

Simulated practice: the interior treatise through a cumulative design research process

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The provision of the MA: Interior Architecture and Design at the University of Lincoln is organised as a simulated practice in which students produce a treatise. Idiosyncratic student outputs are replaced with a coherent approach, knowledge base, culture, and documentation standards. The studio is considered as the vehicle for a project-based learning strategy which allows it to generate synergy between the research and professional activities of staff and the learning activities of students.

The construction of a theoretical model¹ clarifies the interrelationship of technical, conceptual, and professional knowledge areas embedded in the simulation (which is informed by two sets of design theory: alteration as interiors practice and the imaginal interior). The result is a flow diagram of the research-engaged design process.

- The decision to present this work as a diagram, rather than as a paper, was informed by Leon van Schaik's poster for the RMIT PhD (Bythe & Van Schaik, 2013:59). Conventionally, Sankey diagrams, such as this one, illustrate the flow of energy through a system. In this diagram 'energy' serves as an analogy for the accumulation, iteration, and reciprocation of notional activities.
- Frayling (1993) defined three types of design research: 1.) research 'into' design (what design should be: includes theory, aesthetics, and history); 2.) research 'for' design (that which enables design: includes precedents, materials, and construction methods); and 3.) research 'through' design (which includes developmental work and action research). Murray's (2012:95-6) triadic relationship refers to research 'into', 'for', and 'through' design. The UK subject benchmark statement for Art and Design refers to the combination of 'the conceptual, the theoretical and the practical' (QAA, 2017:9). My own synthesis of these principles is to consider the technical, theoretical, and professional knowledge areas of design as 'techné', 'dogma', and 'praxis'. This is an integrated approach which considers reciprocal facets of making interior as the 'concept' ('idéa'). Knowledge-practice (research) informs the generation of the concept.
- The theoretical process of altering existing architecture is developed by Scott (2008:107-142). The process is presented as a general strategy for the task; as such it was developed from existing physical processes involved in the refurbishment of buildings: 1.) stripping back, a contextual analysis of the site which involves the physical location and temporal position; 2.) making good, to determine the degree of alteration and the operational purpose; 3.) enabling works, to 'break' the building and reveal its second-order associations; and 4.) new work, to make the building inhabitable, while retaining the possibility for future alteration.
- König (2015:282-295) proposes an outline strategy for constructing meaning and embedding it in the built interior: 1.) determine a model inhabitant to serve as target for the message; 2.) determine an utterance, as an organised set of meanings – these are primarily focused on the typology; 3.) saturate and extend the utterance by deliberately including second-order meaning; 4.) synthesise the utterance and its context; and 5.) express the meaning spatially as it will be embodied in a material interior.
- The reciprocity between intangible and tangible components in artefacts (UNESCO, 2003:1) informs both sets of theory. In the masters programme it finds expression in the differentiation between artefacts and objects: 1.) Artefacts are all cultural residues, including tangible and intangible residues (König, 2015:44). The artefact is alive in the cultural system (Fisher, 1992:17) and includes that which may be external to the artefact (Mowitt, 1992:214-215); 2.) Objects are the subset of artefacts with material form (König, 2015:45). Objects are tangible artefacts with three constituent parts: 1.) the material form; 2.) the idea; and 3.) the content (Panofsky, 1955:16).
- For Louis Kahn, the spirit of the building is something separate from its function (Scott, 2008:62). The spirit of a building is revealed when the building is able to indicate how it is made (Scott, 2008:96). My interpretation of this is that it includes the intangible associations which are contained in the conceptual underpinning of any object.
- The stand-for relation is the relationship between a fictional model inhabitant, generated by the designer and the actual inhabitant which will occupy the interior (König, 2015:270).
- The site determination includes the decision on which building to consider, but also its full contextual understanding (Scott, 2008:107-115). This should entail a thorough investigation of the potential heritage value of a site (environmental, historical, aesthetic, and communal values) (Historic England, 2008:26-32).
- Here larger discourses which are present in all interior artefacts are considered; they express the discipline's agency. The purpose is to consider theory as a prelude to new theory construction. In this case, students are expected to make a critical selection from the programme's research endeavour to locate their projects. Interior discourses were identified by König (2015:267-270).
- The initial phases of the processes adopt a typological approach: this specifically considers typology as two distinct categories: 1.) morphological type (form); and 2.) use type (function) (Jennings, 2007).
- An utterance is produced by selecting elements from a set of meanings, isolating units of meaning, articulating them, and composing them as a meaningful string to compose a text (Eco, 1979:151); for the interior, the utterance is the organised and analysable content attached to the interior (König, 2015:255).
- The denotation and connotation is considered as a single function. The denotation is the first-order meaning (which includes the operational purpose of objects); it contains all the stable, observable evidence in signs. The connotation is the unstable and subjective interpretation of artefacts (Eco, 1979:56, 86; König, 2015:48-50). To consider the denotation and connotation is one of the opportunities to synthesise the two main theoretical underpinnings: alteration (more concerned with denotation) and meaning (which is more concerned with connotation).
- Transfunctionalisation is an active process in which external meaning is attached to use objects. This is a social process which attach second-order meaning which exceeds the first-order meaning (use function) (Gottdiener, 1985:998). It is the process by which the material thing becomes the carrier for secondary associations (Kingwell, 2006:175). This is a major synthetic moment in the design process.
- The hermeneutic approach leads to a greater understanding based on a constant movement between surface and deep, back and forth (Webb, 1997:207). This includes constant comparison of the part to the whole. The understanding of any text (and in this case, interior can be considered as text) is dependent on understanding the constituent parts while the whole text define the constituents (Zimmerman, 2015:25); understanding is dependent on the particular meaningful gestures and the entire habitus (Zimmerman, 2015:17). The hermeneutic circle here can be seen as a movement between the model inhabitant's understanding of the constructed interior and their understanding of their own habitus (after Zimmerman, 2015:67). The interior artefact, and its interpretation, is here also dependent on constant comparison between the dictionary (a limited set of semantic universals) and encyclopaedia (every possible association is interpreted) models of understanding (Eco, 1990:143).
- A rapid evidence assessment (REA) aims to provide a comprehensive overview of an issue during a limited time-frame. In this case students compile a corpus of images and meta-data in a limited timeframe, and synthesise an image board out of them. The image board is a recognisable interior output (König & Khan, 2018).
- A reflective approach is encouraged throughout the masters process. This includes continuous record-keeping and weekly monitoring of notional hours spent, and progress made.
- The simulated studio includes a set of documentation pro-formas (this includes all academic outputs). This poster was prepared using the pro-forma for academic posters.
- Since design research is a fundamental principle of this programme, students are expected to be able to contextualise their project within the subject itself. They are expected to reflect on two categories of learning: factors with theoretical importance, and factors with practical importance.
- The display and presentation of a design portfolio to illustrate the project outputs, using a combination of appropriate techniques and media. The portfolio is considered as a collection of work which is compiled over a period of time. The interior treatise should display the characteristics of a 'professional masters degree' as defined by the QAA (2015:5); it aims to enable graduates to qualify for entry into the profession of interior design (this may be subject to the requirements of the profession in various jurisdictions) and to provide development opportunities related to advanced employment in interior design.

