

Transient Domesticity in the Urban Interior

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Abstract

This chapter considers a refurbished Bermondsey Street in London as an interior space where objects of memory are curated into a reconstructed atmosphere of domesticity. I argue that as our experience of the city becomes increasingly transient, our notions of inhabitation shift to a wider and more fragmented context, and our ability to integrate with the urban environment becomes eroded. Bermondsey Street, however, presents a distinctive experience illustrating how phenomena of intimacy and familiarity can converge across space and time to provide a more stable form of inhabitation.

In order to understand how these phenomena occur, and how the experience of the urban interior manifests itself in our consciousness, I follow a phenomenological method of intentionality, whereby the urban interior becomes the intentional object. This phenomenological narrative is illustrated as a meditative journey through images—a recollection of memories of the homely, initiated

by the encounter between consciousness and the way the interior animates imagination. Such a phenomenological approach can thereby link past and present in future transient experiences of the urban environment as an interior space.

'Growth is the continual condition of the city'¹ remarks historian Peter Ackroyd. In London, there are places where the old and the new coexist to provide continuity between past, present and future inhabitation, while in others, building developments have erased all traces of past lives and familiar points of reference, altering the urban landscape beyond recognition. Rising costs of living have also forced many people to move further away from the city centre and commute each day. Their encounter with the city becomes transient, composed of short bursts of experiences, which, Charles Rice explains, contribute to 'the dynamic energy of the modern city.'² However, rapid change and transience can also destabilise us and create a fragmentation between body and space that impairs our ability to cultivate meaningful connections with our surroundings. This impermanence results in a shift in the meaning and experience of inhabitation, once related to a specific and even permanent location—often the home and its immediate community. Now, it encompasses a plurality of situations. We may inhabit the place where we

work and another where we socialise. We may also, for a while each day, inhabit the transitional spaces we use to commute. Urban planner and designer Ali Madanipour tells us that 'we constantly need to draw boundaries as part of our need for wellbeing.'³ As inhabitation becomes increasingly impermanent, the need to redraw boundaries may intensify and our sense of continuity weakens. Consequently, if we consider the fast pace of change in contemporary cities like London, it becomes increasingly important for future designs to consider how urban environments can foster the sense of place and belonging that underpins our need for psychological and emotional integration. One way of doing this is to embrace the distinctiveness of local phenomena, and for the transient population to take some degree of ownership of its surroundings, 'enabling the individual to develop a sense of identity and engage in the rituals of communication and recognition.'⁴

The Urban Interior

London has, so far, resisted homogeneity, still

offering unique and distinctive experiences to the transient inhabitant. Far from a single entity, the city is experienced as a network of constituent parts, nested against each other, each infused with a recognisable identity and idiosyncrasies whose meanings, familiarity and recognition generate a distinct sense of place. A rich palette of phenomena, experienced gradually as we move through the city, brings forth a surprising variety of situations, which, woven into a cluster of spatial experiences, embody the values, beliefs and dreams of the city's inhabitants. As such phenomena permeate our consciousness, body and mind become immersed in the singularity of each experience to initiate a feeling of 'insideness'. This animates imagination and impacts our fundamental ability to perceive our location in the world, in relation to other places outside the locus of perception of the body. Madanipour tells us, 'the body mediates between the states of consciousness and the world.'⁵ This occurs quite naturally when we are inside the private interior of our homes, where, following Madanipour's metaphor on the perceived layers

of privacy, we 'can be seen to be situated at the core of a multi-layered shell, surrounded by an onion-shaped structure of layers of protection.'⁶ We are not only conscious of the room we are in, but also of other rooms around it, of the street nearby, the road beyond, the area where the house is located and the city around it. In imagination, the interior transcends traditional walled boundaries. Therefore, urban interiors are connected to each other not simply through spatial relationships and actual thresholds but, as the notion of interiority is transposed to the streets of the city, they also connect through perceptual thresholds, described by Karin Jasche as 'meaningful, psychologically effective transitions.'⁷ Accordingly, even when the city appears to be whole, it is experienced as a series of nested interiors. Thus, in the midst of London's ancient interior, in the Borough of Southwark, lies Bermondsey Street, one of the city's original nested interiors. The area was home to leather industries from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century, and street names such as Tanner Street and Leathermarket Street reflect this. Then, its

proximity to the River Thames made it an ideal location to store and process food arriving by ships in the docks nearby. People didn't just work there, however; it was also for many a place of dwelling—a home. Today, it is occupied by creative agencies, crafts showrooms, art galleries, restaurants and specialist boutiques, all bearing the qualities of the local environment. Architecturally, while its remaining nineteenth- and twentieth-century warehouses have been carefully restored to safeguard its more recent heritage, new additions favour a style of contemporary design that embodies a desire towards a symbiotic relationship between past and present, and cultivates a promise of integration into future developments. In Bermondsey Street, our sense of interiority is enhanced by a distinctive threshold. From the city centre, the street is accessible via a tunnel underneath a railway bridge. It is deep and cavernous; it takes a few minutes to walk through it. The space envelops, sounds are contained. Architect Peter Zumthor speaks of the threshold as a 'transition between the inside and the outside, an incredible sense of place, an

unbelievable feeling of concentration when we suddenly become aware of being enclosed, of something enveloping us, keeping us together, holding us....'⁸ The tunnel provides an immersive experience that forces the mind to surrender from one scale of perception to another. On one side lies the exterior—the city with its fast-moving pace and tall buildings—while on the other lies the interior of Bermondsey Street, where the space around the body becomes narrower, the buildings lower, the traffic slower, the textures more noticeable and the colours warmer. The singularity and temporality of the threshold provide a perceptual stage for the street to reveal itself in its most intimate setting. Beyond the architectural notion of scale, Zumthor explains that levels of intimacy relate to proximity and distance⁹ and so the interior connects with the body. The effect of spatial and perceptual relationships in the intimate interior of Bermondsey Street is almost immediate, and the inner space of the body harmonises seamlessly into this new environment, while experiencing phenomena that bring forth an acute sense of place. Intuitively, we feel a sense

of familiarity and comfort. It is therefore through enquiring into the essence of these phenomena, illustrated here as a phenomenological journey through the interior, that it becomes possible to grasp the structure of experiences, and articulate the qualities that enable our most intimate space—the inner self—to integrate with this interior.

Transient Domesticity

The visible world reaches us through multi-sensory perceptions, and so visual experiences contribute to what philosopher Gaston Bachelard refers to as 'the polyphony of the senses' whereby the 'eye collaborates with the body and other senses'¹⁰ for our perceptual memories to enable us to use the eyes to touch, smell, hear and taste; to grasp notions of depth, kinaesthesia and time. With a phenomenological focus on the interior of Bermondsey Street, images begin to emerge within the inner space of consciousness, and, in imagination, the inner-self is able to perceive its surroundings with renewed wonder. The meditative journey through the interior

becomes a gradual recollection of moments of lived experiences through the encounter between consciousness and the intentional object. Familiar features that bear the essence of the homely act as symbols of continuity and recognition for the transient inhabitant, and the domain of the private initiates memories of lived experiences, conforming to Bachelard's view that 'imagination augments the values of reality.'¹¹ The collection of images in this chapter illustrates how the interior incorporates points of reference that present engaging opportunities for phenomena experienced across space and time, as well as clear boundaries, and a continuity that enables the inner self to authenticate through interaction with the space. The resulting narrative aspires towards what Rice refers to as 'an interior of unproductivity [...] needed to counter the rationalization of the metropolis,'¹² in this instance, where the experience of inhabiting becomes bound to the original notion of shelter, as when Bachelard speaks of the home as a place for dreaming.¹³ As in a domestic space, the coherence of the features encountered throughout the interior

indicates that it is curated to reflect the values, beliefs and dreams of its inhabitants. The curation signals that a selection process has taken place—a desire towards a symbiotic relationship between past, present and future. The features on display do not, therefore, need to represent authentic memories of the present-day inhabitants. Instead, the curation intentionally appropriates and repositions selected memories to reinstate them into the present so that, in this instance, the distinctiveness of the local phenomena becomes an intentional perceptual map of domesticity. Images of the homely provide a degree of recognition and intimacy which, explains philosopher Gernot Böhme, brings the dimension of historical depth necessary for its inhabitants to feel sheltered and at home.¹⁴ This, as Rice tells us, belongs to the domain of long experience, 'founded on an appeal and a connection to tradition, and the accumulation of wisdom over time.'¹⁵ As time becomes 'spatialised', we experience continuity as well as a sense of place. The urban interior of Bermondsey Street sustains meaningful

public-private relationships as it merges with the imagination of its transient inhabitants, and converges with contemporary and future values.

References

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- All images in this chapter are by the author, 2015. This chapter is adapted from a previous article published in the *IDEA Journal*. Valerie Mace, *The Transfigured Phenomena of Domesticity in the Urban Interior*, *IDEA Journal* 2015, *Urban + Interior*, pp. 16-37, ISSN. 1445-5412.

Author Biography

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Figures

1 - Warm tones, tactile textures and smooth surfaces bring a light and welcoming feel to the interior. The stillness of the atmosphere suggests repose.

2 - The tones and tactile qualities of a large timber panel reveal the passage of time and wrap the eyes with a sensation of comfort. Like a picture on a wall with a story to tell, it inspires a pause.

3 - The light filters onto a dining terrace to highlight the mellow tones of the wall surfaces. A cheerful display of seats echoes the chatter of people enjoying a meal around the dinner table.

4 - Materials bearing the patina of time, lines and familiar scars inscribed across surfaces, reveal the textures of the repetition of daily gestures, acting as a reminder of the many lives of the interior.

5 - Near a side door and into a small room, people perform the rituals of daily activities—cleaning, storing, making, moving, fetching, resting, daydreaming; the domestic scenography of the interior.

6 - Two steps up onto the chequered kitchen floor, a mouth-watering smell of food emanates from the interior while, in the background, a radio plays a lively tune.

7 - In a glass cabinet, an incongruous display of objects showcases a cherished collection: bottles of various sizes and colours, an old radio, kitchen scales and a few enamelled teapots.

8 - The glimpse of a fireplace, the image of the fire warming up skin and spirit in winter, coming home from the cold, almost rushing in anticipation of the warmth of the interior.

9 - With just enough space for a table, a couple of chairs and a few plants, this cosy corner becomes a sun trap where, through semi-closed eyes, daydreams merge with reality.

(Photographs by author)



















