

Outside as Inside

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Issue 03: Essay



Outside as Inside

by [Naomi Hay](#)

*'Our walls are late and decadent forms of cave walls. The existential problem is as follows: Although our walls were made by human beings (by masons, architects and those who impose their ideology on masons and architects), they are nevertheless taken for granted as far as those living between them are concerned. It is a mistake to say that culture is made by human beings and is therefore the realm of human freedom. For everyone living in a culture, it is something taken for granted just as nature is. Therefore walls are taken for granted. They are taken for granted even by those who build them.'*¹

Architects and designers of inhabited spaces construct barriers to the external environment that are both physical and psychological. This paper reflects upon the withdrawal of contemporary Western cultures into increasingly mechanised and artificial spaces, limiting experience of the outside. Could alternative modes of design thinking open the perceived boundaries of built environments to what exists beyond? A fresh approach surpassing the current limitations of static architectural and interior design practice towards sustainable futures requires further examination.

(In) escapable walls

From our time as Palaeolithic cave dwellers, humans have strived to dominate the natural environment and its multitude of threats, both real and imaginary. Throughout this continuing evolutionary process, we have developed increasingly sophisticated approaches to hide from that which we aim to conquer. From early cave hideouts to nomadic vernacular forms of dwelling, from fortified city states to today's secure gated residential communities; Western cultures continue to develop complex technological means of keeping the natural environment and its predators - human and non-human - firmly at arm's length. Within walls we protect ourselves from the elements and the enemy, achieving dominance over the external other, rendering proof of our own superiority. Advances in artificial climate, lighting, sound, vision and experience have allowed cultures of affluence to withdraw inwards to virtual environments, where the external becomes increasingly foreign, alien and distant.

The fabric of the built environment stretches thin, as the consequences of this inward convergence become increasingly evident. In contemporary Western societies we place ourselves at risk of becoming prisoners in our own designed environs, evading the inevitable truth that humanity's home extends far beyond the intimacy of the walls that protect us. Heidegger describes dwelling as, 'the manner in which mortals are on the earth,' or our 'basic character of Being.'² Dwelling then, is not limited to mere occupation of architectural space between walls, but rather our very existence and mode of occupancy of the planet as home. As Heidegger surmises, it is possible to inhabit a space, to take shelter, yet this does not guarantee we actually dwell within them.³ Experience of inhabited space is determined by the memories and events that shape our way of Being, as in turn, the designed space moulds and shapes the events that occur within. External walls are barriers designed to separate us from experiencing and comprehending the unknown, thereby limiting our ability to authentically dwell both within and outside of the interior.

According to Fry, the establishment of early human settlements and the subsequent act of homemaking, shifted humanity's relationship away from 'being-at-home-in-the-world,' to becoming 'dwellers in a place to which the claim of belonging was made.'⁴ A sense of belonging to a claimed place, location, town or house thereby replaced our connection to the world as home. Whilst interior spaces provide immediate psychological security, they expose us to a danger that we are largely unaware of. Walls are membranes that protect us; from the outside, from danger, from our relationship with others, from our connectedness with nature and essentially from our animality. When turning inwards, we render that which sustains us invisible; our external environment, our world, our home.

Flusser explores the irony of humanity's propensity to huddle within walls, both physically and metaphorically in-depth, describing the walls of our dwellings as the 'borders of a stage on which the tragedy of the human striving for beauty is enacted.'⁵ As Flusser explains, walls allow us to defend ourselves, whereby the 'outside wall turns to face dangerous aliens (lurking on the outside), would-be immigrants; the inside wall turns inwards to the inmates of the house like a jailer responsible for their security.'⁶ Windows, allow us to view the outside world from our self-enforced entrapment without either danger or authentic experience, while doors allow one to 'experience the world, and there one loses oneself, and one returns home in order to find oneself again, and in so doing one loses the world that one set out to conquer.'⁷ Overshadowing this fragile prison is the roof, which Flusser describes as the most important of all where, "'homeless" and "without a roof over one's head" are synonyms. Roofs are devices to make us subservient: under them one can cower and hide from one's lord (be he a God or Nature).'⁸

As Western society contains itself within the walls of the built environment, we continue to lose touch with that which we hide from. Architecture - the line drawn between the internal and the external - is a façade which no matter how transparent, serves as a psychological distinction between the protected and the exposed, the natural and the unnatural, the inside and the outside. Recently, the internal shift has become noticeably intensified, with activities that once took place out of doors retreating further inside. Flade describes this as 'Verhauslichung', the transference of activities indoors whereby, 'the significance of the exterior environs as a realm of experience and action has diminished whilst the home has gained in importance.'⁹ In this context the 'verauslicht child,' no longer plays outside; but watches television, plays on a computer and keeps in touch with friends via social networking, all within the perceived safety of his own four walls.¹⁰

Crossing the threshold

Stepping outside we are exposed to the elements and vulnerable to the other. Abercrombie explains we are, 'psychologically exposed to the magnitude of nature... from which we - who like to think of ourselves as refined singularities - have inexplicably emerged.'¹¹ Nature is something we crave only in small and controllable doses. A garden here is imagined as a 'provocative place' which, while free of enclosed walls shares similar features to that of an interior space where paths and trees become corridors, lawns become carpets and shrubs become décor.¹² However, 'for all its delights and strengths, the garden, like the wilderness and the city, is missing a key dimension - it has no cover - and thus it can never be more than an echo of an interior.'¹³ Abercrombie maintains that the interior holds power over us through phenomenological experience as, 'when we enter a building, we cease being merely its observer; we become its content.'¹⁴ The threshold then becomes a 'sacred place', where we are at once exposed to the 'interior dominated by others' and also to the greater uncertainty of the outside world.¹⁵

Extending the psychological distance between the internal and external, modernist architecture often preferred a transitional corridor which Le Corbusier has described as, "the little vestibule that frees your mind from the street."¹⁶ Corbusier's 'open plan' interiors did not welcome the external, but were instead protected by solid walls broken with horizontal windows, distinctly separating the inside from the outside.¹⁷ The windows were designed to frame a view; a cinematographic, carefully selected snapshot of an appropriate landscape allowing glimpses through time and space where 'the outside is collected by the inside.'¹⁸ The home then becomes a box - a 'machine for living' - where every visual reference to the exterior is delivered in small doses so as to view the world from relative safety.¹⁹ Even Frank Lloyd Wright's renowned 'open plan' dwellings - where doors and walls were minimal and cantilevered terraces daringly pushed out into natural surrounds - typically wrapped around a fireplace at the core, a zone of protection from the magnitude of nature.²⁰ Despite this architectural bravado then, the focus, once again turns safely inward.

Contemporary works of celebrity architects including the likes of Hadid and Ghery, whilst preoccupied with sculptural organic form, are ultimately lacking in geographical, environmental, cultural and socio-political context.²¹ These architectural wrappings not only ignore the external beyond their own shell, they also paradoxically disregard their interiors, which become no more than inconveniently shaped spaces to fill within the elegant outer membrane. Frampton explains that upon examination of Ghery's renowned 'Guggenheim Museum Bilbao', 'it is surely obvious that its exceptionally fluid shape, along with its seductive titanium skin, exists quite independently of anything that takes place within the interior.'²² Increasingly iconic structures are designed within an aesthetically driven culture, neglecting function and usability, serving only to enhance the sign value of the designers, corporations and municipalities that commission them.

What would architecture opened to thinking beyond boundaries, beyond appearances, beyond expectations, look like? Grosz ponders, 'what is it to open up architecture to thought, to force, to life, to the outside?' Outside in this context does not refer to 'the practical, financial, and aesthetic exigencies of building design and construction... Rather... what is alien, other, different from or beyond it. Can architecture survive such assaults on its autonomy?'²³

This is a question relevant not only to contemporary Western architecture, but to all designers bound within the limits of traditional singular modes of practice and unreflective thinking. The era of the iconic architect/designer practising

within an inherently unsustainable industry must be examined from all angles, inside and out. What is called for is a new type of design thinking, recognising design's agency must encompass more than just an aesthetically pleasing end product. As Fry explains, 'disciplinary thinking, by its very nature, is exclusory, and thus has a limited ability to comprehend and engage the relational complexity of unsustainability.'²⁴ Fry suggests that what is needed is a bridging of singular design disciplines as we currently understand them, within the meta-discipline of redirective practice in order to 'redesign design' towards positive change.²⁵ A multi-disciplinary approach to examining alternative modes of sustainable inhabitation beyond the expectations of a polished architectural product requires further consideration.

Architecture without the façade, opening relationships between interior, exterior, landscape and environment requires a shift in thinking away from instrumental design practice. Architecture beyond these boundaries must recognise the embedded cultural systems in which it exists. Spaces designed to accommodate social relationships, structures and customs recognise both the physical and psychological requirements of the occupant. No two cultures share these relationships identically, therefore a one-solution fits all approach drawn from a Westernised aesthetic sensibility is not an appropriate strategy. It is time to cross the threshold of contemporary architecture and re-think the circumscribed boundaries of current design practice.

Technology – inside and out

As Flusser describes it, technology has invaded all that we consider safe and familiar where, 'home-as-one's-castle has become a ruin with the wind of communication blowing through the cracks in the walls.'²⁶ A variety of technologies construct the artificial world we inhabit, yet, mostly, we engage them with a limited understanding of their ontological consequences. Architects and designers have embraced, largely without reflection, a growing number of technologies (for heating and cooling; security, home entertainment etc.) so as to provide internalised, artificial world experiences and environments, responding to the demands of clientele and broader market forces. It is estimated that up to forty percent of total energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions in Australia can be accounted to the operation of buildings.²⁷ In the United States, this figure has been calculated similarly, with thirty nine percent of total energy usage, sixty eight percent of electricity consumption and thirty eight percent of carbon dioxide emissions accountable to buildings.²⁸

There are numerous rating tools available to measure the construction and operational impacts of buildings. Some, including 'Green Star,' measure the environmentally sustainable design and construction of buildings, calculated at the design phase or at the end of construction.²⁹ Others, such as 'NABERS,' measure the consumption of energy, water and waste according to building performance over twelve months of occupancy.³⁰ Rating systems however cannot ascertain unnecessary complexity of design, excessive space allocation, building occupancy and utilisation, or foresee the actions of occupants after the rating period has ended. Whilst any move towards reducing environmental impact is to be commended, regrettably 'green wash' rhetoric may be spouted by end users utilising their 'green' building as a marketable commodity, despite such buildings perpetuating unsustainable long-term behaviours.

Minimising reliance upon complex artificial systems at the earliest stages of building design is a step in the right direction. A small number of architects are moving in this direction, for example, by utilising natural ventilation and lighting towards more efficient building solutions. Webler and Geissler's design for the 'Gotz' building in Germany operates with a double glazed skin, equipped with a louvered ventilated cavity. On a mechanised feedback loop, louvers and vents automatically adjust according to changing external conditions. Utilisation of water chilled ceiling panels over the offices helps to reduce summer temperatures, while a central garden and pool help to cool and humidify internal air.³¹ The 'CH2' building in Melbourne operates on similar principles, with head architect Mick Pearce drawing inspiration from the bio mimicry of natural cooling systems of termite mounds. The building utilises one hundred percent outside air; with vaulted concrete ceilings, chilled water panels and beams, ceiling exhausts, floor vents and external louvers that allow for night purging of warm air. Horizontal external shading elements and operable timber shutters combine with vertical planting to north facing walls, helping to reduce glare and heat whilst increasing air quality. Additionally, the building operates on a recycled water system for flushing toilets and watering gardens, while wind cowls and photovoltaic cells on the rooftop reduce overall energy requirements.³²

Whilst designed with admirable intentions, such high-tech solutions to designing 'low impact buildings' commonly suffer from their own complexity. Difficulty in sourcing materials along with limitations in design and construction expertise can result in increased initial costings, which must be sold to the client in terms of long-term benefit. The complexity in control systems and a lack of operational understanding by the end user is a primary factor in long-term inefficiency. Put simply, the more hi-tech a building, the more it becomes disconnected from its occupants.³³ Furthermore, a building that operates seamlessly may also serve to extend the psychological distance between user and environment. The immediate comfort of an automated artificial environment encourages a level of indifference to external conditions. A building that automatically controls lighting, ventilation and temperature requires limited user involvement, thereby removing the occupant from responsibility or awareness of the energy they consume. Low-tech

alternatives allowing for engagement between occupants, built and external environment should therefore not be undervalued.

On a smaller scale this has been achieved with some success by architects and designers willing to traverse preconceived design parameters. Glen Murcutt's 'Marika-Alderton House,' in the Northern Territory is one such example; constructed from timber, the simple dwelling is raised off the ground to avoid flooding and provide a view of the horizons, a defensive feature fitting with the Aboriginal culture of the client. Designed for the region's high humidity, the structure can be opened completely, with full height pivoting shutters, an open slatted timber floor to allow airflow throughout and roof vents to dispel pressure when exposed to seasonal cyclonic winds.³⁴

Contemporary designs such as these though, are few and far between; located outside the boundaries of current Western expectations of architectural form which according to Banham is 'bounded and contained, limited by walls, floors and ceilings.'³⁵ Banham explains that as a result of a market driven prescription of interior environments, 'the architectural profession responds, reflexively, by proposing enclosed space framed by massive structures, because that is what architects have been taught to do, and what society has been taught to expect of architects.'³⁶

The permeable exterior

We have not always lived within the confines of fixed and regimented massive structures, in a condition of separation from the environment that sustains us. Nomadic peoples over many centuries have grouped 'their activities around some central focus – a water hole, a shade tree, a great teacher – and inhabit a space whose external boundaries are vague, adjustable according to functional need, and rarely regular.'³⁷ The vernacular structures of nomadic peoples protect from the extremes of climate, yet function symbiotically with the surrounding environment where the barriers between the two are undefined.

The 'tipi', favoured by the North American plains Indians were commonly wrapped in buffalo hides with hems able to be lifted for ventilation in warmer temperatures. An inner skin was designed to prevent condensation and also as a space to pack straw insulation throughout the colder months.³⁸ The black tents of the Berber, Bedouin, Kurd, Pashtun and Tibetan peoples were typically covered in woven goat hair. The black colouring absorbed the heat whilst the loose weave dispersed it, resulting in temperatures up to fifteen degrees cooler inside than out. In wet weather, the goat hair fibres swelled, closing the gaps and protecting the interior from moisture.³⁹ Felt covered tents of the nomadic herders of central Asia have been used for nearly two thousand years, by peoples including Mongols, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs and Turkmen. Thick layers of felt were constructed from sheep's fleece, providing both waterproofing and insulation, where in colder temperatures, additional thick layers of felt could be added for warmth. A decorated inner screen in Turkic 'yurts' provided additional insulation in cold weather, whilst in hotter temperatures, outer felt layers could be removed allowing air to pass through the screening.⁴⁰ In areas of extreme cold, the 'igloos' of the Inuit peoples of the Arctic North were kept warm by seal oil lamps and body heat, reaching up to 15 degrees Celsius inside. Hot air rising would melt the snow which, trickling down the inside walls would refreeze in a continuous cycle.⁴¹

What these vernacular methods of dwelling display in common are flexibility, adaptability and recognition of external environments. As Bunn describes, this is derived from, 'a particular relationship with nature which comes from journeying through it rather than living outside it.'⁴² Nomadic dwellings are deceptively complex, designed not only for climate control, but to accommodate cultural rules and customs through spatial planning, living arrangements, areas of segregation and the inclusion of places of worship. This was achieved with minimal technology, but with an intimate understanding of material properties, the interplay of interior and exterior space and an acceptance of dependence upon surrounding environments.

Redefining the interior

Cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin describes the designed dwelling of humanity as a 'shell,' bearing 'the impression of its occupant,' providing security and shelter and the 'image of that abode of the human being in the maternal womb.'⁴³ We have designed ourselves as internalised creatures, scampering into manufactured shells that protect us from the external, yet fail to support authentic lived experience. Contemporary Western interiors simulate climate, light, ventilation and actuality via complex technologies that allow all to occur safely within, without fear of impending danger. They are full - wall to wall - of things we have collected over time as the physical materialisation of our existence. Furthermore, Western interiors have become containers of underutilised consumer products, destined for the scrap heap when fashion dictates they are no longer of value. Interiors and the objects within are designed with minimal consideration for quality and longevity. Instead they are designed within the continual cycle of consumerism that demands upgrading, replacement and disposal once their sign value has diminished. These spaces have increasingly become a projection of image within consumerist culture; reduced to a polished reflection of how we prefer to perceive ourselves and how we hope to be perceived by others.

Open to reflection and re-direction however, design and architecture can traverse the limitations of current practice and step outside. The interior redefined is an intermediate space, integrating the need for essential shelter and

protection from the elements while reducing environmental impact. This form of interior environment aims to minimise reliance upon the artificial for climate control, instead adjusting accordingly to variations in temperature, ventilation and lighting. Drawing lessons from simpler vernacular forms of dwelling, designers of these spaces can learn to appreciate local materials and methods of construction suited to fluctuations in external conditions. The designer needs also to recognise the ontological ramifications of the 'product' of their work. Designing in time for extended material lifespan, interchange-ability, reparability and re-use, acknowledges a responsibility beyond the immediacy of an aesthetically pleasing space. An alternative form of interior environment then, encompasses materials selection to minimise embodied energy and reduce excessive maintenance and wastage.

Furthermore, growing populations with increasing vulnerability to climate and conflict induced displacement heightens the necessity of pre-figurative design for adaptability, disassembly and transportability. Contemporary Western architecture's static nature can once again learn lessons from nomadic forms of dwelling that are flexible to change in times of uncertainty. The design of built environments to accommodate this flexibility while appropriately reflecting cultural diversity challenges contemporary architectural practice. The design of such a space does not sit within an impervious skin - is neither inside nor outside - but sits somewhere between the two, opening physically and psychologically to the possibility of the unknown. Crucially, the redefined interior recognises the larger ecology of the planet as home, reflecting a movement towards a simpler, more sustainable mode of dwelling.

*'Lacking roofs and walls, such architecture standing wide open to the world (i.e. made up entirely of reversible windows and doors) would alter the nature of existence. People would have nowhere to cower any more, nowhere to go to ground or take cover....And there would no longer be any Nature threatening them and which they had to dominate.'*⁴⁴

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