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Interiors and their temporalities: Etching time into Modernist Materiality

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“Since the classical period,” Marvin Trachtenberg claims in his thought-provoking 2010 book *Building-in-Time*, “architecture has always been known as the victim of time – of the entropic agency of time’s arrow” (Trachtenberg 2010: 1). As a consequence, architecture has often been conceived of in terms of space rather than time. Within this dominant paradigm even so-called historicist phenomena such as the imitation of classical building principles in the 18th century or the vogue of neo-movements in the 19th century can be interpreted as attempts to arrest the passing of time in favor of “timeless,” transhistorical spatial structures. This evacuation of time from architecture, it is argued by Trachtenberg, reaches its climax in the “chronophobic” and even “chronicidal” nature of High Modernist architecture (Trachtenberg 2010: xxii).

In contrast to the premodern way of building, he argues, modernist architecture lives “in its own timeless-time bubble”

since it is sealed off both from future time (as modernist buildings are not made to endure) as well as from the time of the past (as modernism rejects all references to architectural history) (Trachtenberg 2010: 4–5). In modernist architecture, what is left then is some kind of eternal present. This a-temporal architectural ideology, which is inherent in post-renaissance architecture and is typically exemplified by High Modernism, is contrasted to buildings dating from before the Renaissance. In the premodern era, Trachtenberg contends, the slow pace of building processes inevitably lead to the materialization of the passing of time (and hence of the co-existence of different moments in time) in the structure of the building. Then, temporality was intertwining with the production, occupation and use of space. After the Renaissance, so one might conclude when reading Trachtenberg, building no longer enabled the passing of time “to take place.” But was that really the case?

Time zones and temporal regimes

It is important to see that Trachtenberg offers more a specific theory about modernist architectural theories than an account of buildings as they materialize and are inhabited or used in another way. In our opinion, the ideology of “chronicide” covers a more complex reality in which the effects of the passing of time—repressed or not—inevitably emerge. As buildings materialize they always get entangled in history. They necessarily live *in* and *with* time. They are never immaculate creations. Even buildings that are explicitly conceived and shaped to transcend time’s “relentless passage” (Hoffman 2009: 14), will face the effects of time and hence display a temporal complexity beyond the clear-cut here-and-now (or there-and-then). What *Building-in-Time* therefore mostly proves is that the rethinking of time as a cultural production can challenge the assumptions and unsettle the foundations of architectural history. Trachtenberg generates what Greig Crysler has called a “temporal domain” or “time zone” in architectural theory: a site of debate and counterargument that emerges when the role of conceptions of time in architectural debates and practices comes under discussion (Crysler 2012: 290).

The “time zone” this theme issue will concentrate on, is the one that emerged when modernist architects, artists and writers started to reflect about the temporalities of buildings and interiors during the interwar period. With his radical ideas on modernist chronophobia and chronicide, Trachtenberg provides this “time zone” with a unifying label. Yet, many other visions are and were developed. Sanford Kwinter has stressed that modernism can only be identified with the demise of the concept of absolute time, depriving real time of its “unitary strand distributing homogenous units of past, present, and future.” Through its fascination for the event, modernist architecture opened our eyes for the fact that time is a “complex, interactive

‘thick’ manifold of distinct yet integrated durations” (Kwinter 2002: 6, 22). Such focus on spaces of flux and the acceleration of time, easily leads up to the idea that history disintegrates and even disappears. Still, next to the idea of an “unbound modernism” (Mertins 2011), there is also a tendency to focus on the persistent role of larger time frames within modernist architecture. Here, a more genealogical perspective on modernism prevails, revealing the constitutive effect of nostalgia on modernism (Boym 2001; Nagel 2012; Payne 2012). Considering all these views on “histories of the immediate present” (Vidler 2008), which all seem to have a very stable footing in their own right, Michel Serres’s often quoted phrase about the temporal complexity of objects might be apt to describe the temporal dimension of modernist architectural spaces and interiors too: “An object, a circumstance, is thus polychronic, multitemporal, and reveals a time that is gathered together, with multiple pleats” (Serres and Latour 1995: 60).

If buildings and interiors—even the so-called timeless spaces of modernist architecture—reveal complex temporalities, the question arises how we can sort them out. Helpful in this regard are the ideas Jonathan Gil Harris, a scholar in early modern English literature, developed. In dialogue with the ideas by Michel Serres, he highlights the difference between the polychronic and the multitemporal:

What may at first seem like a pair of synonyms for “polytemporal” are, on closer inspection, two subtly different concepts, and this difference points to a significant disjunction in the meanings of “time.” “Time” can refer to a moment, period or age—the punctual date of chronology. [...] But “time” can also refer to an understanding of the temporal relations among past, present and future. Serres’s notion of the polychronic draws on the first, chronological meaning of time in asserting that objects collate many different moments [...]. Serres’s notion of the multitemporal evokes the second meaning of time. (Harris 2009: 3–4)

In other words, buildings, houses, interiors—which, in the broadest sense of the word, can be conceived of as massive constellations of objects—do not only refer to different moments in time. They also manifest different “temporal regimes” which are shaping the multiple rituals and practices by which relations between past, present and future moments are structured (Hartog 1996). Trachtenberg’s take on timeless space definitely captures the temporal regime some modernist architects had in mind. Yet, even this outspoken temporal regime was always forced to co-exist with other temporal regimes. The aim of the contributions to this issue is to chart such co-existence of—or even conflicts between—temporal regimes in interior spaces. Specifically, this theme issue dissects

the multifaceted temporal regimes in which quintessential “Orte der moderne” (Geisthövel and Knoch 2005), ranging from (semi-)private spaces such as the domestic interior and the artist’s house, to the (semi-)public interiors of the grand hotel, the sanatorium and the department store, were enmeshed.

From the moment architectural ideas materialize, time and history come into play. What’s more, when people move into buildings things are constantly modified and/or they deteriorate. In order to fulfill changing needs, interiors’ original design gets transformed. In the modern era on which Trachtenberg concentrates, the work process underpinning an interior’s make over, became less and less time consuming. Nowadays, for instance, advanced tools and techniques make it possible to turn an old farm very quickly into a modern dwelling. Such make-overs not only affect the outlook of the renewed interior, they often fundamentally alter the temporal regime. If space reflected the tempo of the old inhabitants’ life, in close harmony with the rhythm of the local seasons, the time frame of those living in the restored farm is characterized, for instance, by the rhythm of the five-day workweek, with its alternating pace of commuter time and leisure time. At times, the clashes between these time regimes can be very outspoken, yet interiors can also be quite successful in evoking and establishing a sense of continuity over time and generations. In Victorian Britain, it was the grandfather clock which injected space with a generational continuity. The sound of this clock evoked industrial time as it separated work from leisure. At the same time it conveyed the cyclical nature of family life and its everyday routines from day to day, year to year, and generation to generation (Doolittle 2011: 245–50).

The cases of the renewed farm and the Victorian interior make clear that interiors ask for what Penelope J. Corfield has called a “diachromesh approach.” With this neologism she emphasized the need to develop a “full view of time,” one that is both synchronic and diachronic. Both split seconds, as well as the continual massive accumulation of those immediate moments in years and millennia, she argues, have to be taken in account. The synchronic is always in the diachronic, and vice versa (Corfield 2007: xv). Long-term frameworks as Victorian culture stretched beyond an individual’s personal experience, but did affect the passing moment in working-class families. Contrariwise, the visitors of a restored twenty-first century farm smile when their host juxtaposes his relaxing moments in his jacuzzi with the fact that, for centuries, that part of the house—“and I am not kidding,” the host says—offered a space for the cesspool.

Traces

But how can we replace the idea of a linear homogenous time with a more complex, heterogeneous, and multi-layered notion of temporality? How to unlock the reciprocal relation between a timely

moment and any protracted span of time at work in interiors? Here, the reflections by Edward Hollis in the first issue of *Interiors* can offer the beginning of an answer. Interiors, he noted, are “temporary arrangements.” They are “assemblages of elements collected from many times and places,” thus evading the “taxonomies of style and the linear narratives of traditional art history” (Hollis 2010: 105, 108). Consequently, not imagining the interior as a “thing” or “many things” is most helpful in decoding interiors. A better understanding can only ground in approaching it as “a set of relationships between things that exists in time” (Hollis 2010: 108).

At first sight, the acknowledgement and even appreciation of the co-existence of different temporal regimes in interiors seems radically opposed to the High Modernist architectural ideal of a *tabula rasa*, the “liberation from cursed enslavement to the past” as Le Corbusier called it in his *Vers une architecture* (1923) (Le Corbusier 2007: 58). However, these traces of the past can obtain a critical function that is in line with the modernist program to radically transform the aesthetics and ethics of living and dwelling. Seminal in this regard is Nietzsche’s famous essay *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (1874). In this essay, Nietzsche introduces the untimely as a critical force, which he defines as “acting counter to our time and thereby acting on our time and, let us hope, for the benefit of a time to come” (Nietzsche 1997: 60). Following Harris’s fine-tuning of Serres’s notion of the “multitemporal” as a set of “temporal relations among past, present and future,” we could argue that the multitemporal dimension of interiors can function as such a Nietzschean “untimely” force. Rather than a hindrance to the process of transformation, the interaction between numerous historical traces in our built environment can be used to challenge the dominant temporal regime and to imagine other ways of living and dwelling. As Walter Benjamin demonstrates in his work, sympathy for the modernist aspiration to revolutionize our society does not exclude a more positive evaluation of the traces of the past.

Benjamin’s notion of the “constellation” plays a crucial role here (see also Teyssot 2013a). For Benjamin, a singular object or building is itself already a constellation of different temporal regimes. In an historical artefact or architectural structure a more mythical, distant and dreamlike past is evoked that interrupts the “now” of the beholder and opens up to another, utopic (messianic) future. A good example of such a constellation can be found in different public buildings of the nineteenth century, built in typical neo-styles. For a modernist architectural critic like Sigfried Giedion, these neo-styles are just a facade. Hiding behind “le fallacieux ‘des masques historisants’,” modern construction techniques already anticipate the architecture of the 20th century (Teyssot 2013b: 101).

As Teyssot makes clear, Benjamin’s interpretation of these buildings was radically different. For Benjamin, this historical masquerade does not *hide* something (i.e. the anticipation of modernist

architecture); on the contrary, it *reveals*. For Benjamin these “masks” stand to the underlying construction as our dreams to the bodily processes that produce them (Teyssot, *ibid.*). In these dreams, the nineteenth century expresses its desire for another, better world. The actual transformative potential of these dreams can only be discovered at the moment of awakening. For architecture, this moment of awakening occurs when a style becomes obsolete. Instead of possessing a “transhistorical,” timeless quality, neo-style buildings soon became markers of a specific historical period in western architecture—and it was this very historicity that allowed Benjamin to interpret their “dreamwork” as a challenge to modern society. Benjamin considered the surrealist movement as the first to acknowledge the “revolutionary energies” that are generated by the mythical dream-world evoked by the outmoded, the discarded and the anachronistic, like “the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them” (Benjamin 2005: 210). For Benjamin these historical artefacts (from objects to interiors to buildings) are dialectical images where past, present and future meet in one single constellation:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past: rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. (Benjamin 1999: 462)

The traces of the past can thus only acquire a critical dimension if they are mediated by language and turned into “images.”

Literature is the medium par excellence in which such an untimely imagination can find a verbal expression. It is, of course, not uncommon to look at architecture as a language, a specific code that communicates the architect’s intentions or, even more literally, as a language in its own right (so popular within typological analyses). Benjamin urges us to explore a third way of looking at the analogy of architecture to language: the continuous cross-fertilization between literary imagination and architectural materiality. That is why all authors in this issue will look at the “architexture” of interiors (Spurr 2007: 469–72). On the one hand, we will study how the architecture of interiors was represented in different types of literature. On the other hand, we will flesh out how literature, just like interiors, could shape and shelter the lives and the imagination of those who lived

in those interiors. An interior always produces many meanings and literature is part and parcel of that process. In this, we follow William Whyte who did put it this way: “we are always translating architecture: not reading its message, but exploring its multiple transpositions” (Whyte 2006: 153).

The contributions to this special issue explore different kinds of interior spaces that play a crucial role in the modernist imagination: the lobby in the grand hotel, the therapeutic spaces of the sanatorium and the psychiatric hospital, the house of the artist-writer and the domestic interior. It is impossible to neglect the differences between these spaces, as they range from the public domain of the lobby to the utmost private sphere of the living room, from the clearly *heterotopic* space of the mental hospital (Foucault 1984), symbolizing the fringes of society, to the more mundane setting of the hotel as part of the emergent touristic industry, from the quasi-sacral place of the artist's house to the prosaic everydayness of the rented room in the modern city. A closer look, however, reveals that from the moment people start to write and reflect about these spaces and their interiors, traditional divisions between the public and the private, the sacral and the profane are getting diffuse. The hotel lobby, for instance, functions as a kind of intermediary space, as a lock between the public world outside and the more secluded spaces of the individual rooms inside. Conversely, even the private entity of the home – that powerful 19th century symbol for the refuge from public life – loses its aura of self-containment and security, as demonstrated convincingly by the literary critic Enda Duffy, who reads end-of-the-century detective fiction as an evidence of the fact that private homes are increasingly opened up for inspection by a representative of the authorities (Duffy 2009: 59–110). Thus, the spaces we will discuss showcase a combination of the public and the private, as well as a mix of the sacred and the profane. They are part and parcel of modern society – as in this period even the secluded artist's house increasingly functions as a tourist attraction – and still they embody something heterotopic, something out of place. On top of that, our point is precisely that they embody something out of time as well. Besides being framed as modern spaces, characteristic of the present, they contain traces of the past; they display multiple, sometimes even conflicting temporal regimes and function as sites capable of negotiating between different temporalities.

In “Time in the hotel: Gazing with lobby lizards” Rajesh Heynickx canvasses the different temporal regimes at work in the lobby of the grand hotel, based on the *field notes* left behind by intellectuals and writers who linger in the lobby as if it were their natural habitat, a place for living and writing, from where they can observe and register modern times and its mores. Their writings about the lobby disclose at least two different temporalities. On the one hand the interior of the lobby reflects the hustle of a modern, urbanized, capitalist society, with clocks and schedules that regulate time and people rushing in and out, substituting their identities for room numbers. On the

other hand, the interior of the lobby contains numerous traces of older time regimes, as if they were designed to arrest the flux of modernity. The application of historical building styles, for instance, provokes a sense of bygone grandeur and nostalgia for ages past, and the luxurious setting invites to relax and to retreat from the hectic world outside, offering ample space and time for contemplation. Thus, the lobby lizard, involved in an activity of waiting, finds himself in a curious borderland between stasis and speed. This experience, it is argued, gives rise to new sensations of subjectivity and time that prefigure François Hartog's notion of *presentism*, in which the past, the present and the future co-exist in a single timeframe.

Although the spaces dealt with by Stijn de Cauwer in "Experimenting with time: therapeutic spaces in the German inter-war novel" are of quite another nature, they manifest similar temporal structures in that they combine different temporal regimes, referring both to the past and to the present. Objects such as an old-fashioned looking easy-chair in the sanatorium in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauberberg* (1924), for instance, remind us of the fact that for the main character Hans Castrop the place functions as a refuge from modern society. Nevertheless, in these experimental therapeutic settings objects connoting nostalgia co-exist with the newest technological devices, such as a state-of-the-art gramophone, capable of rousing the fascination of the protagonist. Exploring the multitemporal dimension of the setting, Mann is able to assess the impact of the modern on tradition, and taking stock of the points of transition, conflict and continuity, without integrating them in a single, coherent temporal scheme. The psychiatric hospital in Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (1930-1933) offers similar perspectives, although here the temporal regimes of the past and the present are supplemented by a vision about the future. By stripping the building of its most extraordinary characteristics – and framing the hospital as nothing more or less than a mirror of ordinary society – the writer seems to voice a critique against all kinds of eschatological thinking and of irrational redemptive messianism.

In "‘Energies of History’ in Modernism: the Case of Casa Malaparte" Nadia Sels and Kris Pint unravel the ubiquitous historical traces in the house the Italian avant-garde writer and journalist Curzio Malaparte had built for himself among the cliffs of Capri. Although the artist's house is a prime example of cutting-edge avant-garde architecture, it abounds with historical references, from the Goethe's lyre used as a motif in the floor tiles in the study, to the many features reminiscent of Roman and Greek antiquity. In Casa Malaparte, the temporal regime of historical time even merges into mythical time. This is shown for instance by the monumental staircase at the outside, which bears overtones of sacred places such as antique temples. Due to the multiplication of temporal layers and the omnipresence of surrealist irony, the interior space of Casa Malaparte is difficult to read and its temporal paradoxes reveal something about the complex relation

between the old and the new in modernism itself. Drawing upon the ideas of Walter Benjamin it is argued that Casa Malaparte questions the ambition of modernism to get rid of the models of the past in favor of a timeless and universal conception of space. On the one hand, the historical references seem an exaggerated continuation of the escapist historicism of the nineteenth century bourgeois interior, on the other hand they reveal the “enormous energies of history” (Benjamin) by drawing attention to the past as a creative and transformative force within modernism itself.

Finally, in “Domestic Interiors, Decorative Objects and their Multiple Temporalities. The Case of the Dutch Modernist Novel” Pieter Verstraeten charts the temporal heterogeneity inherent in the spatial organization of the domestic interior as it is represented by the Dutch novel in the interwar period. The new kind of novel-writing, it is claimed, reacts in very different ways to the so-called “fashionable artistic interior”, full of the most diverse antiques and curiosities, as it was propagated as a model for the tasteful decoration of houses in the last decades of the nineteenth century and played a central role in the imagination of the realist novel. If the Joycean novel *Meneer Visser's Hellevaart* (Mr. Visser's Descent into Hell) (1936), by Simon Vestdijk, can be read as a straightforward rejection of the over-stuffed interior, the dominant temporal regime of tradition and the corresponding bourgeois ideologies, Menno Ter Braak's 1931 novel *Hampton Court* offers a more ambivalent account of the museum-like interior and the historical decorative object. As the novel displays at least three different (and partly incompatible) temporal regimes (from prehistorical time, over historical time, to the time of the present) it can, so goes the argument, be read as a modernist critique of modernism's ahistoricism and chronocide.

The four contributions

1/

'Energies of history' in Modernism: the case of Casa Malaparte

Nadia Sels (Antwerp University) & Kris Pint (University of Hasselt)

2/

Time in the Hotel: gazing with lobby lizards

Rajesh Heynickx (University of Leuven/Antwerp University)

3/

Experimenting with time: therapeutic spaces in the German interwar novel

Stijn De Cauwer (University of Leuven)

4/

Modern Interiors, diverging temporalities: the literary representation of domestic interiors as sites of negotiation

Pieter Verstraeten (University of Groningen)

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