Chapter 18

On Boundary-Drawing Practices

An Eco-systemic Take on Interiors

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This chapter argues for a conception of interiors that no longer identifies them (and spaces in general) as (sub)units or parts of an external whole. This partial conception fails to understand in its own terms what constitutes interiors; what they are in their own right; and most importantly *how* they are, meaning how they are produced and what they thus *do*. As a queer architecture theorist, I take the liberty of a transversal perspective that attempts to cut through the historical divides between architecture and its perspective of interior as a subdiscipline. Through an immanent vision of environmental systems, and a more eco-systemic – that is embodied and embedded, relational and affective – notion of interiors, interior spaces, and space in general, I want to problematise part-to-whole relations, and the resulting oppositional otherness of interiors and exteriors.

To counter the 'exclusive' and 'exterior' vision of spatial production, this chapter proposes a radically inclusive and immanent counter-notion that starts from a brief critique of conceptions of closed systems, calling instead for a more layered and material understanding of environmental systems through relative levels of interiority. It then centrally explores this conception through a diffractive notion of "boundary-drawing practices" that – as the work of US-American feminist theorist Karen Barad suggests – are "cutting together-apart" heterogenous material milieus (Barad 2007, 140; 2014, 168). This is something that interior architects and designers intuitively do in carefully selecting and sorting specific objects, materials, atmospheres, acoustics, perspectives, light, smells into particular relations, constellations, and configurations, which produce certain effects and affects. Yet, making this immanent and inclusive vision theoretically explicit may also serve as a means to

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challenge and displace historically drawn disciplinary boundaries, and enact a more transversal 'ecology of practice'. This chapter thus revisits a resulting eco-systemic notion as to how spaces assemble affective relation, to conclude with a few remarks about where this positions the interior, and interiorist discourse, theoretically.

Critique of Closed Systems

In 1970s French discourse, the philosopher Michel Foucault had advanced a provocative understanding of modern built environments and the cellular spatially that characterises them. Throughout his many analyses of hospitals and prisons, he developed the related notions of "heterotopias" (or "other spaces") and "spaces of enclosure".[1] Contrary to the sociologist Henri Lefebvre who argued that space is the product of social practices (Lefebvre [1974] 1991), Foucault investigated how spaces shape practices in the first place. Making it impossible to regard spatial ensembles as simple containers, he evidenced instead how they are intricately connected to subjectivation processes, meaning that spaces – in their very arrangement and materiality – act on our thoughts and feelings and disposition us towards particular behaviours. Foucault thus understood spatial setups as a *dispositif* (or 'apparatus') that enable and regulate (sometimes even control) certain behaviours (Foucault 1980, 194–198). In a sense, they fundamentally constitute, affect, and condition our lives, or forms of togetherness, and social reality.

Foucault's heterotopological approach has since been widely embraced in a stream of studies too numerous to properly credit here.[2] They not only variously explored the emergence of all sorts of interiors and interiority, space (esp. domestic space), sex, and (gendered) bodies, but at the same time also refracted and extended the approach (particularly in feminist and queer discourses) through alternative epistemologies. As such, they often focused on the more emancipatory aspects of modern interiors (such as the Bourgeois *intérieur*), and recognised residential space not only as a site of oppression and domination but also as a site of liberation and emancipation (Figures 18.1 and 18.2). The (emancipatory) relation between (gendered) bodies and space is not just a central focus in these works; it since has proven a key trope in interior discourse.[3] This trope, however, is prone to succumbing again to two related things: to understanding interiority mainly in terms of closed systems, and to thus miss the radical critique of container conceptions of space, with which Foucault hoped to open up a new understanding of how environmental systems affect us.

Closed spatial concepts like enclosures, interiors, cells, or spheres re-iterate a highly reductive conception of part-to-whole relations, which erases the constitutive aspect of *part-to-part* relations that bring about these structures in the first place. Philosophically speaking, these conceptions place boundaries not "on par" with parts (Casati and Varzi 1999, 5). As US-American architect Kiel Moe argues (2014, 11–53), these concepts thus prevent us from ever approaching spaces as an *open* system, and thus from ever questioning the production of *boundaries* – or all sorts of material interfaces – that defines spatial/environmental design (Figures 18.3 and 18.4).

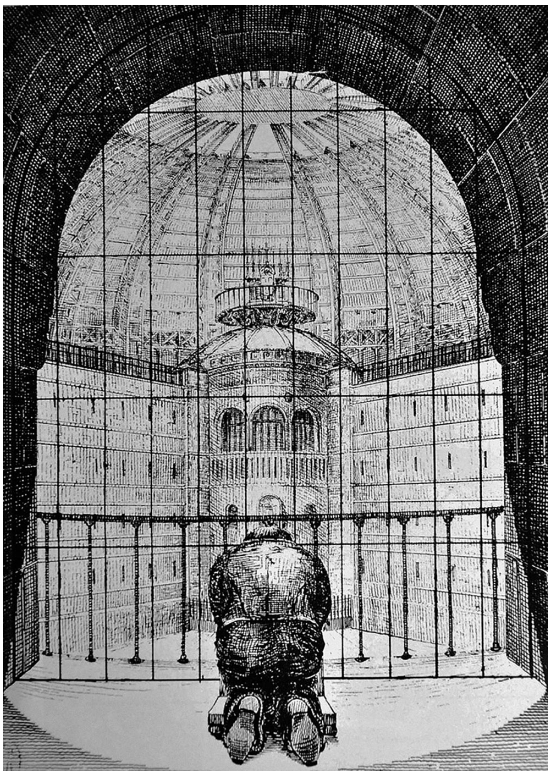

Figure 18.1 Prisoner kneeling in his cell. Frontispiece from N. Harou-Romains's Projet de Pénitence (1840). Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 18.2 Gustave Caillebotte, "A Young Man on his Balcony" (1880). Source: Wikimedia commons. Public domain.

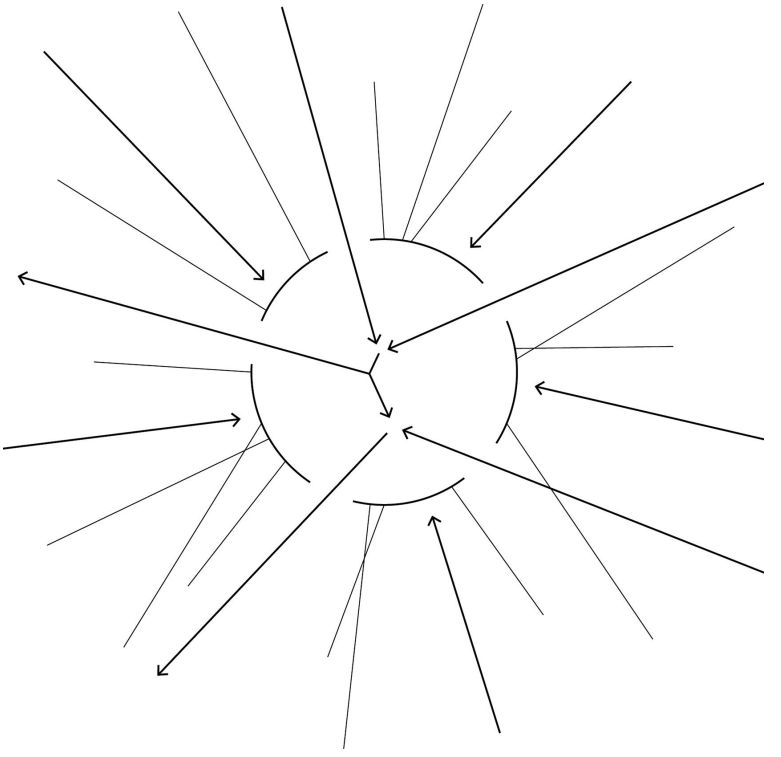

Figure 18.3 Schematic diagram of the body as 'a local rarefication of fluxes'. After Quentin Meillassoux, "Subtraction and Contraction", Collapse 3 (2007), 97. Redrawn by the author.

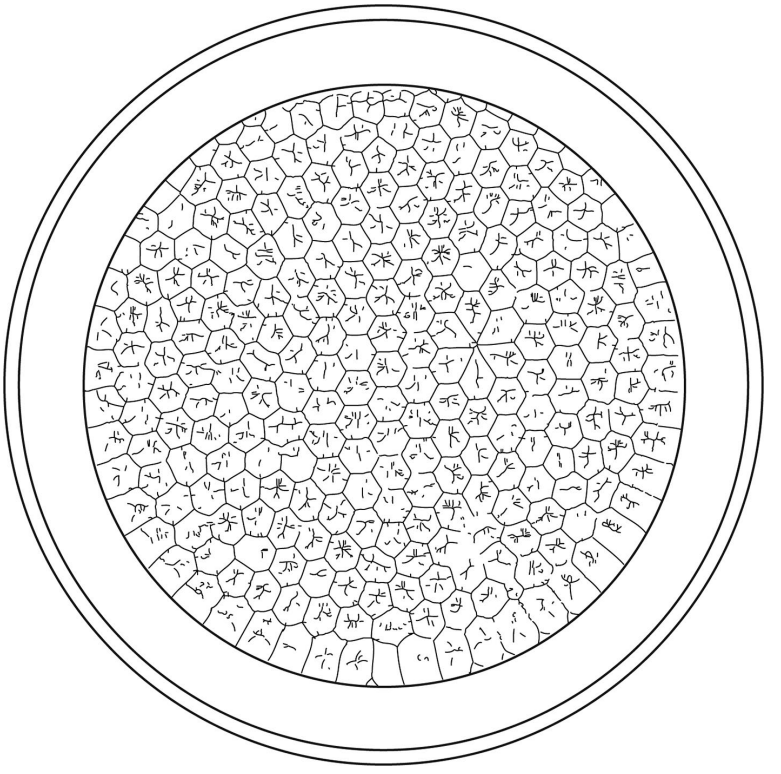

Figure 18.4 Drawing of a so-called Rayleigh-Bénard convention pattern within a heated fluid. Redrawn by the author.

Relative Levels of Interiority

Boundaries are no secondary result of a spatial ordering placed 'between' pre-existing things; they are the *prime site of a production of socio-environmental organisations,* constituting specific flows of exchange, movements, and circulations. They thus have a crucial *binding function* (Nail 2016, 9; 21). To fully appreciate this binding function, we need to arrive at entirely different conceptions in which topology [i.e. the study of relations of (non) connectivity] offers the basis for mereology (i.e. parthood structures), in order to avoid reducing emergent relations to functions of larger systems in which they gain certain functions (Casati and Varzi 1999, 54–65). The French philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon had long called a paradigmatic shift to study the production of individual bodies through the primordial production of *mediating levels of relative interiority and exteriority* (Simondon 2020, 250–256). By using the notion of membranes and foregrounding part-to-part relations, he avoids part-to-whole relations, and thus the mereologically reductive vision of cells and their architectonic structure. Instead, he articulates interiority in terms of being first in contact with an exterior – a relative and differential relationship.

For Simondon, this exterior is not a 'space' but a *milieu,* which is always material, like bodies. Simondon's point is that milieus and bodies are then co-constitutive entities. Bodies do not exist or evolve in space, but 'of' space. This means that spaces are materially embodied, as much as bodies are spaced. This also implies that bodies have not just 'extension' and extensive properties. Materially engaged disciplines as ecology, geology, pharmacology, neurology, or meteorology are largely aware that changes do not happen 'in' an environment, but that change takes form as a transformation 'of' a material environment. They thus understand emergent phenomena as intensive formations with material force-fields (Figure 18.4).

In this regard, maybe the better term for spaces – even interiors – is 'environment'. Against understanding interiors as a container space or spheres, environments are material and affective bodies, always both embedded within and embodying in themselves dynamic ecologies, constituting nested material systems. Elizabeth Grosz – an Australian feminist theorist who has taken much inspiration from the difference and assemblage theories of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze – has reconsidered bodies and all forms of environmental production through 'territorialisation', that is, the production of interlocking frames. Framing, as the production of a relative interior, always involves an 'existential production' through which environments and arrangements allow objects and subjects to 'come to appear' through a process of *selection* (Grosz 2008, 24). As architecture historian Beatriz Colomina noted, spatial frameworks thus never serve as a 'stage' that simply accommodates viewing subjects. Rather they engender a viewing mechanism that precedes specific subjects and subjectivities that come to be produced through their placement within, and framing, by specific relations (Colomina 1992, 84). One must thus align with a position in which the (produced) subject comes second to (productive) relations enacted through such framings.

Boundary-Drawing Practices

This inversion (and its ethical implications) can be greatly understood through Karen Barad's recent extension of the Foucauldian notion of apparatus (2007, 2014). Trained in quantum physics, Barad challenges the traditional understanding of experimental setups, like for instance double-slit experiments, as devices that simply 'detect' natural phenomena. Rather, she argues, these must be understood as diffracting techno-material arrangements that help generate and replicate such phenomena in the first place. As enabling constraints, they only create the material conditions for specific phenomena to actualise. Against the outdated conception of container space in which things interact and have agency before they encounter another, Barad posits that things – as *relata* – actually only "emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relatings" (Barad 2007, ix).

Barad therein refers to the work of US-American philosopher of science Donna Haraway, a biologist turned eco-feminist philosopher of science, who provocatively argued that "objects do not pre-exist as such" (1988, 595). Rather they emerge through certain materially mediated processes of 'becoming-together-with', which she recently called *sympoieses* (2016). Both Haraway and Barad's notion de-emphasises (pre-)formed unities and starts from the constitutive relationships through which these unities are produced through "boundary-drawing practices" (Haraway 1988; Barad 2003, 2007). As Deleuze had argued, differentiation processes seldomly operate by way of simple separation, exclusion, or 'exclusive disjunction' ("*either* this, *or* that"); rather, they involve a progressive definition and synthesis of conditioning factors that concatenate through *inclusive disjunctions* ("this, *and* that, … *and* that…"). From this angle, boundary-drawing practices are "cutting together-apart", as Barad calls it, specific environments and fields (2014). These then "come to matter" in mutually articulated materialities and meanings (Barad 2003, 823). Therein, the very boundaries between distinguishable objects, ideas, research areas, discourses, etc. are constantly redrawn through "material-discursive" reconfigurings of the world (Barad 2003, 810–818; 2007, 137–172).

While this sympoietic nature of material-discursive practices is easily apprehended by anyone who know how (discursive) ideas are experimentally drawn into (material) reality and concretised through sketching, it also has larger implications on how to conceive environments that are more difficult to appreciate. This difficulty lies in how it entails a notion in which parts are ontologically on par with their boundaries as well as their material conditions. Amounting to a larger ethical and aesthetic project, the heavy price to pay for such a vision of reality is, however, that relations attain an ontological primacy over the *relata* they bring about. This primacy does not reintroduce any new hierarchy. Instead, as the Netherlands-based posthumanist philosopher Rosi Braidotti argued, this radical relational ontological stance promotes an *immanent* vision of the subject as an embodied and embedded figuration of relational and affective forces. In contrast to understanding boundaries as secondary formations, the conception of bodies, objects, and spaces as formations within material milieus implies that figurations only *become* individual forms through the arrangement of boundaries that set them apart and *differentiate* them (Braidotti 1994/2011, 2013, 2022). It thus means that analytically, one must always start – not from

constituted parts, wholes, objects, or subjects, interiors or exteriors – but from emergent and differential relations.

Assembling Relations

For instance, in cutting into material milieus frames constitute the very possibility of an inside and outside (Grosz 2005, 10–17), where selective relations of (non)connection enable parthood structures in the first place. Enacting what architecture historian Georges Teyssot has called a "topology of thresholds" (2005, 89), milieus never simply plot pre-existing spaces against spaces, bodies against bodies, or objects against objects, and especially not spaces against bodies against objects. Rather, they enact filters of relation that only plot relations against relations. They imply a particular "poetics of relation", in which relations to others are co-constitutive (Glissant 1997, 11). They are co-constitutive, to the extent that (as most above authors suggest) relations *shape* relata, and they do so in a process wherein they mutually condition another.

Concerning the latter, Deleuze's difference- and assemblage-theoretic concept of "reciprocal determination" helps understand how the meaning, use, or value of objects, facts, is never given, it only comes to be determined differentially in relation to something else (Deleuze 1994, 171–174). Diffracting the above-mentioned idea of (passive) framing, this idea that things reciprocally determine another allows to understand boundaries not simply as devices to draw distinctions, but *at once* always "draw near" diverse bodies (Bennett 2010, 100–101). This notion emphasises the active capacity of things to bring bodies together and allow them to enter assemblages – meaning a higher-order (eco)system made up of a co-constitutive heterogeneity – even if these bodies therein seem to exist in a relation of nonrelation. The Australian cultural theorist Claire Colebrook, for instance has reconsidered urban environments as a sympioetic "milieu of mutual self-distinction" that allows us to exist together through a "complex creation of increasing difference" and differentiated interiors (2017, 46). What happens here is that these heterogenous elements come to be arranged so that they 'hold together'. This brings us back to understanding the binding function of boundaries and spatial interfaces, through which evolving systems gain an internal consistency that allows the constituents to exist, and *come to exist* – not just despite their differing, but *thanks to* their constitutive differences.

An assemblage-theoretic understanding can be (and has long been) rather easily applied to all kinds of organised environments, from libraries to museum exhibitions, larger technical to smaller material assemblages, and their historical formation and design. Yet, properly understood, it first has more far-reaching implications concerning the very relation 'between' bodies, spaces, and things, or subject and objects. For – based on the idea of reciprocal determination – environmental assemblages never simply bring objects, and people in relation *with* one another. This notion would re-iterate the old ontological hierarchy in which space is a background or container for living human action with inanimate material objects. It entails a highly dualistic notion that pitches (immaterial) space against (material) objects, active things (humans) against passive ones (things), or interiors as an oppositional other to exteriors, which segregates these things on distinct levels of reality, rather than understanding them as mutually constitutive entities.

In failing to understand space, objects, and bodies – on the same level – as all material things, albeit with different levels of complexity, we also fail to see them as nested systems. As the Mexican-American assemblage-philosopher Manual DeLanda argues, nested systems are constituted not so much by part-to-whole relations; rather, they are better understood in terms of part-to-*differently-scaled*-part relations. Assemblages; all the way up, and all the way down (DeLanda 2006). This nested notion also prevents us from confusing assemblages with mere collages (DeLanda 2016, 1–7). More than bringing objects, and people in relation *with* one another, assemblages imply that we are constituted by entering into relations with objects, by which we are reciprocally determined, and become-(different-)with these relations.

Conclusion

From this angle, boundary-drawing practices that cut material assemblage together/apart are neither an exclusively architectural nor interior modality of design. Rather all forms of organising, categorising, laying out, arranging, collating, selecting, and designing, engender boundary-drawing practices and sympoieses. It is from this radically relational angle then, that all things – bodies, objects, subjects, spaces, exterior, and interior – come second, but for a different reason so. It does not mean that interior architecture is second to architecture, urban design, etc. From an eco-systemic ontological angle, *bounded figurations all come second* to the boundary-drawing practices and binding arrangements that engender them and that hold them together.

And in the latter that is particularly relevant to understand the 'affective' dimension of spaces, meaning how in particular the various interiors from small studios to larger urban spheres in which most of us spend most of their lives – affect us, our well-being, and health, and critique and creatively rework all-too-exclusive and impoverishing modalities that are rooted in outmoded hierarchies and container conceptions. A task to be carried out on all scales of environmental design, the growing discipline of interior architecture and design is a historically sedimented field concerned with one particular level of this nested sympoietic reality, thanks to the direct proximity of interiors as our most proximate environments in which we 'become-with' certain material (con)figurations. And it is growing to the extent that this level of organising reality gains an increasingly important function, in mediating or even counteracting some of the negative effects of larger organisations in the re-shaping of our more immediate environments. In conjunction with an emerging stream in environmental psychology that increasingly revisits or reinterprets spatial dispositifs as "affectifs", "affect apparatus", "affect arrangement", or "affect dispositioning"[4], the interior discipline has a clear and distinct theoretical trajectory in reclaiming a more eco-systemic conception of interiors, as a materially embodied and embedded, relational and affective figurations.

In discussing Barad's relational notion of boundary-drawing practices through which such figurations are co-constitutively created from within material milieus, this chapter has provided some pointers that invite such

a vision. In calling to abandon binary oppositions, it aimed to show in what way this more active notion of boundary-drawing practices may also serve as an emancipatory tool to help redraw disciplinary boundaries towards more transversal form of engaging with spaces that cut us and the world not apart but together.

Notes

1 For an accessible introduction and overview on Foucault's work and its relevance for spatial design, see for instance Fontana-Giusti 2013.

2 I mention several of these works in the article "Reclaiming What Architecture Does" (Gorny 2018, esp. note 19). An illustrated overview of these discursive streams, mentioned hereafter, is also given in the first part of the essay "A Diagrammatic Cartography of Discourses on Architecture of Life and/or Death" (Gorny 2021).

3 Notable examples include, amongst many others, Sedgwick 1990; McLeod 1996; or McCarthy 2005.

4 A guide to deeper discussions is provided in the entries "Affect", "Affective arrangement", and "Affect disposition" in Slaby and von Scheve 2019.

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