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Igor Siddiqui

The question of how to intellectually define interiors frequently oscillates between interior design's claims of disciplinary autonomy[1] and a broader view of interiority as an interdisciplinary space open to and impacted by multiple bodies of knowledge.[2] Both models are relational: the former defines its disciplinary authenticity in relation to others, while the latter seeks to cultivate relationships among multiple and disciplinarily diverse contributors. The title of this journal, *Interiors: Design/Architecture/Culture,* appears to relieve the tension between the two by simultaneously suggesting disciplinary inclusiveness and separation. On the one hand, the triad of design, architecture, and culture signals the journal's openness to the treatment of interiors as a subject matter relevant to multiple disciplines. On the other, the slashes that separate the three terms, though perhaps intended as a stylistic graphic device, nonetheless grammatically imply the use of the word "or" – effectively offering the reader three distinct choices as subtitles that define interiors. This observation prompts one to consider the journal title as a symptom of an ideological conundrum, but also as a diagram that is open to further development and evolution. What if the divisive slashes within the subtitle were to be replaced by directional vectors that, instead of separating, connect design, architecture, and culture in multiple ways? What would such vectors look like

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and what new directions may they take? How might such a diagram not simply reiterate the historically familiar power dynamics within the triad in question – namely the orthodoxy of total design and its view of interiors as a subset of architecture – but also suggest new relational possibilities? In exploring these questions, I begin by considering interiors in the tradition of total design and arrive at devising the notion of *oblique interiors* as an alternative proposition.

Total design

Spatially speaking, interiors are everywhere, for everything that has an outside also has an inside. Most discussions about the design of interior spaces nonetheless refer to that of buildings; the building is in fact routinely seen as a necessary precondition for the construction of the interior.[3] Although such a dependence may be seen as merely typological or spatial, it is also disciplinary. In other words, it is not only that interiors depend on buildings – architecture's main product – for their spatial definition, but also that interior design as a discipline routinely draws from architecture for its knowledge and expertise. Interior design's need for architecture makes sense given architecture's influence on interiors over the past two centuries through the powerful legacy of total design. While it was interiors that provided a significant venue for architecture's own disciplinary growth and propagation, what is often considered to be an essential part of the history of interior design is in fact mainly a story about architecture.

In his 1998 article "Whatever Happened to Total Design?" Mark Wigley defined total design in terms of implosion and explosion (Wigley 1998: 1–8). The immersive interiors of Peter Behrens, Frank Lloyd Wright, Josef Maria Olbrich and others, in which all constituent elements are subjected to an over-arching vision of the architect, exemplify implosive design. Explosive design meanwhile refers to the proliferation of architect-designed artifacts at all scales from teapots to cities and beyond, demonstrating the discipline's conviction that architecture is – and should be – everywhere. Through both implosive and explosive design the architect positions himself at the center of all creative activity[4] enacting, according to Wigley, a fantasy about architecture as a form of total control.

Total design blossomed as a modernist reaction to industrialization (Wigley 1998: 2), at the same moment that architecture's allied professions including interior, product, apparel, and graphic design started emerging as a consequence of technologically enabled mass production, mass consumption, and mass culture. With these circumstances in mind, one could extend Wigley's argument about architecture's desire for total control to also include the need for self-control. Much like the need for buildings to be self-supportive, the work of architects too had to distinguish itself by remaining autonomous and legible on its own, to stay intact while transforming the world inside and out.

By the 1960s, critiques of what French architect Claude Parent referred to as modern architecture's "unbending control" (Parent 1996: 14) and its inadequate social consequences proliferated from within the discipline, with a number of avant-garde practices who borrowed many strategies from total design while complicating and effectively undermining its original intentions. Groups like Archigram in the UK, SUPERSTUDIO in Italy, and Ant Farm in the US used total design's proclivity for multi-scalar modes of practice and explosive dissemination not simply to reiterate architecture's existing authority, but rather as a means of discovering alternatives to it. Some of the resulting architectural projects from that era – such as Archigram's body-scaled projects like *Cushicle* (1964); SUPERSTUDIO's black-on-white gridded clothing, furnishings, and rooms; and Ant Farm's *Inflatocookbook* (1971), a three-dollar know-how publication on DIY inflatables – have since been thoroughly absorbed into some of the most progressive interior design curricula as foundational disciplinary material.

Oblique architecture

In France, the multidisciplinary group Architecture Principe, led by Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, was formed in 1963 as a platform for what Jacques Lucan described as "investigating a new kind of architectural and urban order" (Lucan 1996: 5). During its five years of activity (because of political differences, the group disbanded in 1968 in the midst of the May protests), members of the Architecture Principe developed the Function of the Oblique, a theory of the inclined plane in architecture. Disseminated through nine issues of their eponymous manifesto-magazine, as well as numerous lectures, exhibitions, and other publications, the group's theory sought to renew architecture's capacity for meaningful engagement with the broader society by advocating for an architectural language that dismantles modernist orthogonal form. In 1966 Paul Virilio wrote, "In effect, the static vertical and horizontal can no longer correspond to the dynamics in human life. In future, architecture must be built on the oblique, so as to accord with the new plane of human consciousness." (Virilio 1996: 66). For Virilio, Parent, and their artist-collaborators, oblique architecture's salient feature was the slanted floor/wall, which they believed would not only merge program and circulation, but also act as a generator of ever-changing activity. In this way,

> The purpose of the oblique was to encourage a constant awareness of gravity, bringing the body into a tactile relationship with the building. The qualities of the architecture were to be perceived in a sensitive, sensual manner, as people became free to move beyond conventional spatial situations (Lucan 1996: 5).

Decades before emergence became a buzzword in design, Architecture Principe's theory of the oblique was driven by concepts of disequilibrium, dynamic form, and emergent behavior through which they confronted architecture's orthodox views of stability and control.

The most significant architectural manifestation of the group's theory during their period of activity is the church of Sainte-Bernadette du Banlay in Nevers (1968), along with a series of unbuilt proposals, primarily for private residences. Formally these projects share a common attitude toward the building mass: heavy monolithic volumes distorted by non-orthogonal geometries and strategically fractured to hint at the complexity within. In all, it is interior space that serves as the primary medium for manifesting the virtues of the oblique: interior landscapes of interconnected sloped floors that blur the distinction between programmed spaces and circulation, avoiding the conventional morphology of discrete rooms and maximizing spatial continuity.

In the years immediately following the group's disbandment, Claude Parent continued to integrate principles of the oblique into his work with interiors occupying a significant role among the realized cultural and residential projects. For the French Pavilion at the Venice Biennale (1970), Parent designed an oblique interior in which angled wood-plank floors and a wireframe ceiling constructed from a diagrid of colored neon made for an all-enveloping public spectacle. Likewise, in a series of temporary installations, including an exhibition environment at the art center in Reims (1972), inclined planes are the primary architectural element, multitasking as vertical circulation, group seating, and display. Parent's residential projects, such as the Bellaguet Apartment (1971) and his own home (1974), feature faceted surfaces further tailored to the scale of the body that allow for various uses while minimizing the need for conventional furniture. If in the public realm it is circulation that is envisioned as oblique architecture's preferred activity, in private – as existing documentation of these projects suggests – it is all about lounging and hanging out.[5]

The immersive nature of these interiors, and the activation of architectural form as the primary device for spatial definition, may be interpreted along the same lines as total design's implosive interior, but the differences are radical. While oblique architecture does in fact seem to geometrically implode within the limits of its massing, it does not obsess over every detail at every scale. Rather than being overdesigned and exceedingly refined, it is materially rough, abstract, and even somewhat incomplete. As the selected projects demonstrate, conventional interior elements such as furniture are virtually evacuated from oblique architecture, yet as they open up the possibility of open-ended use and appropriation they do not preclude the absorption of external content. If anything, the material traces of use and daily life serve as the theory's proof-of-concept.

In the decades that followed, Parent eventually departed from the oblique as the primary focus of his architectural practice, but the theory's long-term influence on architecture endured. Architects like Jean Nouvel (who apprenticed under Parent), Bernard Tschumi, and Rem Koolhaas – including many associated with what came to be known in the 1980s as deconstructivism – all absorbed certain aspects of the Architecture Principe's oblique in their work. More recently, buildings such as OMA's McCormick Tribune Campus Center in Chicago

Figure 1
SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, Lausanne, Switzerland, 2010; photograph by the author.

(2003), SANAA's Rolex Learning Center in Lausanne (2010) (Figure 1) and Snøhetta's Ryerson University Student Learning Center in Toronto (2015) exemplify oblique architecture's tenets of free movement and open-ended activity that mirror the dynamic nature of today's society.[6]

Oblique interiors

As I have argued so far, the oblique is a fascinating departure from total design in terms of how its architecture treats interiors – and thus other disciplines. In disciplinary terms, I would go as far as arguing that while in the paradigm of total design architecture keeps its professional allies (interior, graphic, lighting, and others) in a subservient role, oblique architecture sets them free. I hence suggest that the architecture of the oblique is, in other words, less needy. So what then might *oblique interiors* be?

Rather than framing oblique interiors simply as the outcome of oblique architecture, I instead refer to oblique interiors as those forms of interior design practice that no longer require a subservient relationship to architecture. Like the inclined planes of oblique architecture that encourage dynamic activity, today's architecture may be seen as an open-ended framework rather than an absolute pre-determinant for contemporary interiors. In developing alternative relationships to architecture, the aim is to advance other forms of knowledge that shape interior spaces and thus intellectually shape the broader culture in new ways. By overcoming overreliance on buildings, a discipline like interior design also expands its cultural role beyond client-based service, opening up new trajectories for its development. Oblique interiors result from forms of design practice that engage with external constraints, but are driven by internal motives. Eschewing straightforwardness, oblique interiors favor operating in ulterior mode, constantly seeking

Figure 2
ISSSStudio, RGB HUB, Austin, TX, 2016; photograph by Bill McCullough.

oblique strategies that simultaneously fulfill professional responsibilities, but also intellectually advance the discipline.

When imagining the overlay of oblique interiors onto Architecture Principe's oblique architecture, or for that matter onto its more contemporary permutations, one sees an interior as experimental and as provocative in its own right. One may see soft layers that expand the interior's capacity for inhabitation with flexibility and mobility in mind; a range of atmospheres that create new kinds of microenvironments; interventions that advance material and graphic possibilities in relation to new technologies; and accommodations for a range of temporal and temporary cycles of use. Such spatial layers not only fulfill their role in terms of experiences *in situ*, but also actively engage with the disciplinary discourses that they seek to advance. Oblique interiors are in this way not a single theoretical approach or a specific formal language; on the contrary, the term is coined to stand for the multiplicity of approaches to interiors as an intellectually driven spatial practice.

Conclusion

Claude Parent believed that in order to alleviate their indifference to architecture, people had to be drawn into an environment using the "specifically architectural methods to bring about this state of mind, which is characterized initially by receptiveness, then by participation, and ultimately by a sense of belonging" (Parent 1996: 67). The statement not only describes architecture as a space of inhabitation, but also considers space as a didactic tool for architecture. Following Parent's logic, how might other disciplines use space to teach its relevance to its audiences and inhabitants? What methods, specific to their areas of expertise, may they use to draw its supporters in? In my work with ISSSStudio, a practice that I direct in relation to my scholarly work, the didactic role of interiors is the primary ulterior motive. Dedicated to exploring alternative modes of spatial practice that advance the status of contemporary interiors, the practice links experimental design research with "real-life" commissions in order to publically illuminate some of

design's most relevant issues. In a series of full-scale installations and interior environments, we have disseminated our research on a range of issues from biodegradable plastics and color theory (Figure 2) to innovative soft structural systems and robotics. Through a particular version of oblique interior practice, ISSSStudio's immersive work seeks to create new lines of influence that connect design, architecture, and culture and as such expand interiors' role in society. Finally, the slashes found in the title of this journal in this way have the capacity to morph into a whole range of other characters on the keyboard, setting into motion a multiplicity of scripts for the future of oblique interiors.

Notes

1. This is clearly reflected in both academia and practice through the organization of curricular departments and professional licensure respectively.
2. *Aftertaste*, the series of symposia and resulting publications and exhibitions at Parsons the New School for Design from 2007 to 2015, is an example of such an expanded view of interiors.
3. *Interiors beyond Architecture*, a forthcoming book edited by Amy Campos and Deborah Schneiderman to be published by Routledge in 2018, promises to examine alternatives to this dependency.
4. The central role of the architect and the role of building among all creative trades is famously represented by a conceptual diagram developed by Walter Gropius in 1922 showing the structure of the Bauhaus curriculum. "Teaching at the Bauhaus," accessed April 1, 2017. http://www.bauhaus.de/en/das_bauhaus/45_unterricht/
5. For a comprehensive documentation of Claude Parent's body of work, including the projects discussed here, see Parent, Claude. 2010. Claude Parent: l'œuvre construite, l'œuvre graphique. Orléans: HYX.
6. It is perhaps not a coincidence that all three of these contemporary projects, which in my opinion are among those that most strongly demonstrate principles of the oblique today, are student centers, a building program particularly well suited to informal inhabitation, flexible activity, and meandering circulation.

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Biography

Igor Siddiqui is Associate Professor at The University of Texas at Austin, where he also serves as Graduate Adviser and Chair of the Graduate School Committee in Interior Design. He is the principal of ISSSStudio, a cutting-edge design practice whose work has been extensively exhibited and published internationally. Siddiqui received his Master of Architecture degree from Yale. Email: igor@isssstudio.com