being fully enclosed or independent of the adjoining spaces. It constructs a set of alternating and ambiguous relations between the various seen and unseen spaces of the apartment. Manipulating the operation of simple elements of architecture—doors, windows, and corridors—is an important factor in our imagining of new forms of architectural and spatial relationships. Other examples of this can be found in the works of Gordon Matta-Clark, with his revelatory extractions in an almost surgical cutting away of disused buildings and their interiors, or the work of L.A.-based artist Paul McCarthy in such projects as his *Bang Bang Room* installation (1992), or the pavilions of Dan Graham, where different types of glass are used to explore issues of displacement and delay, transparency and reflection, so that our perceptual bodies entangle with the ephemeral and site-specific performances of his constructions.

A recent installation at London's Camden Arts Center, *That Open Space Within*, creates another kind of shift in the visual relation of the viewer to the outside. The artist Anya Gallaccio, whose work often deals with decay, moved a dead horse-chestnut tree from the grounds into one of the galleries. This meticulous displacement of a "natural" element was planned with the help of a tree surgeon, who cut and then re-assembled the tree with steel bolts. The mode of reassembly heightens our sense of the tree's fragility, in the same way that we would become aware of the fragility of our own body after suffering a fracture.

Extracted from the outside, the dead tree acquires a more factual, immediate, and tactile presence inside. And perhaps as important as this inversion (though it may be unplanned) is how the tree, in the way it occupies the gallery, reveals so much about the space it is filling. The tree becomes a measure of the room, of its width, length, and height, of the recessed window facing the garden, and of the walls and floors that support its weight. The tree helps us see the space and its specific attributes much more precisely, as if with a sharper sensibility.

The importance of the relation between an event and its setting is particularly evident in films. The late Rainer Werner Fassbinder was a master of capturing the mood of an interior and often framed the view of a room where the action was unfolding through an open doorway, presenting the space in its stillness as a denatured setting. More recently, Hong Kong-based director Wong Kar-wai has explored the connections between character, plot, and physical space in films such as the melodrama *In the Mood for Love*. The action is slowed down, and this heightens the effect. At the same time, every element of the interior, every piece of clothing or furniture, lighting or fabric, seems to be choreographed as part of the *mise en scène*. (Even on the few occasions when the actors are out in the city, the scenes are shot close up, giving them the intimacy of a large interior.) We can imagine the spaces, understand the proximity of the rooms in these

small apartments occupied by multiple families, and almost smell the food being cooked in the communal kitchen—in other words we understand the correspondence between physical space and potential events. The apartment performs spatially in a very different way when used by multiple families than when occupied by a single family. The sense of privacy is highly dependent on the relations between the social and the physical.

In architecture, the combination of different programs or uses is one way the articulation of such relations can be made more explicit. Chareau and Bijvoet's *Maison de Verre*, one of the icons of Modern architecture, is a case in point. Combining a doctor's office and home, the project was both conceived and constructed as a pure inside. The new structure was inserted in place of the lower floors of an existing building, leaving the tenant-occupied attic intact. Continuing the tradition of the *hôtel particulier* while also offering advanced ideas in handicraft/fabrication and suggesting the future potentials of prefabrication, the house pays unusual attention to the qualities and relations of the spaces and materials of the interior. The staircase is a mechanism of arrival, a hinge point linking the doctor's rooms on the ground floor with the double-volume living room above. The house's physical materials, its bookcases, handrails, and floor finishes, as well as its ephemeral characteristics, such as the quality of the light coming through the translucent glass-block exterior, emphasize its haptic and sensual interiority. The *Maison de Verre* has little visual relationship to the outside, unlike much of the work of Le Corbusier, in which the house is a machine for viewing the outside (as in the famous *Petit Maison*, with its horizontal window), or Mies's *Farnsworth House*, with its simultaneous sense of protection from the elements and dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside. Much has already been written about the *Maison de Verre* and the correspondence between the clinic on the ground floor and the attention to health and hygiene demonstrated by the arrangement and number of bathrooms in the rest of the building. Yet it is in the attention given to the tension between handicraft and the possibilities for industrial manufacturing—the tension between uniqueness and repetition—that the house achieves its most radical qualities. Because of this, it is hard to make a distinction between the rooms and their furniture; there is continuity and fluidity between its spaces and the design of elements such as staircases, bookshelves, and bathroom fittings, which are more akin to pieces of equipment than furniture. These elements—many of them presumably the work of the metalworker Louis Dalbet—are intertwined with the physical envelope of the building, providing a more complex sense of the interior as a setting. Like Chantal Akerman, Chareau pays attention to the everyday, but here the everyday is the site of innovative speculation about the nature of habitation.

Just a few years before the *Maison de Verre* was built in

Paris, the artist and craftsman Wharton Esherick began the construction of his own studio in Paoli, Pennsylvania. For Esherick this was an opportunity to celebrate the sculptural qualities of his craft. The studio's key feature is a solid wood staircase that twists through the center of the space. Carved by hand, as were other elements of the interior, it makes the studio a singular artifact, unsuited, indeed averse, to technological repetition or replication. Climbing the staircase, which has no real handrail or protection, one succumbs to a sense of danger that ironically makes it even safer than a conventional one. The juxtaposing of the colors and textures of the wooden elements with the solidity of the bare walls creates a rich intimacy.

The idea of the interior as a form of conceptual carving is perhaps best demonstrated by Francesco Borromini's little church of *San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane* in Rome. This 17th-century masterpiece has an intricate plan with a complex geometrical arrangement of intersecting ovals. Yet the overall effect of the plan, with the resultant thick *poché* walls, suggests more a collection of spaces carved from a solid than a building constructed according to geometrical principles. This is especially the case with the spaces adjacent to the cross-shaped plan, where the sense of the hollowing out of space, like excavations for mining, is most prominent. The diversity of spaces and geometries on such a small corner site produces a highly ornamental interior that is also consistent with the plasticity of the concave and convex treatment of the building's façade.

Historically, the rationale for the arrangement of architectural spaces has been made manifest through the structuring of the plan. But the thick walls of Borromini's church create an experiential disjunction between the adjacent spaces of the building, partly because of the way the interior is planned in response to the site's boundary conditions. Borromini's plan bears attributes similar to those of a building's section: a description of a set of relations that the building performs through the user's experience of the space, relations that are not made visible as a whole. The section as a drawing is a key device for the organization and description of a building's inside: both a tool for seeing the hidden, like an X-ray, and a blueprint for construction.

In projects from Frank Lloyd Wright's *Guggenheim* to Le Corbusier's *Carpenter Center* (or, more recently, OMA's *Dutch Embassy* in Berlin and *Casa da Musica* in Porto, UN Studio's *Möbius House* and *Mercedes-Benz Museum*, or Zaha Hadid's *Contemporary Arts Center* in Cincinnati, among many others), the section is used as both a concept and a drawing tool for choreographing the building's internal and even external vertical trajectories. In the process, the section becomes a means of incorporating the experiential movement of the user within the architecture's inside.

These examples demonstrate that architecture's engagement with the interior has been varied, experimental, and productive. However, this important issue

has not received much focused intellectual attention within the academy, in contrast to the enormous popular interest demonstrated by the global success of television programs focusing on lifestyle. Today, many architects, along with interior and industrial designers, deal with projects broadly called "interior architecture," but even this title cannot be legitimately used by academic institutions and practitioners in parts of the world where the word *architect* is protected. Despite these hurdles, designers such as Antonio Citterio, Jürgen Bey, Philippe Starck, Jasper Morrison, the Bouroullec brothers, Tokujin Yoshioka, Ron Arad, Konstantin Grcic, Masamichi Katayama, Ross Lovegrove, and Droog Design, to name but a few, have created objects and interiors that consider our everyday environments with fresh eyes. New materials and new techniques of production have led to exciting and innovative products, especially in industrial design and furniture manufacturing, as well as projects for fashion companies. But much of the work being done under the heading of "interior" has little or no connection to the outside—"the architecture."

The current proliferation of large-scale projects, from airports to office buildings, calls for interiors that can undergo a succession of rapid transformations. In these buildings, where architecture merely defines the organizing structure and the envelope, the temporal conditions and needs of the interior cannot be too rigidly fixed. However, rather than understanding these contingencies as the basis for a different type of approach towards the interior, the majority of contemporary large-scale projects continue to rely on conventional and formulaic solutions. This has not always been the case. The 19th-century arcades of Paris, for example, were a manifestation of the internalization of public life. Louis Aragon's surrealist novel *Paris Peasant* contains a beautiful description of the *Passage de l'Opéra*—long since demolished—as "a human aquarium." But such places, unlike contemporary malls, were also the sites of unexpected discoveries and encounters.

Computation and technology more generally have made it easier for us to imagine the interior of buildings through dynamic renderings that simulate the characteristics of interactive and ambient environments. From kinematics to atmospheres, the future of the interior is bound to rely more and more on the development of new forms of responsive environments attuned to the nuances of our sensory pleasures. The works of artists such as Olafur Eliasson or James Turrell (still constructing the *Roden Crater* in the Painted Desert of Arizona) are manifestations of this tendency. But how can the everyday benefit from this research, the amalgam of the past and the present? It is no coincidence that some of the most exciting discoveries related to sensory qualities have occurred at the intersection of architecture, art, and design. According to Jürgen Bey, the Dutch designer known for his unorthodox settings and furniture, we need to create

“a symbiosis between intuition and intellect.” For Bey, “good art is like scientific research. Investigating the world in search of new answers without the question of direct use. An unrestrained research that makes us experience reality differently over and over again. And in design you sometimes find art.”² Perhaps it is irresponsible of us to think of the inside without the functional realities of the everyday. But it is precisely in the provisional postponement of the routine, and in questioning whether it should be otherwise, that we may find answers. It is time once again for architecture, in collaboration with other disciplines, to consider the inside with the wit, seriousness, and curiosity it deserves.

Notes

1. “Everyday Speech,” *Yale French Studies* 73 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 13.
2. vividormgeving.nl/vormgeverpagina/bey.htm