

Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

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DOORING: EXPERIENTIAL BOUNDARIES

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INTRODUCTION

Few devices lend themselves to debates on our physical encounters than the door. As ‘dual phenomena’¹ of *outer/inner, public/private* interdependencies, the door is hidden in plain sight and overlooked in the wider experiential discourse. The scenes and acts unfolding at the door are seldom used to reflect upon the shifting relationships between people, objects and environments. Reimagining the doorset as a conceptual stage-set, this paper frames the door as the architectural micro-site of serendipitous social interactions, transactions and occasional transgressions. As a context ripe for performative association, its physical anatomy also masks profound psychological needs in controlling and monitoring entry. Saturated with symbolic, metaphorical and psychoanalytical associations, the door is more than the mere sum of its physical parts. It marks the transition into private and unconscious realms as suggested in Atget’s photography as, ‘a meeting ground between domestic and civil life, the innermost plane of the private person’s public face’² Contrasted against the magnitude of the city, the ubiquity of the door reminds us that the true face of the city, as Benjamin stated, is revealed not in its outer materiality but in ‘the sharp elevations of the cities inner strongholds’³ and it is the door that is front-of-stage in these relationships.

Dooring

In rethinking the door, we might require a new addition to the lexicon; ‘dooring’. *Dooring* suggests an alternate way of understanding the door and examining its potential⁴. Equally, it is useful in exploiting Teyssot’s ‘dual phenomena’ more playfully between its utilitarian purpose and its performative associations enacted in those serendipitous interactions. Here, the door is a conceptual origin point in which to speculate on the forms, technologies and behaviours that it accommodates when seen through the lenses of art, design and architecture. Viewing the door as a strategic and symbolic boundary device, it is also a site of self-expression, the occasional political encounter or temporary homeless sanctuary.⁵ This offers an interiorised ‘line-of-sight’ – a trajectory absent from the discourse of the experiential city and suggesting that we do not arrive in the city until we arrive at the door.

As a tactile encounter Pallasmaa’s ‘handshake of the building’ reminds us it is the door not the ‘architecture’ that offers us that haptic experience – ‘my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind.’⁶ It is at the door where we pause to perform an act[ion], to caress, touch, insert, twist, push and pull on its anatomy whilst interacting with the *bell, letterbox, keyhole, doorknob...* the *door handles*. The door invites aesthetic interventions in ways normally prohibited by the architecture in which it is framed. In decorating a door the inhabitant’s aspirations and identity become externalised inversions of the environmental psychologists term ‘identity claims’ where ‘the minutiae of our private spaces hold the secrets of our

Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
Tallahassee, Florida: 16-17 January, 2020

true personality.’⁷ Lo Ricci reinforces the haptic and performative allusion further ‘...even in architecture, the door has taken on a leading role; it is a secondary, instrumental element – if considered in relation to the complexity of an architecture - and yet it is the first thing with which people come into contact when entering a building: through the door you can enter other worlds’, reflecting Bourdieu conceptual ‘plane in which the world reverses itself.’⁸ Van Eyck’s exploration of the metaphysical threshold – the ‘shape of the in-between’ reveals the liminal and poetic passage between interior, door as the city⁹ forming, as Zumthor suggests, points of tension between the outside and the inside¹⁰. The threshold has its guardians, gods and spirits for they are symbols and, at the same time, vehicles of passage from one space to the other.’¹¹

Contexts

The door has a long history as a strategic and symbolic boundary device used to control entry or exclusion to a city or inner sanctuary. Its ubiquity is reflected in its leading role in diverse creative fields. From architecture, film, art, music and literature the door makes an appearance. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy* the doors he encounters on his journey alter their size according to the places to which they give access to, whilst Duchamp’s work, *Rue Larrey 11*- represents the ‘double-essence’ of the door by making the one door serve two doorways, i.e. both open and closed simultaneously.¹² As architectural theory, Von Meiss explores the door / threshold relationship citing their *semantic, utilitarian* and *protective* features . Outlining the social, behavioural and cultural influences on either side of the limit where ‘numerous rites accompany the passing of the domestic threshold- a bow, a prostration, a pious touch of the hand.’¹³

Though diminutive against the stature of the city, the door remains a significant element in a wider collage of architectonic parts as celebrated in Koolhaas’s ‘*Elements of Architecture*’ at the Venice Architectural Biennale 2014. Here the door’s elemental role was exhibited alongside its *ceiling - stair – corridor – façade* counterparts. Forever *on-stage*, the door was expressed as an actor in a theatrical diorama with other props and mock-ups. Koolhaas’s focus however, centred around the door’s ancient role as a secure boundary device examined in two extremes: a fifteenth century castle and the twenty-first century airport. In the Burg Hochosterwitz, Austria (1571) the door takes the form of fourteen-security gates to defend its Christian inhabitants from the invading Ottomans. Symbolizing the fourteen Stations of the Cross each offers a unique security measure i.e. murder-holes, trap doors with spikes, windows for pouring hot oil to delay and dupe the antagonists.¹⁴ A traditional element once invested with physical heft and graphic iconography has turned into a dematerialized zone. A gradual transition registered by the ephemeral technologies and body-scanners running concurrent with architectural, technological and societal change. Where once it privileged isolation it now aspires to movement, transparency, accessibility—which the door, by definition, stands in the way of.¹⁵

Performance / Performance

The paper introduces the term *dooring* whilst toying with the suggested *design and performance* theme of the conference to examine the door’s performative potential rather than its utilitarian performance framing the city from the inside out. Analogous with the natural fissure in a cave, the door whether an immaterial membrane, dematerialised veil or an explicit object has played a significant role in the evolution of our cities and in understanding its physical, symbolic, ritualistic and conceptual characteristics.¹⁶ Though simple in its conception and application, the conceptual fascination with dematerialized door has surprising origins in our remote past. One could argue that

Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
Tallahassee, Florida: 16-17 January, 2020

the fissure in the cave represents the authentic dematerialised doorway. Expressions of the doors implicit membrane is evident in Magritte's *La Réponse Imprévue* 1933, in Christian Keretz's *Oberreealto Chapel*, Switzerland, 1992 and in Reyner Banham 1965 essay '*A Home is not a House*' (and images by François Dallegret) where the *door* is replaced with an air-curtain.

Boundary Device

As a strategic boundary device, - a cybercrime term used in the IT sector,¹⁷ the door's ability to monitor entry and exit responds to increasing territorial insecurities. This is more acute in exclusive gated communities whose technological dependency reflects deep-rooted anxieties about encroachment but are unwittingly 'paving the way for domestic designs that imprison free inhabitants in alarmed paradises.'¹⁸ The doors components –the *threshold- jamb -mullion- stile -rail*, etc., offer a basic anatomy of an object. However, such simplicity has a more emotive and bodily expression in the elaborate baroque door at Casa Zuccari, Rome, 1591. Frederico Zuccari's use of anthropomorphic allusions reminds us of the symbolic representation that the door once held as the 'mouth', just as the 'window' held for the eye; the 'façade' as the face. This is now shifting as the door incorporates digital *eyes* and remote *ears* through smart remote sensors whose *presence* on the door itself is remotely monitored by *absent* occupants. However, as Spiller suggests, the decorative aligns with the digital where, 'the aged doctrines of Modernism are being questioned; decoration and Baroque distortion are respectable again.'¹⁹ Not unlike Koolhaas's dystopian observation of doors in airports, one wonders when more optimistic or playful counter-cultural technologies will emerge. Being at the door, rather than the plaza, suggests opportunities to reconsider the it as a spatial intermediary between the city, the interior and technology. Andrea Branzi's holds the view that 'the twenty-first century city is no longer just a bunch of boxes having transformed itself into a territory of commodities, exchanges, information and services... or posed as *exterior* to an *interior-making*. Instead, the city itself has become a continuous interior where there is no exterior side.'²⁰ Notable commentators, such as Massey, Grosz, Castells, Thackara and Novak have discussed the forces shaping our understanding of the built-environment which Roscoe described as complex states of *digitalia*²¹ that brings opportunities for new hybrids and typologies to converge. Novak's speculations on a 'liquid architecture' suggests one way forward. 'Liquid architecture is an architecture that breathes, pulses, leaps as one form and lands as another....an architecture whose form is contingent on the interests of the beholder; it is an architecture that opens to welcome and closes to defend me... it is an architecture without doors and hallways; where the next room is always where I need to be and what I need to be.' Roscoe postulates how this will '...spill into, draw out, overlap and puncture the interior...' and one wonders if the door is an architectural mediating element in this change? Thackara, however, sees potential for physical spaces to become islands of salvation of the 'real' amidst a sea of endless data streams and digital saturation whilst Grosz argued that this is bound to affect perceptions of space, materiality and our reading of 'boundary' and the built environment. Doors are also geographical boundary-markers of specific limits in any city revealing themselves through their sequential place in a series of other related places, e.g., No10 next door to No11. As abstract but discrete post-codes they are also an opportunity to imagine more evocative, romantic personas – *Cairn Duill; Rose Cottage*, etc., whilst 'for Benjamin, the interior possessed both phantasmagoric and ritualistic qualities, with the threshold occupying a central place within the potentially enchanted space of the interior.'²²

Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
Tallahassee, Florida: 16-17 January, 2020

Enter Stage Left

Seen conceptually as an architectonic *mise en scène*, we might interpret *the door* as the theatrical backdrop and, if we continue that line-of-thought, imagine its counterpart –*the threshold* as the conceptual stage in our serendipitous interactions. These performative parallels recall the idea of the interior itself as ‘a box in the theatre of the world’ and as the hidden backstage to the city’s *frontedness*.²³ Similarly, the architectural settings of Serlio explored parallels between the theatrical framing of street life and the fictional world of the stage, examining off-stage and on-stage worlds through the doors and thresholds of the Renaissance street to illustrate the drama of urban life through its entrances and exits.²⁴ This theatrical analogy has its place in the immateriality of the digital where Bouman describes architecture in the digital era as becoming itself ‘. a migrant. There is a temporal aspect to this. Rather than creating place, designers stage-manage moveable situations. The relationship between the individual and the object becomes the relationship between dynamic places and (sometimes manipulated) states of mind.’ To this theatrical thought we see the door itself as an actor- a door that gesticulates and announces. The door’s dynamics, rotational actions and sweeping arcs offer a worthy parallel to the gestures and movements of a flamboyant thespian but also the dynamic ebb and flow of passage that addresses the door’s temporal qualities. In the theatre, both farce and domestic comedy rely upon doors for their comic rhythm. These ‘necessarily ambiguous and time-based constructs, refer to both the physical and the psychological states of being.’²⁵ Gae McAuley’s critique of the performativity of the theatrical setting observes that ‘the nature of the door articulates the relationship between the here and the beyond.’²⁶ We can unpack these *dooring* observations to invoke other conceptual *foldings* between interior, door and city as the ‘constitution of an inside and interiority as a ‘*folding*’ of the outside²⁷, or ‘where the interior is produced through an ‘*in-folding*’ whose surface does not produce a hermetic seal against the external world, but rather is activated through the inhabitant’s relationship to the city²⁸. Viewed through a psychoanalytical lens, Fuss describe Freud’s segregation of the two areas of his practice, psychoanalysis and writing, kept separate by a threshold that bisected his office.²⁹

@Home

Digital culture has hastened the erosion of division between inside and outside, taking ‘inside’ beyond the envelope and ‘outside’ within. In the context of dissolving interior boundaries and its own dematerialization, the door remains a powerful metaphor.³⁰ However, the door is increasingly complicit in remote *surveillance* signalling a shift in its digital armoury and architectural anatomy. How this evolves remains an intriguing challenge. This effect of digital technology has been described by Crary as ‘the process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates that which impedes circulation, and makes exchangeable what is singular’³¹. Massey citing Castells, describes the new spatial condition where we are ‘...moving from an age in which we lived in a *spaces-of-places* to an age in which we live in a *spaces-of-flow*...commonly evoked as a complete abandoning of spatial barriers...Instead, we continue to strengthen all kinds of barriers in the world.’³² Sterling highlights similar shifts in which the door may be on the front-line. ‘I think the reason people don’t discuss domesticity any more is that they don’t want to admit the wolf is in the living room...Amazon has rendered your house transparent. So even if you imagine you have the privacy that Reyner Banham was talking about in 1968...it’s long gone! ...you can shut the front door, but nothing is private. It’s the New Deal in the domestic sphere, people just don’t realise it yet, but, really, the wolf is in the living room.’³³

Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
Tallahassee, Florida: 16-17 January, 2020

Installing / Installation

Artistic responses to the door offer architectural and digital practitioners' alternative strategies and counterpoints that are nuanced and revealing. Scott Snibbe's *Boundary Functions*, 1998 was one of the first hybrid interactive artworks to examine personal and collective space in an experimental threshold. Using Voroni diagrams, computational projection and algorithms Snibbe captured the shifting boundaries and provided fascinating data more akin to space-syntax theory but useful to the wider understanding of the social choreography occurring at the door and city.³⁴ Similarly, the *architectonic ghosts* in Rachel Whiteread's *Untitled: Cast Iron Floor* exposes our preoccupation with a vertical door face rather than its horizontal threshold³⁵ Both artworks raise questions, echoing Van Eyck, asking how artistic practices lead to better design thresholds that challenges that digital armoury on the architectural anatomy of the door. In *Between States*, multiple doors and sequential encounters along a commuter's journey are explored³⁶ Using Rilke's notion of the *Dinggedichte*, or thing-poem, Louise Ritchie explores the door as an object or portal that 'does not come before the mind's eye as a mere isolated object, but as a phenomenon whose meaning is revealed through the manner in which it takes part in a larger context.'³⁷

The door as an object holds properties expressing something of its inherent materiality but also absorbs the patina and interactions between the individual and the collective passage. If we consider this in the context of *Imponderabilia* by performance artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay, 1977, the door-threshold is, in this instance occupied by two naked bodies that invites an awkward or perhaps erotic passage for participants. This extreme proximity is not unlike that of the dance between commuters caught between strangers united only by the stops along the way. The forced intimacy and breaking of personal boundaries, although largely consensual and especially potent in the context of social-distancing, are often unsettling. The larger context suggested by Rilke, offers an expanded view of the door-threshold as a shared experience that transports individuals between spaces, between cities, between interior-exterior states both physical and psychological, revealing new and familiar places. These interconnected portals can operate as a sequential encounter of multiple doors along a journey or accessed as a series of considered or random improvisations with a myriad of potential entrance and exit points.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Dooring as a concept unlocks a richer set of possibilities within the dualities of performance and performativity; the element and the elemental.

The door is not simply a question of design; it is deeply nuanced. *Dooring* offers a view of the artistic properties so often excluded when we question the door's role in the environment and allows us to speculate on the dramaturgy surrounding the door or portal as an intrinsic layer of poetic encounters throughout the experiential city. Aronson reminds us that on the stage, a door is a sign of the liminal, the unknown, the potential and the terrifying. Represented in dramatic performance to create and reinforce social hierarchy, it has been described as 'the most profound technological and scenographic development in the history of theatre.'³⁸

Goethe offers that the 'threshold is also the expectation'³⁹ whose existence is not simply to access one place from another. In this same way we might consider a stair or bridge as a mere device to get us from here to there but we offer it as a consideration through ritual, artistic or performative actions that may reveal promises for experience, escape and refuge.

Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
Tallahassee, Florida: 16-17 January, 2020

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Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
Tallahassee, Florida: 16-17 January, 2020

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Experiential Design – Rethinking relations between people, objects and environments

Florida State University, AMPS, Architecture_MPS
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