SITUATION Symposium

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Jacqueline Power carries out research in the fields of interior architecture and product design. Jacqueline’s interior architecture-related research was the focus of her Ph.D thesis, which investigated south-east Australian Indigenous space. The research considered notions of interior, interiority and cosmology in relation to classical Australian Indigenous buildings. Such buildings do not always create a defined division between inside and outside, thus transforming the notion of interior. As a result, the research sought to engage with spatial divisions operating at a variety of scales, including those beyond buildings.

Jacqueline is also involved in cross-institutional collaborative research in the field of product design. Her collaborative research with industrial designer and academic Rina Bernabei, explores how designers can create products that are more meaningful for users. This research recently culminated in an exhibition called Stories in Form at Object: Australian Centre for Design of which Jacqueline was the curator. Recently, this research has evolved to consider ways users can be involved in the completion of products, resulting in greater product personalisation and emotional attachment to the product.

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The Liminality of Interiority:
Australian Indigenous cosmological space

Introduction
Interiority is a much-discussed concept in the interior discipline. In its most basic form, interiority can be described as a sense of interior-ness’ freed from the constraints of architectural forms. The philosophical theses of interiority, which concern self-reflection and inner awareness, reveal it as an important idea for a discipline that is concerned as much with the physical properties of space as with the psychological impact of those spaces. Interiority is also valuable when attempting to understand building traditions in which interior spaces are articulated differently to those within the western European architectural tradition, such as in the case of classical Australian Indigenous buildings. As part of a Ph.D thesis titled ‘South-East Australian Indigenous Space and its Cosmological Origins’, interiority proved an important aspect of the research. This paper will delve into how interiority was framed for the research, and how interiority was understood in relation to a specific cosmological model. Firstly, this paper will conceptually equate interiority with liminality and propose that liminality provides an important mechanism for engaging with the shifting nature of interiority. Secondly, this paper will explore a specific Australian Indigenous cosmological model, the sky-dome, in relation to the concepts of interiority and liminality.

As a means of introduction, it is necessary to position myself as a researcher. Post-colonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has said, ‘No one can quite articulate the space she herself [or, he himself] inhabits. My attempt has been to describe this relatively ungraspable space in terms of what might be its history.’ To briefly summarise the history of my own space – I am a non-Indigenous researcher trained in the field of interior architecture. I am therefore both an insider and outsider in the context of this research – an insider in the field of interior architecture but an outsider to Australian Indigenous cultures and buildings.
Liminal Interiority

Interiority is a philosophical concept, although it has been utilised ‘across many disciplines including psychology, literature ... and architecture’. It is not the intention here to provide a specific and closed definition of interiority but, instead, drawing upon a range of thinkers, to convey its ‘feel’. Architectural theorist Michael Benedikt explains interiority in its application to design and architecture, or what he terms ‘the feeling of interiority’, as ‘being immersed, surrounded, enclosed’. However, this feeling ‘transcends the experience of rooms and other indoor enclosures, and extends to the out-of-doors (streets, squares, and parks bounded by trees and buildings). Internalisation in a physical sense is required for the existence of a built interior, however applying the concept of interiority paves the way to consider how a sense of interior-ness might be achieved when a physical interior may not be present. As theorist Christine McCarthy states, ‘interiority is not a guarantee of inside location’. McCarthy articulates that while ‘inside and outside are architectural prescriptions tied to the boundary of building’, which is the space of construction and building materials that mediates inside and outside, ‘interiority and exteriority weave within and without the built constraints of architecture, sometimes between them, and sometimes independent of them’.

Architectural historian Anthony Vidler has summed up some of the philosophical theses regarding the notion of interiority in his book chapter Outside In/Inside Out: a short history of (modern) interiority. He describes, for instance, the work of René Descartes, John Locke and G. W. Leibniz in which they compared the perception of the outside world in the mind to a ‘camera obscura – a dark room with a pinhole, projecting images from outside inside’. Vidler explains that the various ‘theses on interiority’ had an ‘effect on the perceptions of the interior’s power to construct and inform psychic interiority’. As he sums up: ‘Sensations, space, and the interaction between the two were constitutive of the human psyche – emotions and rational thought alike were deeply intertwined with the forms of exteriority translated into interior images, thoughts, and ideas’. In this way, a sense of spatial engagement can be achieved in the interaction between inside and outside, resulting in a sense of interior-ness, however an architectural interior may not necessarily form part of this equation. Design historian Penny Sparke explains, in relation to the domestic interior, that it provided a capacity for ‘self-reflection, or “interiority”’ for its occupants. This further supports the explanation from Vidler, that the notion of interiority has an impact on the relationship between the physical interior and the abstract space of interiority. Interiority in this way can be understood as the relationship between the ‘intangible images we carry in our minds and the experience of a physical place that contributes to the sense of place of an interior’. For the purposes of this argument, interiority will be further explored as a liminal state.

The term liminality originates from the Latin limen, meaning threshold. The term interior is a ‘comparative of adjective “interus”, placed on the inside, from the prepositional “inter”, in between’. The underlying notion of ‘in between’ suggests that the threshold of the interstitial space is essential to any understanding of interiority. Binary opposites, such as inside and outside, belong within a geometric ‘thirding’ effect in which a third term or element is brought into play. The boundary or mediating force – the third element – is a construct that occupies a tenuous existence, ready at any moment to transform. As Michael Tawa has eloquently described it: ‘The limit trembles – whether it be at the interface of distinct ecological systems, between historical epochs, between philosophies or concepts, between different social and cultural communities ... or at the edges of buildings meeting a street’. It is perhaps this ‘tremble’ – or in reference to the visual effect of Central Desert art, ‘shimmering’ – that best characterises interiority as a place that allows for exchange of difference, whatever that difference might be concerned with, and that exists on a shifting scale – from a domestic level, to the social existence of a group, to a spiritual awareness of one’s relation to others and place. As Tawa articulates it:
Liminal states are … not states of closure, stability or formal cohesion – but precisely unstable states poised on a breach, on the potential of the open to manifest itself as fervent and effusive fecundity. It is in this sense that the limit is what wavers or shivers, so as to touch its own incandescence. This condition of excess, that is both withheld and promised by the limit, and which is both the excess of the limit and the limit of excess, is the remainder. It is precisely because something always remains over and above a limit, that the boundary is what is always-already destined to break.\(^{17}\)

Liminality is therefore a ‘place’ or state of becoming, fused with the potential of what it might be, what it is not, what it will be and how that will occur. It is the ‘threshold; or passage, between two positions or more’.\(^{18}\) Interiornity, then, is defined by its liminality; its changeability; its ‘shimmering’. Christine McCarthy considers interiority to be ‘temporal because changes in its variables (boundary, performance, intimacy, between-ness, enclosure) can cause the dissolution or the materialization of interiorities’.\(^{19}\) Interiornity can also be considered culturally and socially dependant, as well as ‘spatial and temporal, the very essence of space and time’ as suggested by the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz.\(^{20}\)

Building on this understanding of interiority as a liminal condition, Australian Indigenous interiority will be framed here to be both a personal and collective space that shifts over time. Anthropologist Nancy Munn in an article entitled *Excluded Spaces: the figure in the Australian aboriginal landscape*, provides a framework that might be applied to an understanding of interiority as being both temporal and spatial. Munn, the author of the 1973 text, *Warlpiri Iconography: graphic representation and cultural symbolism in a Central Australian society*, considers the boundary in relation to ‘spatial exclusion’.\(^ {21}\) She speaks of a ‘spatially and temporally situated actor,’ the protagonist engaged in the dynamic exchange between ‘spatial regions and moving spatial fields’.\(^ {22}\) A person’s relationship to space – to places and to socio-constructed space – is in a constant state of flux, but this is perceivable, or best expressed, when the body and its actions are considered in this ‘dynamic’ relationship.\(^ {23}\) This allows a physical space to be considered, which is of course a primary concern of interior and architectural thinking.

In *Excluded Spaces*, Munn provides a perfect position from which to understand the concept of interiority in relation to liminal states when she considers ‘Australian Aboriginal spatial interdictions’ in relation to the Central and Western Desert, and notes that her discussion may have a broader applicability.\(^ {24}\) As Munn describes it:

> These interdictions create a partially shifting range of excluded or restricted regions for each person throughout his or her life. A specific kind of spatial form is being produced: a space of deletions or of delimitations constraining one’s presence at particular locales.\(^ {25}\)

Munn explains that this concept, or what she terms ‘negative space’, is well conveyed by the use of the phrase ‘no room,’ or variations of that phrase and of its specific application.\(^ {26}\) She compares a person’s space to a ‘patchwork of regions’ that may or may not overlap with the space of others, providing the example of gender exclusion from particular places or ceremonies.\(^ {27}\) This presents a form of interiority in terms of its liminality, with a threshold that shifts and changes. The concept of excluded space is summarised by Munn as follows:

> Aboriginal ‘excluded spaces’ can be understood as particular spatiotemporal formations produced out of the interaction of actors’ moving spatial fields and the terrestrial spaces or bases of bodily action. From this perspective, the analytical problem of spatial boundaries cannot automatically refer to limits marked out on pieces of land (or in architectural forms); nor can bodily boundaries be dealt with as body surfaces apart from the body’s spatiality, actions, and locatedness.\(^ {28}\)
Munn’s so-called ‘excluded spaces’ thus provide the opportunity for interiority to be understood on various scales – from an individual level to a societal one.

**Cosmological Interiority**

Australian Indigenous cosmology provides a means of further engaging with interiority and liminality in a way that presents a more architectural manifestation of these ideas. Anthropologist Fredrick David McCarthy describes one cosmological model as being a ‘widely held idea’ that ‘the earth was flat and surrounded by water, being held up by props’. This cosmological model was held by the Karadjeri of north Western Australia, the Yarralin of the Northern Territory, the Anyamatan of South Australia, the Wotjobaluk of the Wurunjerri and the Wiimbaio. This model was predominant in parts of south-east Australia at the time of European colonisation. Anthropologist Aldo Massola describes the structuring of the world in this cosmological model in the following terms:

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Briefly, the earth was a flat circular body, covered with a solid vaulted concave sky which reached down to the horizon. It can be, perhaps, described as a plate covered with a dish cover. Beyond this solid covering there was a beautiful country full of all good things to eat and which was never short of water. To that place eventually went the spirits of all dead...
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This concave bowl is what anthropologist Dianne Johnson, in her text *Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia: a noctuary*, descriptively terms the ‘sky-dome.’ Johnson’s use of the term reflects the architectural-like creation of space formed by the presence of an astreated dome. The sky-dome is presented here as a primary way of understanding Australian Indigenous interiority. It presents a spatial arrangement that is clearly defined, with an identifiable inside (the terrestrial landscape under the dome), and an outside (the sky world beyond the dome). Within this arrangement the terrestrial landscape in its totality forms an expression of interiority.

It is important to note that the conceptualisation of the landscape in terms of a sky-dome cosmology was predominantly one subscribed to in south-east Australia. The Tiwi people, whose islands are located in the Arafura Sea north of Darwin for instance, employed a stratified planar cosmology. The palawa peoples of Tasmania, of whom much less information regarding astronomy and cosmology has been recorded, were noted in Robinson’s journals to ‘have names for the stars and constellations and are aware that they revolve’. In the Torres Strait Islands there are quite different cosmological models. In the text *Stars of Tagai: the Torres Strait Islanders*, anthropologist Nonie Sharp explains that the accumulation of knowledge during one’s lifetime ‘moves in the form of a spiral, resembling the pattern imprinted upon the wauri shell’ which is a cone shell. Sharp explains the connection between the movement of the stars across the sky and their relationship with cultural life. According to Sharp, like the ‘helioc movement’ of the stars, it is this ‘arch which forms the Meriam image of cosmic space’. This spiral form is extremely different from the cosmological model discussed in this paper, but importantly it emphasises the cultural diversity amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and, again, the shifting, liminal nature of interiority and its various means of expression.

Interiority when considered through the cosmological sky-dome model is highly structured, demarcated, and the space within familiar. The dome, which is the sky, and therefore tangible, is also conceptual in its interpretation, and acts to form a zone of interior-’ness.’ The sky itself is liminal – forever changing, reconceptualised and restructured in its role. It is a highly evocative and powerful expression of spatial organisation – the terrestrial landscape is knowable and familiar, while the space beyond the sky-dome is, at times and to certain people, accessible.
Conclusion
What became clear from the Ph.D research is that interiority provides a valuable framework to engage with buildings and spaces that may not belong within traditional western European ideas of spatial organisation. Conceiving of interiority as combining different scales of interaction and inhabitation, captures the many facets which combine to create a sense of interior-‘ness’, ranging from individuals, to society, and even to cosmological models. To do this, interiority must be engaged with as liminality – shifting, changing, ‘shimmering’. Interiority, understood in this way, presents a useful thesis that can contribute more broadly to the interior discipline.

References
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5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
Christine McCarthy, ‘Towards a Definition of Interiority,’ *Space and Culture* 8, no. 2 (May 2005): 120.


Ibid., 465.

Ibid.

Ibid., 447-48.

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The various palawa names for the southern lights were recorded by Robinson in his journal entry of October 19, 1837. ‘(1) PURNENYER (2) NO.HOINER King George, (1) GEN.NER (2) NUM.MER.GEN Nomey western native.’


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5 Ibid.


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9 Ibid.

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16 For more on Warlpiri shimmering see Jennifer Loureide Biddle, Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert art as experience (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 69-75.


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23 Ibid.

24 Ibid., 447-48.

25 Ibid., 448.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.


33 A. W. Howitt, The Native Tribes of South-East Australia (London: Macmillan, 1904), 427.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.


39 The various palawa names for the southern lights were recorded by Robinson in his journal entry of 19th October 1837. ‘(1) PURNENYER (2) NO.HOLNER King George, (1) GEN.NER (2) NUM.MER.GEN Nomey western native.’


41 Nonie Sharp, Stars of Tagai: the Torres Strait Islanders (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1993), 75.

42 Ibid., 76.