

Negotiating Space: an Interior Practice

Roger Kemp, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract: I argue that an interior is a condition of space defined by a set of relations activated by a participation in that space. To embrace a position and relationship to space is a process for constructing interiors. An interior practice emerges through an activation of this process.

I will discuss a drawing strategy that considers, constructs and documents relations in space as a way of imagining and embodying the potential of spatial and temporal conditions, and which can in turn contribute to the design of interiors. These drawings can act as a tool to generate a relational condition. Through an engagement with existing space, a documentation of embodied responses can capture the potential for future interiors.

Given that interior designers work into existing spaces, it is important to define the space being worked into. An interior of a space is not something that is universally perceived or defined. It requires negotiation. Rather than considering the interior as something that is in existence, I am advancing the notion that an interior is generated through an encounter with space.

The drawing strategies discussed here, emphasise the relationship of designer and existing space. By engaging a position in space, apprehending spatial conditions and remaking an expression of the initial encounter, the drawing process builds an extended relationship to the existing.

Key words: negotiation, participation, occupation, interior, drawing

Introduction

I propose that an interior comes into being through a participatory engagement with space. It is defined through a set of relations encountered in space. The interior is not universally perceived, it is determined by the participant in space.

In my practice the role of the drawing is to negotiate and participate with space. The drawing process is used to extract conditions of existing environments relevant to future productions of interior space. An interior practice is generated through a negotiation in space. I have deliberately taken an internal position in this work as a way of considering what an interior position might offer. This is distinct from the convention of an externalised view, which assumes that a critical distance can be taken up and is therefore more useful than an internalised view. By placing myself in the space and through the work, I am embedded in the investigation. The approach to the work becomes one of interior – not through a perception of self or internalised thinking, but by locating myself in the existing space and the space of the drawing through participation.

Drawing provides an extended participatory engagement with space. It is a method I choose to use in my work because it provides a relationship to space that extends from observation alone. It casts the observer as a mediator between the space and the drawing artefact. It is this act of mediation that is important in offering a felt response to a space. There is an input of sensations via the senses and an output of sensations through the hand and material negotiation of paper and medium.

Existing space

Within interior design practice, the term 'existing condition' refers to a building or site that is under consideration for alteration. Interior designers often work within existing buildings and hence existing spaces. John Ketich and Garret Eakin in 'Interior Architecture' suggest that 'the (existing) architectural enclosure is the most immediate contextual influence.'

Working into an existing space (central to the practice of interior design) requires a process of determining what is in fact the existing. What is understood to be the existing and therefore what is determined to be of importance to any prospective design is shaped by the way in which the existing is negotiated. Existing conditions are defined by the way designers of subsequent spaces encounter and document an existing space.

The convention for representing existing space in interior design practice is through a set of 'existing conditions drawings'. These drawings are typically composed of orthographic drawings: plan, section and elevations. As parallel projections, these drawings conventionally set up views of surfaces or objects without visual diminution. It is my contention that a conventional set of existing conditions drawings do not document space from an interior point of view. An orthographic drawing presents a view synonymous with that of an object seen from a distant viewing position. This can be understood as a moving backwards, withdrawal from the building, inventing an exterior view (not a view of the exterior but a view from an exterior position).

To enable a more expansive understanding and engagement of existing conditions relevant to the discipline of interior design, other types of encounters are necessary. An expanded documentation method, one that involves a material and bodily negotiation in space, can facilitate other types of encounters. The drawing process can provide for encounters with a space other than that of the initial experience of being inside. By engaging a position in space, apprehending spatial conditions and remaking an expression of the initial encounter, the drawing process builds an extended relationship to the existing.

Recognising the inherent limitations of construction type drawings used as conventional existing conditions drawings, there is an opportunity to reconsider the way an interior designer makes drawings in relation to existing spaces that allow for a more expansive understanding and engagement with conditions of space relevant to the discipline of interior design.

The following gives account of the processes used in the production of my interior practice. The proposed process moves through three phases of space, positioned as three encounters.

1. Encounter 1 – negotiating the existing
2. Encounter 2 – apprehending conditions of space
3. Encounter 3 – constructing an interior potential

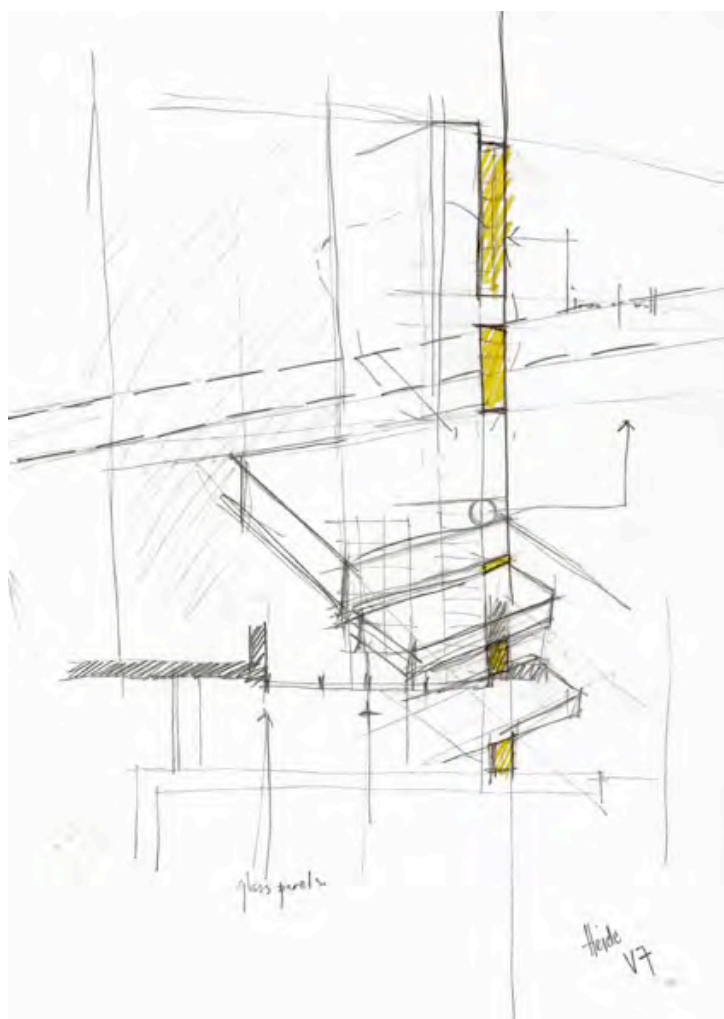
The three encounters are discussed through drawings made in a response to a chosen 'existing condition' case study – the McGlashan and Everist building 'Heide 2', part of the Museum of Modern Art, 7 Templestowe Road Bulleen, Victoria, Australia. 'Heide 2' was commissioned by John and Sunday Reed and Designed by David McGlashan in 1965. Originally designed as a residence for the Reed family this building later became the

receptacle for a collection of modern art.

Encounter 1: Negotiating the existing.

'Establishing one's relative position within a system of spatial relationships has long been a human preoccupation.'¹

A number of drawings are made through the initial encounter. They are made relatively quickly, with an emphasis on holding a number of thoughts and experiences rather than fewer, more detailed accounts. These drawings are then taken to the studio and form the basis for further drawings. The most important aspect of these drawings is that they offer a way back to the space through a memory activated by the memory of their production in the space.



In the course of producing the initial Heide 2 drawings, I became aware of the physical closeness of the space within Heide 2. There is a myopic quality – a physical closeness of observer to space. Vertical division of space via walls, partitions and placed objects, together with horizontal limits of ceiling and floor, are characteristic of the internal structure of buildings that generate this quality. The physical proximity inside Heide 2 presented a restricted viewing distance, one that did not always permit a stepping back to allow an overall view. This condition promotes a spatial perception through a collection of experiences.

The unfolding of space within Heide 2 occurs through a sequence defined by both the

building's spatial arrangement and my encounters via path and participation. The spatial sequence of this existing space is negotiated through journey and intent.

Objects and space appear and disappear through motion parallax and relative position. The events of appearance, disappearance, and reappearance edit space as things move in and out of view. An occlusion occurs in space when there is a closing or blocking of space; this is a quality that originally attracted me to using Heide 2. The building does not have any internal doors and thus uses the interposition of walls to produce relationships that define areas.

The sequence of experiences in a close space such as Heide 2 promotes a type of experiential narrative. This is constructed through a past, present and future relationship in space via locomotion. The physical closeness of space at Heide prompted a desire to look beyond the immediate space I was in. A deepening of view allowed me to anticipate the next encounter in the space. Setting up these relationships between past, present and future encounters allowed me to perceptually locate and orient myself in the space.

The work of David Hockney has been a continual influence that has informed my thinking in relation to these ideas. Both his narrative drawing work, heavily inspired by Chinese scroll drawings, and his photographic montage work, which plays with depth and the location of the picture plane, have provided me with an impetus to generate work in this area. The picture scrolls that Hockney refers to, allow a narrative to be constructed over the length of the scroll. The scroll is a continuous image that allows successive changes through a scrolling from right to left. Images are moving past the viewer consistent with a filmic process. This is an efficient way of presenting successive encounters in space and time.

My drawings similarly attempt to reconcile a relationship between successive spaces. They achieve this through a process of layering information. Conditions of space seen from a specific position are layered over conditions anticipated or encountered previously. This promotes looking 'through' the drawings. Looking through space is a strategy employed in each of the three encounters I put forward. Looking through promotes a depth of vision with a focal length that passes through a space towards a subsequent or adjoining space. The term 'through' (as distinct from 'across') suggests an enclosure or fullness consistent with the interior condition. By looking through space, foreground and middle ground present a frame or a context from which to view prompting a shift and negotiation in space.

Encounter 2: Apprehending conditions of space.

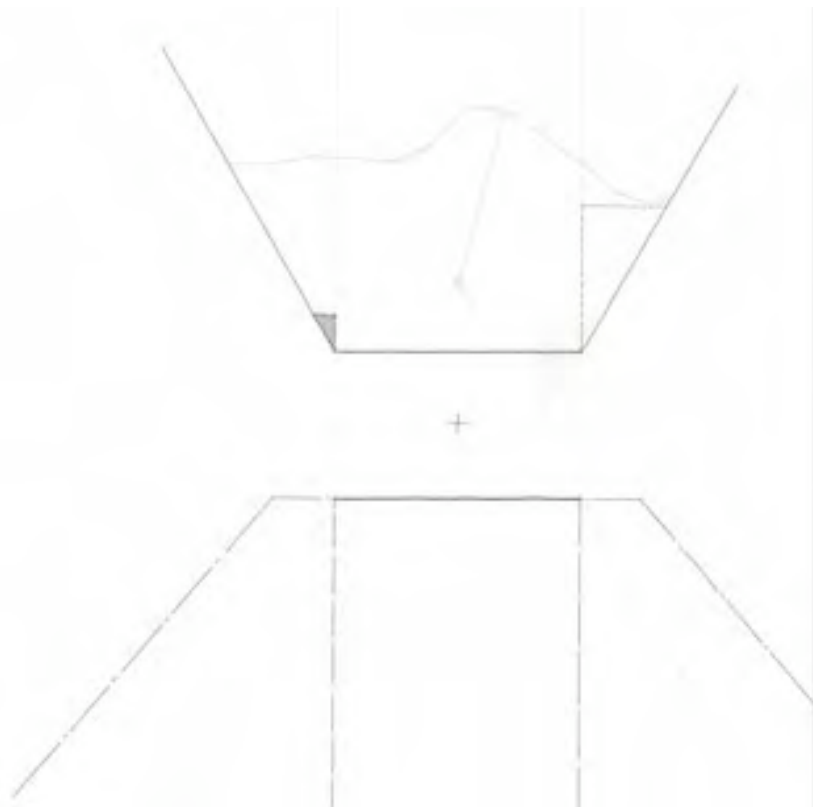
The initial encounter with a space builds a collection of photographs and drawings. The second encounter is made via the collected information. New drawings are constructed in the studio from the initial photographs and drawings. Given that the first drawings produced are done relatively quickly and do not record everything that was in the space at the time of experience, I work with drawings, images, photographs and mental images that have inherent gaps and inconsistencies. These inconsistencies and gaps are embraced as an inherent condition of a participatory engagement – an interior position. These are taken through into the next drawings made.

I set out to make larger drawings than the earlier works. This takes me closer to the space of the drawing. A greater expanse of paper requires an extended length of travel with a line across the paper. This physicality of drawing is important. A physical action through space

made by the hand across the page simulates the action and course of the eye and body in the initial encounter. I choose to use an analogue process over a digital process for these reasons. Working in the studio allows me more time with the material gathered. These drawings begin to construct relationships between various instances of the initial experience of the existing space. This generates an extended relationship between the existing space and the designer.

An interior is something that is continually changing and evolving; the idea of seizing or capturing the space acknowledges the temporal conditions of space. It would be impossible to document everything. This is demonstrated through the shortfalls of the other techniques discussed.

These drawings were mainly produced through the use of lines; orthographic and linear perspective techniques are at work here. The lines that were built through these drawings were taken from my initial observations of the existing space. They describe objects and spaces that are seen, as well as those that are hidden. The drawings have a transparency that continues my aspirations for looking through space. I used a blocking-in for the highlighting of specific aspects within the drawing.



The Heide 2 drawings negotiate the process of moving through space. The critical act of stopping (assessing location, position, and orientation) and then anticipating a subsequent path are presented. The drawings have a constructive process; there is both a negotiation in relation to the physical space and the space of the drawing. This negotiation of the drawing takes place through the construction of lines and their relative position to each other.

The drawings I have continued to make often have a lightness of line work. There is a physical closeness of hand and eye that encourages a close viewing. The constructions I refer to later have a similar quality. There is rarely a stepping away from the work during its production in order to view it from a greater distance. The lines disappear at a distance. A close relationship with the work is demanded. This gives the work an interior quality that is experienced by the maker through the related production methods.

This closeness is consistent and relevant to interior design. Interiors often have a myopic quality, a physical closeness of observer to subject. There is often a limited viewing distance, a constructed short sightedness, produced either through the obstruction of physical objects such as walls, ceilings and floors or a density of non-physical conditions of a space. This closeness in space can produce an intimate relationship to a space. A close proximity allows for a detailed inspection of elements within a space. The junctions between materials or the wearing of surfaces are all evident at this distance. The closeness of making is a method of research critical to my practice. The dominant idea of research as one of objectivity and critical distance is inappropriate here. Closeness through participation with the space and the drawing allows an apprehension of spatial qualities. To apprehend is to understand, to seize something. As an expression, it can be thought of as 'arrest' or 'capture'.

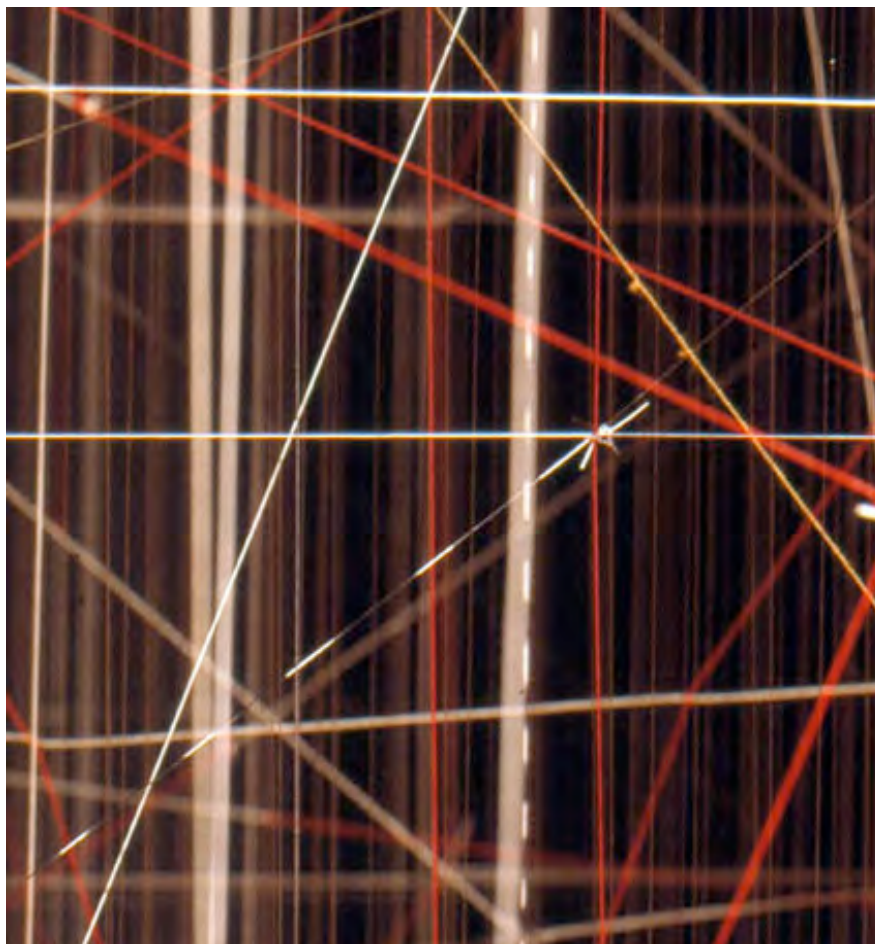
The desire to hold onto spatial experiences connects to something Alain de Botton touches on in his book 'The Art of Travel'. In speaking about beauty, de Botton states that 'a dominant impulse on encountering beauty is the desire to hold on to it: to possess it and give it weight in our lives. There is an urge to say, I was here, I saw this and it mattered to me.'² He goes on to quote John Ruskin: 'In the process of re-creating with our hand what lies before our eyes, we seem naturally to move from the position of observing (beauty) in a loose way to one where we acquire a deep understanding of its constituent parts and hence secure memories of it...'³

It is not the issue of beauty that is important for me in the above quotes but the notion of a desire to hold, possess, arrest the experiences of space – and that this has value as a process because it gives meaning to these encounters. The move from observation to a deep understanding and securing of memories that Ruskin identifies is of prime significance to me in relation to the documentation of interior space. The drawings made through Encounter 2 are generated from drawings made at the time of the initial encounter, Encounter 1. Whereas the drawings in Encounter 1 seek to capture a lot of information, these drawings identify and apprehend specific conditions and aspects of the initial encounter. This process is an act of negotiation, which encompasses the memory of the initial experience of the space and the construction of drawings that aid this memory.

Encounter 3: Constructing an interior potential.

The third encounter, like Encounter 2, comes from a re-making of drawings. The emphasis of these drawings is mnemonic. Line-work taken from drawings produced in the second phase of the process (Encounter 2) composed in transparent layers enables a looking through all the drawings at once. A looking through the succession of drawings reiterates the viewing operation undertaken in the initial encounter with space. The line-work of the drawings provides a condition that permits the eye to follow and jump between lines, moving around and through the space. This sets up a different viewing relationship to the codified reading of a conventional set of existing conditions drawings.

The third encounter drawings, produced through the suspension of physical lines through a framed armature, takes the hand through a journey that traces apprehended aspects of the initial spatial encounter. This participation of the hand through the making of lines produces a sensation of space, a sensation that recalls the initial encounter, a bodily participation with space.



This third encounter has a mnemonic function; it incites a memory of the initial experience.

'(Henri) Bergson argues that there are two different aspects to memory/re-cognition, one which imagines and another that repeats or acts out. This duplicity, in which the imaginary and the re-iterative or re-active are coupled together under the same faculty, is the essence of eidetic phenomena, for here an image is re-called to the mind in such a way that one has the sensation of actually re-living one's physical relation to that which the image re-presents. In other words, in this view of the experience of re-calling, images and bodily experiences are interlocked.'⁴

A distinction is made here between conventional practices of existing condition documentation and the proposed strategy. My drawings do not set out to represent the existing space; rather, they model an initial encounter with a space coupled with an extended encounter via the drawing process.

The use of materials that require a physical production via the hand supports the mnemonic function of the drawings. The Heide 2 construction used thread to perform the function of a

line made by pencil or ink on paper in the previous drawings. Each line was selected, cut to length, fed through holes in the timber frames and secured in position. The handling of each line made conscious the ideas embedded in the initial drawings through a process of questioning their position and relationship to other lines. This was – deliberately – a far more time-consuming process. The duration of making allows time for reflection on the initial encounter with the space.

The third encounter drawings sought to extract lines from the surface of the paper and give them a three dimensional presence. The removal of the paper gave rise to a discernible relationship between drawings through layering. This transparency generated a gestalt-like effect when looking through the succession of drawings. I could make a number of visual connections between lines through the frames. Relations were produced through the layering of lines over each other. The effect was not unlike the motion parallax I experienced at Heide 2. Looking through the frames demanded a continual shift in focal length. The act of looking through the drawings suspended in frames became another negotiation of space brought on by the constantly changing depth of vision. Like traditional construction lines that are usually rendered invisible, the lines produced in the encounter 3 drawings present a relationship between objects in space and the observer. They flow through space between objects and surfaces, presenting an intense activity in between.

Rhumb lines used in navigational charts were an important reference for this work. They have a similarity to the construction lines in perspective drawing, in that they make a connection between two locations on the map. A rhumb line is 'a line followed by a ship sailing in a fixed direction'.⁵ It presents a path between two points in space. The term 'rhumb' refers to a point on a compass. Some lines made in the Heide 2 construction act like rhumb lines. They describe directions of motion or views in space.

My drawings have become less pictorial. My interest in maps led me to the sea charts made by Marshallese island navigators. Their "stick charts" provide information for the navigation of waters between islands. Made from the mid-ribs of coconut leaves, there are three types of stick charts used by the Marshallese island navigator: the Mattang, Meddo and Rebbelib. The Meddo and Rebbelib describe the position of islands in an island chain and the refracting swell patterns, whereas the Mattang 'is an abstract presentation of how swells refract around an island and meet in a series of nodes'.⁶

It is important to note how these charts were used as they were not consulted during a voyage; rather, the Rebbelib and Meddo were used as mnemonic devices consulted prior to a journey, and the Mattang was used as an educational tool for teaching navigators. This distinction is a critical one which has assisted me to think through the differences between conventional architectural drawings used for the construction of a space and my drawings (such as the Heide 2 construction). For me, these act as a mnemonic device by presenting compositions of line-work that can be remembered and that have the facility to be taken into a design operation - they have an interior potential.

Conclusion

Interior design is an emerging discipline. It seems that it has always been in a state of emergence. Perhaps this is a good place for it to be - always being developed, invented and negotiated. This emergence places it in a different position to disciplines that are established

and conventionalised that have an established and celebrated history. A continual negotiation of interior and interior design allows the discipline to function in a way that discovers other perceptions, ideas, opportunities and practices. The dominant idea of interior is one of enclosure and containment. When contemplating the design of subsequent spaces, the notion of enclosure or containment literally sets limits for a potential spatial production. It defines volume, reinforcing a closed condition of space. This would seem to be an unnecessary limitation when considering subsequent spatial productions.

The term interior is often linked to a specific entity, for example, an interior of a body or interior of a building. Interior designers spend much of their time designing interiors of buildings. As soon as we refer to an interior as belonging to something else - for instance, the interior of a building - we have instantly defined the interior through prescribing an owner and governing body. This way of thinking and discussing an interior supports the dominant definition of interior as enclosure.

The interior practice articulated through this paper attempts to offer up strategies and methods for documenting encountered conditions of space. The work negotiates interior practice by critiquing the use of borrowed architectural drawing conventions and techniques for the documentation of interior space. It does this through emphasizing the participatory engagement with space via the process of drawing.

Through my drawing practice I have come to understand and propose that an interior comes into being through a participatory engagement with space. It is defined through a set of relations encountered in space by an observer. This idea has the implication of defining the interior through a participation in it – an interior view. This is in contrast to an externalised view that emphasises the surrounding context.

A relational analysis of space from within reveals proximities. Proximity to entities and conditions of space become a significant factor in determining relations that can influence subsequent spatial productions. A physical or perceptual closeness to entities and conditions in space better define the notion of interior - a close condition rather than a closed condition. Through a participation in space an interior is not seen as an existing entity but something that is negotiated and constructed. This negotiation is important to an interior design process as it questions the existing space. It is the role of an interior designer to propose new possibilities for a space. New possibilities come out of questioning existing assumptions and perceptions.

The central concern and operation of my practice is the negotiation of space. I prefer to talk about my practice as an interior practice rather than an interior design practice as this allows relations to space and interior other than design. It gives priority to interior rather than design. Although there are aspects of design within the practice, I do not see design as a specific outcome of the practice.

This drawing strategy apprehends conditions of space encountered through a participatory engagement and remembers those encounters through a spatial sensation captured by material relations and making actions. The making of lines as marks or physical entities places the hand actively in the interior space of drawing, which at times resembles and retraces that of the initial bodily encounter. The documentation makes apparent the conditions of interior. It is not simply a question of seeing or perceiving them – they can only be understood or known

after they are drawn.

The drawing strategies offer a strengthened relationship between designer and site through participation with the space – both in a physical experience of the space and an extended relation through drawing. The mnemonic function of my drawings closes the gap between the studio, the 'existing space' and the initial encounter. Designers most often design from a remote location to the existing space or site. It is this remote working that begs another relationship, if the existing is to be fully appreciated for its potential in the development of subsequent interiors.

I have come to the conclusion that the practice is most adequately described as an interior practice, which straddles concerns of art and design. My drawing practice does not make proposals for future designs for space but rather operates as a negotiation of space that embodies an interior position and orientation.

Endnotes

¹ Sergio Correa de Jesus - 'Environmental communication: design planning for wayfinding', *Design Issues Vol 10, issue 3 Autumn 1994*, p.33.

² Alain De Botton, *The art of travel*, New York :Pantheon Books, 2002. p.222.

³ *ibid* p.222.

⁴ *ibid* p.222.

⁴ Wertheim, Christine, 'Eidetic images' *AA Files no.30* p.75.

⁵ (Ed.) Tullock, Sarah, *The Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder*, London: Readers Digest and Oxford University Press, 1993. p.1321.

⁶ Woodward, David., Lewis, Malcolm.G. (ed.)*The History of Cartography Vol.2 Book 3: Cartography in the Traditional African, American, Arctic, Australian, and Pacific Societies*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994. p.480.

Bibliography

Berger, J. (2000) 'How is it there? An open letter to Marisa'. *Art Monthly Australia*, September, 2000, p.19.

Bloomer, C M. (1976) *Principles of Visual Perception*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

De Botton, A. (2002) *The Art of Travel*. New York :Pantheon Books.⁶

Evans, R. (1995) *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its three geometries*, London: MIT Press.

Gibson, JJ. (1979) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Kurtich, J and Eakin, G. (1993) *Interior Architecture*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Tullock, Sarah (ed), (1993) *The Reader's Digest Oxford Complete Wordfinder*, London: Readers Digest and Oxford University Press.

Wertheim, C. (1995) 'Eidetic images' *AA Files*, no. 30 p.75.

Woodward, D., Lewis, M.G. (1994) *The History of Cartography Vol.2 Book 3*, The University of Chicago Press.