From Outside Into Inside Out
The domestic interior as a foundational site in twentieth-century architecture, psychoanalysis and art.

Anna Daly
Monash University

Abstract
Charles Rice notes that the use of the word interior to refer to the inside of a house did not emerge until the nineteenth century when its design was considered the “…literal covering of the inside of an architectural ‘shell’ with the soft ‘stuff’ of furnishing”.

This usage suggests the interior’s secondary importance to a discipline conceptualised in terms of shaping buildings and space from “the outside in”. By the time this interior – a space associated with domesticity – made its way into twentieth-century discourses of architecture, psychoanalysis and art, it had, however, assumed greater significance. Sigmund Freud identified important analogies between architecture and psychoanalysis, for example, when he described psychical operations in terms of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior, and Salvador Dalí’s use of pictorial space to depict architectural and psychoanalytic territories pointed to the cohabitations of subjectivity and visuality. The interior also acquired a more complicated status here, particularly in its identification as a site from which psychic and societal disturbances issued forth and this is partly how it came to be a focal point for psychological and architectural analysis. This paper presents the quotation across early- and mid-twentieth century architecture, psychoanalysis and art that consolidated the interior’s existence as a material and conceptual concern. Dalí’s work is pivotal here since it unites this theme with the divergent attitudes towards interiority governing modernist practices. The functionalism of Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and even Freud, on one hand, centred on the interior’s problematic nature and sought to resolve this by reconciling interiority to exterior space. Dalí’s Surrealism and the organic modernism found in the work of Alvar Aalto and Eileen Gray, on the other, saw interiority as a position necessary to the development of modern practice.
Paintings such as Salvador Dali’s *Slave Girls at a Market with a Disappearing Bust of Voltaire* (1940) and *Fried Eggs on a Plate, Without the Plate* (1931) draw attention to the role of perspectival space in psychoanalysis and architecture as well as painting. Like many Surrealists, Dali was heavily influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud but his translation of psychoanalytic ideas into pictorial form challenge the authority of the subject underpinning Freudian psychoanalysis. *Fried Eggs*, for example, disrupts the authority of viewership around which fixed-point, perspectival space is arranged by engulfing viewers within the visual field of the painting rather than positioning them outside of it. Through a focus on the interior as a site upon which modernist discourses converged, this paper presents interiority as a notion crucial to the consolidation of architectural, psychoanalytic and artistic practice in the early-to-mid twentieth-century. On one hand, functionalist architectural and Freudian analytical models aimed at ameliorating the threat interiority posed to societal and individual health by exposing it to the light of disciplinary analysis. On the other hand, organic modernists such as Eileen Gray and Alvar Aalto saw the preservation of an inner sanctum as a crucial position from which to mould the architectural environment and that is the position visualised in Dali’s Surrealism. An emphasis on Dali’s *Fried Eggs*, Richard Neutra’s Californian residences, Eileen Gray’s domestic design and Alvar Aalto’s approach to institutional space aims to elicit an image of the interior as it appeared to early-to-mid twentieth century practitioners. It also gestures towards the legacy of that conceptualisation in the more participatory practices exemplifying some areas of art, architecture and therapy since the 1960s and the movement away from the interior as a cross-disciplinary concern.

To explain the relationship between the conscious and unconscious psyche, Freud conjured the image of a large entrance hall and a drawing room with a watchman overseeing traffic between the two. The watchman, a metaphor for the Superego, tries to protect the health of the psyche by preventing threatening unconscious material and thoughts from entering the conscious mind. Freud’s analogy refers to the Gothic tradition taken up by Horace Walpole and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in which the house is equated with the self. More specifically, the analogy quotes an association between housing and health formalised in the tradition of therapeutic architecture influencing the design of domestic dwellings and public institutions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and France. Writing in 1788, John Woods the Younger believed that improving the performance of rural cottages benefitted human health. More generally speaking, eighteenth century hospitals were designed to promote physical health and social welfare and the psychiatric hospitals of the nineteenth century were seen as instruments of healing. The sensibility of Freud’s metaphor more closely...
resembles, however, a mid-to-late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tendency to associate interiors with discontent and turmoil. In the writing of Charles Baudelaire, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Walter Benjamin, the nineteenth-century interior acquires the status of a problem due to the cluttered and censorious qualities that see it severed from the external realities of the world. The interior of Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a force that ensnares its occupants in a world circumscribed by social propriety and gender, for example, while Benjamin’s “womblike interior” alienates individuals from the real conditions of existence and thus, from satisfying a desire for authentic subjectivity. Against this background, Freud’s talking cure emerges as a process of revelation that makes the psychic disturbances harboured by the secluded and alienating interior accessible to the therapist’s professional insight.

Functionalist modernists formulated an idea of architecture that, in effect, positioned it as a form of societal psychoanalysis. Alongside the rejection of traditional detailing, they saw the use of modern production materials and a cosmopolitan language as contributions to an aesthetic that would summon the “revolution in consciousness” needed to foster a healthier body politic. Le Corbusier’s picture walls were just one device used to bring about new interrelations between exterior and interior, man and machine and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe conceived of his Farnsworth house as a coming together of nature, human and house that resulted in a “higher unity”. The use of open space and transparency to address what they saw as the introverted nature of nineteenth-century dwellings meant that the architectural visions of Mies and Le Corbusier conformed to a principle also central to Freud’s method: the equation of healthiness with the visibility of the interior. Freud claimed that his metaphor was strictly poetic and considered the physical environment to be of little significance to mental wellbeing. Nevertheless, the positioning of the interior as a problem central to modernist architecture, ensured that cross-disciplinary quotations of architectural and psychological interiority persisted.

Some striking paintings by Dali Surrealist executed between 1929 and 1932 quoted architectural and psychoanalytic interiors to present visuality as a space pivotal to reconciling psychical and material existence. In *Fried Eggs on a Plate, Without the Plate*, for example, the seventeenth-century domestic interior seen in still-life paintings is used to examine the visual field foundational to psychoanalytic subjectivity, Le Corbusier’s architecture and modern pictorial space, that of fixed-point perspective. It is also an examination that disrupts the Cartesianism implicit to Freudianism and functionalism, though and hints of this are evident in the way Dali uses techniques associated with heightened verisimilitude to muddy the distinction between subjective and objective realities. Depicting a large, shelf-like structure that dominates the painting’s foreground, *Fried Eggs* features a plate of two eggs that sit below a wall-mounted, hollowed and dried cob of corn. The cob resembles a wooden scabbard but combined with the sprig of green leaves emerging from its wider opening, is becomes more strongly reminiscent of a carrot. A single fried egg tied by a string dangles above the plate. The shelf brings to mind the scenographic supports found in Juan van der Hamen’s (1596-1631) paintings *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit* (1627) and *Still Life with Fruits and Glassware* (1626) (Fig. i). It also shares an unusual motif with Juan Sanchez Cotan’s (1560-1627) *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (1602), that of produce hanging by a string suspended from a place that remains out of view.

Dali’s painting echoes the sense of unreality attached to the domestic interior found in Baudelaire, Perkins-Gilman and Benjamin, a sensibility he cultivates through the manipulation of techniques associated with realistic representation. In doing so, he evokes an unfamiliarity residing within well-known pictorial conventions. The realistic depiction of carrots, eggs and shelving, for example, does not prevent the carrot-object from slipping into ambiguity, a state partly attributable to the fact that despite the subscription to detail, the object has no basis in material reality. Recognised as a carrot, it suggests a familiar terrain of reality linked to the still-life tradition. As an assemblage of indeterminate
objects - a hollowed out, elongated conical structure topped with leaves recalling the Transubstantiated category of Surrealist object – it is more difficult to comprehend.  

Figure 2. Le Corbusier, Maison Ozenfant, Paris, 1923. © Fondation Le Corbusier, 2017

Its quotation across psychoanalysis, functionalist architecture and Surrealist art helped consolidate and generate an early twentieth-century concept of interiority but that concept did not enjoy the same standing across the movements these disciplines represent. While Surrealists were known for embracing the revolutionary potential of interiority, critics have argued that functionalist and Freudian productions of interiority aimed for its elimination. The Surrealist Tristan Tzara, wrote that “Modern architecture, as hygienic and stripped of ornament as it wants to appear, has no chance of living … because it is the complete negation of the image of the dwelling”. More recently, Beatrice Colomina has concluded that the emphasis on sight in the architectures of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier denies inhabitants their subjectivity. A residence such as the Moller House becomes “… not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupants”. Even though Loos’ described his own practice as one that worked from the inside out and Colomina describes it as being organised around an “interior gaze”, his use of windows and mirrors creates multiple sightlines that capture occupants within a system of looking that objectifies them. Similarly, Le Corbusier's externally oriented gaze has the dweller looking out through vertical windows onto fragmentary views of the landscape. For Colomina, this is an example of the architect taming space by transforming it into an image. Le Corbusier presents the world outside the house as a picture and by controlling access to that picture he produces the location of its occupants and thus, their subjectivity. As such she writes that with Le Corbusier “… the outside is always the inside …” Freud’s approach to therapy has attracted comparable criticisms. Notably, the psychoanalytic feminist Luce Irigaray drew attention to the androcentrism of a Freudian psychoanalytic space that could not recognise the value of a different, read female, subjectivity. In perspectival terms, the Freudian analyst occupies a position around which therapeutic space is organised, ensuring that the patient becomes the object of his or her gaze. As with inhabitants of functionalist buildings, the position and definition of patients precedes them and in ways that deny their unpredictability and creativity.

The convergence between architecture and therapy articulated in the work of Richard Neutra lent the tendency to objectify clients an extreme expression. For Neutra, architecture was “applied biology and psychological treatment” and his emphasis on corners and glass were a means by which he sought to multiply the visual and psychic effects of his designs. In some respects, it was an emphasis that challenged functionalist orthodoxies. In residences such as the Logar house, for example, corners
merged with windows to expand the scope of the functionalist picture window, breaking with the conventions of the classical space conceived by Le Corbusier’s architecture. With “... two planes of floor-to-ceiling expanses of plate glass join[ing] in a mitred edge ...” Neutra produced “... a glazed environment of intense spatial ambiguity”. Moreover, despite being interested in Freudian ideas by way of Wilhelm Reich, he refuted Freud’s notion that environment was of little importance to the psyche and maintained instead that the physiological world formed the basis for social interaction and mental stability. Still, the “psycho-physiological wholesomeness” Neutra sought to foster centred on his role as a therapeutic architect for whom transparency, and thus visibility, facilitated the control of environmental and psychic space. Neutra’s clients did not necessarily share his vision. The Logars decided to sell the home he designed for them after just five years. In a letter to the architect, Mrs Logar explained “It looks messy all the time and there is no place to hide things away; we are entirely exposed to view from all sides”.

Surrealists and organic modernists such as Alvar Aalto and Eileen Gray challenged the principles upon which the optimisation of interior visibility rested by presenting the inscrutability of the interior as a positive attribute. Dali did so by destabilising the perspectival space that lent the Cartesian subject authority thereby revealing its operations without necessarily reproducing them. In Fried Eggs, genres associated with interior and exterior spaces are merged and the generic positioning of the viewer is reversed to allow the internal reality of the psychoanalytic subject and the objective or “phenomenal” reality of the outside world to occupy the same space. The deep, absorbent blackness usually reserved for the central mid-section of seventeenth-century still-life paintings, for example, is used on the left and bottom of Dali’s canvas to describe a profile view of the shelf. As such, what was the background becomes the foreground and one implication of this is that the viewer’s location is reversed. In other words, rather than looking at the shelf from the outside in, as is customary to the still-life tradition found in the paintings of Cotan or van der Hamen, the viewer looks from behind the shelf to the place where he or she would usually be. Alternatively, this rearrangement of pictorial conventions can be seen as a device that simply brings viewers closer to the picture space of the still - life and that, in its turn, suggests a mobility that makes it possible to look further still “into” the painting. In both cases, the painting retains the illusion of three-dimensional space – it is perceived in terms of a foreground and a background - but the darkness distances viewers from the lighter parts of the canvas. It also accentuates the framing role of the shelf and this further muddles the convention that has still-life paintings synonymous with interiority and landscapes with the world outside the home. The landscape in Fried Eggs is the scene most interior to the space of the picture and is perhaps
reflective of the Cadaques beaches’ significance to Dali’s inner world. At the same time, that usually associated with the darkened interior – the still life - becomes external to the central scene and thus acquires the status of the external or objective reality against which internal or subjective perceptions are calibrated. The fusion of landscape and still-life produces a panorama that is formed by being interior, rather than exterior, to perspectival space and thus works towards Dali’s aim of creating for the unconscious “the same objective clearness...the same communicable thickness as that of the world of phenomenal reality”.

The architectures of Gray and Aalto conceptualise the interior as a generative site. In some respects, both architects shared the utopian vision vital to functionalism. Expressing a faith in the materials and processes of modernity, their work conforms to the aesthetic broadly associated with modernist architecture. Indeed, Gray exhibited her work at Le Corbusier’s “Pavillon des Temps Nouveau” for the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris and Aalto is noted for belonging to an organic tradition prompted by Frank Lloyd Wright whilst reaching out to Internationalism for the connections and recognition it facilitated. At the same time, both designers moved away from the tubular steel characterising Mies and Le Corbusier's furniture towards wood and other organic materials. In Aalto’s case, this was prompted by work on the Paimio Sanatorium in Finland where he felt the use of metal for furniture, like his Paimio chair was “… too clinical and impersonal in character for indoor use …”. More significantly, where functionalist modernists saw the dark and secretive nature of the nineteenth-century interior as a problem to be surmounted through its exposure to light and visibility, Aalto and Gray expressed an equal faith in the value of an interiority associated with embodiment and seclusion. For an alcove off the living area in E-1027, Gray designed a bed with a table that could be raised or lowered according to need and provided storage for the pillows so that the bed could be readily converted into a couch. She also had screens made from sheets of metal (used to sift flour in an industrial mill), designed high-up storage cupboards and had a metallic curtain concealing the service area as part of an apartment conversion on the Rue de Chateaubriand. Apart from being an approach to design that “… responds to the body’s position, gestures and belongings, and in doing so, welcomes its presence”. Gray’s design honours the other metaphorical associations that interiority brings – the containment, privacy, sanctuary, and protection that architecture and therapy might offer. A similarly sympathetic approach is evident in Aalto’s Sanatorium. Taking into account the largely horizontal position required for recuperation, Aalto had radiators located nearer the feet rather than the heads of patients in order that they not be subjected to direct rays of heat. He also

Figure 4 (left). Marjo Holma, A Patient Room in Alvar Aalto’s Paimio Sanatorium. Image courtesy of the Paimio Sanatorium Trust.

Figure 5 (right). Manuel Bougot, alcove in Eileen Gray’s E-1027, Roquebrune (restored in 2010). Image courtesy of Manuel Bougot.
positioned the sanatorium’s windows in ways that made the view out of them accessible to the reclining convalescent.31

The idea of an interiority that is not destructive but, rather, fruitful in its seclusion brings Dali, Gray and Aalto into close orbit but this does not make organic modernism a form of architectural Surrealism.32 For one thing, Gray and Aalto were dedicated to the modernist vision that saw the improvement of material existence as axiomatic to a greater social good. Conversely, the Surrealists felt that an equitable social order would only be achieved if the bourgeois culture, from which modernist architecture’s clientele largely derived, was destroyed first. To this end, Dalí’s determination to give form “…to the formless and invisible, to dreams, reveries, delusions, desires and fears” constituted a celebration and documentation of a complete breakdown of the symbolic order that would, ideally, extend to the social.33 Dali, Gray and Aalto did share, though, an interest in the physical dimensions of abstract space and in interiority as a position from which an embodied space may originate. Dalí’s disruption of conventions associated with the seventeenth-century still life tradition implies the physiological location of the cerebral eye. Where he altered the bodily sensation of space by changing the angle and proximity to the focal point of the painting, he also made the contiguities between pictorial space and the body embedded in single-point perspective explicit. In these ways, he assigned what would usually be considered the intangible qualities of perception a physical dimension.34 Gray and Aalto also challenged the Cartesian separation between eye and body central to functionalism by reinstating the visual with a materiality. Aalto’s focus on sight’s corporeal determinants and Gray’s interest in opacity contributed to a language of modernism that situated the body as the necessary condition for human life and thereby staked a claim to the importance of interiority for architectural theory and practice.35

Charles Rice notes that, as a term, the interior was not used to refer to the inside of a house until the early nineteenth century. This is not to say that furniture and its arrangement, or indeed domestic mores and habits, did not exist before this time” he writes. “Rather, the interior conceptualised a particular emerging and developing consciousness of and comportment to the material realities of domesticity, realities which were actively formed in this emergence and which…could also become transformed and destabilised through it”.36 Even though for Freud, the evocation of the nineteenth-century domestic interior was purely figurative, Rice further observes that as the physical site at which psychoanalysis was developed, as an analogy for the structuring of the psyche and as the context for therapeutic practice the interior played a “multiply inflected role in Freud’s development of psychoanalysis”.37 That multiplicity characterises the interior’s role in a functionalist architecture that treated space as a function of mind and in Surrealist painting, where psychical activity was lent visual form. However, as Dalí’s engagement with the techniques germane to the painterly realisation of perspectival space demonstrated, the authority of the disembodied eye upon which Freudian psychoanalysis and the functionalist architecture were founded was also up for debate. Paintings such as Fried Eggs disclose the simultaneously interior and exterior state of selfhood that endows it with an elusiveness, and thus a resistance, to objectification. In this respect, Dalí’s work is a typical of the organic modernism found in the architectures of Gray and Aalto and in Jacques Lacan’s structuralist reinvigoration of Freudian ideas.38 In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Moebius strip replaces the Victorian interior as an analogy to the operations of the psyche. The twist and looping of the strip ensures that neither side of the material used to form it is continuously internal or external to the space its form describes. The conscious and unconscious relations constituting selfhood are thus imagined as being simultaneously interior and exterior to subjectivity. While this image does dislodge the authority of selfhood guaranteed by Descartes’ perspectival mapping of the subject, Lacan’s work demonstrates how that autonomy was itself an illusion produced by the abstraction and rationalisation of the subject in relation to space.

The conceptualisation of the interior has far-reaching implications for the boundaries of disciplines in which, as with architecture, a deep contemplation of the relationships between body, space and
visuality is fundamental. Karen A. Franck and R. Bianca Lepori trace the roots of contemporary participatory architecture, for example, to the organicism characterising the work of Aalto, Gray, Louis Kahn and Hans Scharoun among others. Lepori cites the Jagonari Women’s Education Resource Centre in East London as one example of the participatory approach to practice. Here, a group of Asian women approached Matrix Architects to help them with the project and went on site visits, selected brick and worked with scale models in order to develop the concept. The process resulted in not just a space but in the greater confidence of the clients when it came to articulating their needs. The extensive engagement also guaranteed that the control and manipulation of space did not rest entirely with the designers. By way of analogy, the psychotherapists and conceptual artists emerging in 1960s North America perceived the unpredictability and creativity of patients and viewers as being crucial to the success of any work. Whether these more contemporary practices of art, architecture and therapy continued to converge on the notion of interiority is another matter and one that gestures towards both the importance of the interior to the self-definition of early-to-mid twentieth-century art, architecture and therapy and the degree to which those definitions shifted over the intervening years.
Endnotes

2 Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior*.
8 Daniel Maudlin, “Habitations of the Labourer: Improvement, Reform and the Neoclassical Cottage in Eighteenth-Century Britain” in Haim Finkelstein, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dali*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 231. In Dalí’s Review of AntiArtistic Tendencies, Surrealist Objects- an advance on Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades - meet the needs of human fetishism generally. A specific category of these are dream objects – the objects one can only encounter in dreams and “… have little justification in terms of their usefulness or in relation to pleasure”. [103; Fink]
11 Dali, “Surrealist Objects” in Haim Finkelstein, *The Collected Writings of Salvador Dali*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 231. In Dalí’s Review of AntiArtistic Tendencies, Surrealist Objects- an advance on Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades - meet the needs of human fetishism generally. A specific category of these are dream objects – the objects one can only encounter in dreams and “… have little justification in terms of their usefulness or in relation to pleasure”. [103; Fink]
12 Brianne Gallagher, “Policing Paris”. 
13 Galleray, “Policing Paris”. 
14 Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, US: Cornell University Press, 1985
25 As Anthony Vidler points out, all architecture contains elements of dream, myth and fantasy but we do not conclude from this that all architecture is Surrealist. Anthony Vidler, “Fantasy, the Uncanny and Surrealist Theories of Architecture”, p.2.
31 Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior*.