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Andrea Sosa Fontaine, *Assistant Professor of Interior Design, Kent State University, United States*

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asosafon@kent.edu

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Andrea Sosa Fontaine, Assistant Professor of Interior Design, Kent State University, United States

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Abstract

Each discipline in the built environment has a unique dialect for thinking, designing, crafting, and inhabiting space. Words such as tectonics, materiality, and vernacular all hold a specific interpretation in architecture. Even common words have understated complexity, but only when offered under an architectural lens, words such as gesture, negotiate, and scale. Interiors also have their own language, words such as adjacency, identity, surface, and atmosphere. Language from interior design shares most origins with architecture, but arguably, as a discipline, interiors exist at a point of intersection between disciplines. To be classified as an interior, a space needs a boundary, a container, or an expression of an outside; however, the language of interiors does not need to be so contained.

Interior design foundationally is interdisciplinary and exists as a point of entry into other disciplines. While interiors and architecture share a dialogue, for architecture to understand interiors means also to use interiors to connect with other disciplines, such as fashion. Interiors offer a means for architecture to speak to fashion and, even more so, to converse with the body. However, existing interior language based primarily on architecture does not acknowledge close ties to other disciplines. Instead of using interiors to translate, imagine what opportunities could unfold if design disciplines were bilingual, understanding their own language but also that of interiors.

The paper proposes a method to encourage interdisciplinary dialogue when discussing Design, perhaps even changing how architecture and fashion see each other through a renewed interior dialect. Borrowing words from fashion, like seaming, fit, tailoring, and mending, interior space becomes more fluid, boundaries blur, and ideas are more curious. Making and understanding space starts with remaking the language of interiors.

Keywords: interior design, language, dialogue, making space

1. Introduction

“To be native to a place, we must learn to speak its language” (Kimmerer, 2013, p.48)

Within North America, there is a mass and continual extinction of Indigenous languages, the precursor to all languages on this earth. Some terminology has already been lost with past generations, and others are at risk of fading away. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks to the preciousness of Indigenous language and how translation cannot always capture the original intent (Kimmerer, 2013). Kimmerer’s writing implores us to consider methods of knowledge and understanding of

Corresponding Author: Andrea Sosa Fontaine, Assistant Professor of Interior Design, Kent State University, asosafon@kent.edu

the world through Indigenous practices, not simply through contemporary scientific research. Kimmerer acknowledges that when we speak languages that are not our own, we are merely passive participants in the conversation and unable to comprehend the entirety of intent. From the Potawatomi language, Kimmerer acknowledges that the language presents plants, animals, and landscapes as animated and active participants in the world instead of static objects. She notes that when words do not exist to describe an idea, our capacity to understand those ideas becomes limited.

When we consider the language of the built environment, some words hold meaning in architecture in a way that no other discipline could replicate. Although part of the English language, words such as gesture, negotiate, and scale hold a distinct translation in architecture. Interior design, an allied discipline to architecture, uses the same language. This likely stems from defining architecture as a discipline centuries before interior design was framed as a unique practice.

Interior design is inherently interdisciplinary within the built environment, with deep roots in architectural theory and practice. However, as a discipline and professional practice, Interior Design continues to find itself by redefining its boundaries, where interiors see themselves and present themselves to other disciplines (Schneiderman & Campos, 2018). No longer is interior design a subset of architecture, but instead a paralleled discipline that can work with architecture, each having its own body of knowledge and expertise (Winton, 2013). Interior design finds its own space within the built environment through a hyper-focused perspective, where the body is central to the practices and theory.

Through this distinction, there is an opportunity for interior design to reflect on an existing language, one that began with architecture, to find ways to permeate interdisciplinary influence as a method to develop a language more reflective of the discourse of interior design. If interior design were to define a new dialect of space, perhaps it could pave the way for architecture to dialogue with other disciplines without losing any meaning in translation.

When language is translated, intent can often be lost. Some words have no equivalent, for example, when we compare how plants are depicted in English to the Potawatomi language. Translation remains a valuable tool but only offers the best effort at interpretation. If interior design formed a modified dialect, one that held roots in architecture but was interdisciplinary in nature, architecture could use the language to speak more directly to other disciplines.

2. Methodology

While the language of architecture and interior design is vast, the specific language of the design process was studied for this research. Beginning with a theoretical analysis of interior design processes and architecture, we can find many similarities, as they have and continue to share the same language. In terms of disciplinary distinction, as Interior design continues to frame its boundaries (Weinthal, 2011), there is an opportunity to pen the language of interiors as a dialect of the built environment.

Looking beyond architecture and through dissecting the language of the Fashion design process, we can begin to define the dialect of interior space. While the research and language analysis were extensive in crafting a language that reflects the redefining of disciplinary boundaries, the outcome of these studies has a finite focus on the role of the body in the interior design process. Central to what makes interior design a defined discipline within the built environment, the body provides a starting for a new dialect.

3. Shared Language of a Phased Design Process

To be an interior designer means to know body and space relationships and how to respond to the needs of particular bodies in crafting interior space. As such, in forming a new dialect, we can begin with the interior design process.

The design process, particularly from a North American practice, has a phased language that speaks to consecutive steps of the design process. While not all design practices use this language, many follow this approach. Typically, the interior design process shares a successive

phased process from architecture. While there is some variation, generally, the practices of interior design and architecture utilise the following phases:

- Pre-Design (Sometimes referred to as Programming)
- Schematic Design
- Design Development
- Construction Documents (also referred to as Contract Documentation)
- Bidding (also referred to as Tender)
- Contract Administration
- Project Close-Out
- Post Occupancy (Sometimes included, but not always)

Through this language of phasing, projects are managed, and client expectations are measured. Interior designers and architects are both required to study this language and are tested on it during professional practice examinations (CIDQ, 2019; AIA, 2021). However, from the phrasing alone, it is pretty easy to see that the language is very pragmatic and lacks reference to the poetics of the design of space. This phased language was certainly not developed haphazardly but came about as a method to standardise contractual obligations, project efficiencies, and communication across disciplines. The challenge is to practice creatively when the language of processes speaks more to the organisation of construction and not the design practices of the built environment. By dissecting this language, we can see that the nomenclature for the phases suggests that design only occurs during two stages and has a distinct start and endpoint.

Pre-Design, a term that I take personal offence to, offers an immediate delineation that Design does not begin from the start. However, architects and interior designers know that Design starts from the moment of provocation. By simply identifying the design problem, we begin to consider a response to that problem. Thinking about Design is still Design. This language is problematic, not only to our clients but to ourselves as designers. We are taught through design education that every moment of thinking about and constructing a space is part of design. Design educators foster a sense of curiosity and innovation in their students, hoping they will graduate to contribute meaningfully to the built environment. However, in North America, immediately upon entering practice, architects and interior designers are faced with this face-value pragmatic language or a modified form of it. The language is at the forefront of team meetings, project schedules, and contracts with clients. Sure, there is a purpose to scheduling and following a typical process. However, this language also suggests that most practices are the same and, even more so, that design is comprised of linear, consecutive practices. Suppose we focus back on Pre-Design, which often includes information gathering, site documentation, research, engagement with users of space, ethnography, and sketching. We can very quickly argue that Pre-Design is, in fact, design. The term diminishes the importance of this critical beginning of ideation in the practices of the built environment, an example of where language fails architecture and interior design.

This type of pragmatic language, internally within design practices, can stunt design thinking. Even more concerning is that this language is what we are outwardly communicating to those outside of our professional practices, the client, the public, and even allied disciplines. Any architect or interior designer knows that Design occurs during each and every portion of the design process. During Construction Documentation, working through design details is about refinement and complexity, just as much as in Design Development. Throughout Contract Administration, where spaces are being constructed, we also know that design still occurs as a response to a circumstance or changing needs of the users of space.

Language helps us perceive the world, and we act according to our fluent languages. Design would only occur during twenty per cent of the process if architects and interior designers were to be led by the language of practice. Although designers know better, over time, this language has the ability to dilute the design process. Of course, this is not a generalisation that all architects and interior designers practice in diluted methods, but an acknowledgement of problematic language as an ability to permeate through the theoretical disciplinary foundations.

This language of practice is dangerous. Not only because it suggests when design occurs but also because it generalises that architects and interior designers always follow the same methods. Indeed, there are similarities but equal, if not more significant, differences.

4. How Interior Design Sees the Body

To explore this further, we can begin with interior design as a discipline with solid ties to architectural language. Knowing what distinguishes interior design practices from architecture is critical to understanding how the language of interior design could evolve to reflect a recent reframing of disciplinary boundaries. At the core, interior designers make space for bodies. In the disciplines of the built environment, interior design knows bodies best. Of course, architecture also understands users of space, but interior design places the body central to the design process. To begin to dispel this problematic language of design, we can begin to decipher how the language of interior design references the body.

In practice, interior design understands how to respond to bodies' needs, experiences, and wants. Interior designers know that bodies change, grow, and are different. However, in much of the interior design language, and in particular of design processes, there is little reference to the body itself. The typical phased design process shared with architecture does not reflect the intimate relationship that interior design has with bodies.

The interior design sees itself as the first communicator with bodies in the built environment, holding bodies at the centre as the purpose and intent of interior space. Through shared language, interior design and architecture can communicate freely. However, interior design could benefit from a more refined language that better reflects the body-space relationships.

In this reconsideration of language, it is essential to acknowledge that bodies are more than a singular figure and form. Bodies have identities, values, and needs and differ in size, shape, and mobility. We also need to acknowledge that bodies in space, in particular when it comes to identity, should be considered as dressed bodies (Mckelvey & Munslow, 2012). How someone carries themselves in clothing or uses clothing to represent their identity or even comfort changes how interior designers respond through design practices.

With a focus on this distinction of understanding the role of dressed bodies in space, looking toward the language of fashion design can offer guidance in reforming the language of interior design.

Within fashion design, the body is quite evident at the centre of design theory and practices. Clothing is designed for bodies, particular bodies, changing bodies, and distinct identities. Through the language of fashion design, this co-dependency of design practices to the body is outwardly evident (Quinn, 2003).

If interior design could borrow language from fashion design, perhaps how interior designers think about and design space might become more reflective of their distinction as a discipline.

5. How Interior Design Talks About Bodies

Typically, when interior designers represent a body in the design process, it is often simply a representation. This representation is referred to as a Scale Figure. The term Scale Figure acknowledges that the purpose of the figure in representation is to communicate scale. The figure's intent is not to demonstrate identity or values but instead is a tool of architecture, and subsequently interior design, to communicate the scale of representations of the built environment.

The Scale Figure serves a distinct purpose. However, it is contradictory to how interior design sees itself. These figures are static in form, and their role is to present the architecture, suggest scale, and perhaps hint toward the spatial program. Within the existing language of interiors, a typical term or phrase does not exist to communicate the individual and differing identities of bodies in space. The Scale Figure should not be the medium in which interior designers represent and design for bodies in space.

There are practices and theories within interior design that acknowledge unique qualities of the body, words such as Ergonomics and Anthropometrics. While they are critical to designing

space for people, they speak more to the physical and technical characteristics of designing for bodies instead of distinct identities.

6. How Fashion Talks About Bodies

Looking at the language of bodies within fashion design, we can see how interior design could benefit from an adapted dialect. In clothing design, the body is referenced through technical language, with terms such as figure, physique, form, and silhouette. Arguably, these terms are reductive of bodies to simple geometry. However, fashion design does forge stronger connections to bodies than interiors through both the design process and language.

While interior design continues to use the scale figure, fashion design speaks about bodies more directly with the croquis. A croquis is a term used specifically by fashion designers. Instead of a reductive reference to a form or physique, the croquis is a figural drawing of a specific individual, often representing them in an active state, living and in motion. The croquis also refers to identity, often demonstrating a particular posture, hairstyle, or even individual markings, such as a tattoo or scar. In fashion design, the body is so much more critical than a scaled representation, so much so that they have developed their own term to acknowledge how they understand bodies. Although a simple act, interior design could benefit from a move away from the scale figure and instead toward borrowing the croquis from fashion design. This minor modification to the language of interior design offers a poignant statement that interior design recognises and understands the unique identities of bodies within space.

7. How the Body is Central to the Fashion Design Process

Quite similarly to interior design and architecture, fashion design processes are often defined by typical pragmatic language. In fashion design, the phasing can include The Design Brief, Research, and Design Development (Mckelvey & Munslow, 2012). However, within the larger categories of the fashion design process, additional processes and language are more innate to an understanding of bodies, clothing, and identity. Throughout the entirety of the fashion design process, there is a continual dialogue with the body. Through the significance of Fit, clothing is designed and continually referenced to the body throughout the design process. Fashion design even goes as far as to use Fit Models as a way to test three-dimensional garments on an actual living person. When clothing is designed for a specific person, the garment goes through multiple Fittings to test the clothing related to intention, identity, and the changing form of the body (Mckelvey & Munslow, 2012). While interior design and architecture both use scale figures, neither has a term or phrase in their language to reference Fitting in the way that fashion design so directly connects to bodies. Specifically, through the borrowing of Fitting, interior design language can begin to remind the designer who they are designing for and that their needs may change throughout the design process. This minor modification could offer great significance to the interior design language.

Architecture often manifests in the form of new construction. However, modifications to existing spaces can still be part of architectural practices. Within interior design, even in newly constructed spaces, some form of interior container often sets parameters or extents to design within. More frequently than architecture, interior designers work on existing or recycled spaces. These recycled spaces have been previously occupied, perhaps with a different program, and are ready for a renewed iteration of design. Although the recycled space could look vastly different from the previous iteration, it is through an adaptation to programs, bodies, and contexts that the space transforms. The language of interior design has a few different ways to refer to this type of design, terms such as Adaptive reuse, renovation, or remodel. Each of these terms suggests a repurposing of space. However, none of these terms indicate a repurposing for a different set of spatial inhabitants. Interior design does not yet have a word to describe this acknowledgement of changing users in a particular space. In fashion design, there is a similar practice where a garment is altered to suit a different or changing body from what the garment was originally designed for. In fashion design, this act is referred to as tailoring—a specific reference to modifying a particular garment for one particular person. Interior design practices could become more body-focused by borrowing tailoring, a familiar term, and normalising modifications after initial fabrication.

Finally, within Interior design, spaces age and patina over time. They show marks of wear and past use. Sometimes, the design of space no longer serves the people who occupy the space, and portions become broken. Interior design has language to describe this, such as repairing, fixing, or even making new. However, this language suggests that there is something wrong with a space that needs some resolution to be fully functional. In fashion design, there is certainly the terminology of repair and fix. However, fashion design also uses mending to make garments usable again for bodies after they have become damaged. Mending provides a way to describe the repair process and links the repair process to the hands that will be mending the garment. Through humanising language, ideas of repair can become more accessible.

8. Conclusion

Interior design knows bodies in the context of space. Architecture knows form and structure in the context of the built environment. Fashion design knows bodies as dressed bodies and, through clothing, understands identity. Interior design can translate the identity of the body through the context of clothing. Architecture speaks most directly to exterior landscapes and interior environments. However, through the language of architecture, a natural bridge does not exist to speak to bodies or the inhabitants of space. Interior design knows bodies but continues to use language that references bodies in static form. By borrowing language from fashion design, interior design can evolve its language into a dialect that speaks to the animacy of bodies in space.

The language of architecture is discipline-specific and works well for the practices of designing and constructing buildings. Currently, architecture and interior design speak the same language. However, suppose a new interior design dialect emerged. In that case, architecture could begin to learn this dialect as a way to speak more directly to bodies, engaging the nuanced differences of people in the design process. Using activated and body-centric language, less information will be lost in translation, fostering a more interdisciplinary approach to design within the built environment and prompting architecture and interiors to be more responsive to how bodies change and grow. Perhaps even changing how architecture and fashion see each other, the interior design process becomes more fluid and more resilient to respond to bodies through this new dialect. Disciplinary boundaries blur, and ideas are more curious. Making and understanding space starts with remaking the language of interior design.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

This paper has been presented at the SPACE International Conference 2021 on Architecture and Literature.

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