

## Tracing the Progression of Inhabitation through Interior Surface in Semarang Old Town

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### Abstract

*The capacity of the interior to adapt and transform through time has made the interior space bears the consequences from its past occupancies. The trails of the past are imprinted within the layers of interior surfaces. This paper argues that by utilising the idea of Anthropocene, these surfaces could become the medium to trace the inhabitation processes that happen throughout the life of the building, whether it was in the past, in the present or to predict the future. In particular, this paper attempts to explore and speculate on the progression of inhabitations through the interior surfaces of the buildings in Semarang Old Town, Central Java, Indonesia. The investigations are presented through the stories of the facades, the paints and the tiles, to reveal how these interior layers narrate the idea of the deep time in which the past inhabitation is embedded. These layers of interior surfaces suggest the role of time and continuous transformation in affecting and producing the current interior spaces. An understanding of deep time, as reflected in the layers of interior surfaces, also suggests the agency of human inhabitation within the transformation of interior space and highlights the ability of interior space to manoeuvre in time.*

*Keywords: Anthropocene, deep time, surface, layers, inhabitation*

### Introduction: Interior and the Progression of Inhabitation

The progression of interior architectural theory is steadily growing towards the argument that the interior, as the substance of the discipline, is neither an inert nor a static entity. Rather, the interior should be seen as “a state of becoming”, a product of a temporal-spatial relationship that enables inhabitation (Attiwill, 2012). In this regard, the interior is not produced through a singular process, but through a constant reiteration of spatial operations. This places the interior in its capacity to take on form as both an artifice and an artifact, as a mechanism and a spatial product. As an artifice, the interior acts as an autonomous device of inhabitation and “a ‘process’ designed to improve a system (e.g. nature); the capacity to improve the appearance, the result, the effect on something” (Giunta, 2009, p.53). In this role, the interior is aimed at persistently refining human inhabitation to reach a certain level of physical and psychological wellbeing. It ‘forces’ the interior to develop the ability to adjust its shape physically in correspondence with its surroundings and does not bind itself to any particular physical forms. This ability is what makes the interior able to manoeuvre *in* time.

The interior, as an artifice, has the capacity to cope with changes and transformation. It means the spatial affairs of the interior are consistently a result of the accumulated consequences from its past occupancies. The traces of the past are imprinted and embedded within the layers of physical attributes in the interior space, which makes them become the evidence of a continuous transformation that allusively constructs our presence. The skin, hereinafter referred to as the surface, is one of the layers of interior space that accommodates ageing and adaptivity (Brand, 1994). The surface allows the interior to progress with the growth of its inhabitants by offering a certain degree of flexibility which allows some part of the layers to be transformed naturally through time. Yet at the same time, this layer hardly ever goes through a substantial transformation, which makes it the perfect medium for the traces of the past to reside. The surface becomes the witness that carries the narrative of the interior that is made up by the interconnection between the past, the present and the anticipation for the future.

In interior space, the surface becomes the medium to envision the passage of time. The method of reading time through the evidence imprinted in the surfaces becomes possible, since time is experienced through memory and sensorial activity that could not be separated with the understanding of the space (Till, 1996). The equivalent method of reading time has been used in the field of natural science, as suggested in the Anthropocene thesis - the use of *deep time* to reveal the effect on human occupation toward

the transformation of the natural object (Turpin, 2013). Using the lens of the Anthropocene, it would be possible to question how things are done, thought, and produced; rather than just accepting our presence as inherited and intolerable circumstances (Turpin, 2013). We could use the idea of the Anthropocene to challenge the given situation of the interior by looking at its ontological nature, in this case, the physical matters that construct the interior surface. By looking at the idea of Anthropocene as a method of reading time, it would be possible to unfold the phenomenon and its interconnectivity that formulates our present and affects our vision of the future.

This paper attempts to read and speculate the progression of inhabitation through the lens of Anthropocene by looking at the physical evidence embedded on the surfaces of interior spaces. We have no intention to reconstruct the actual past, rather by investigating the interior surface, we aim to question what constructed our present. This paper looks at several interior surfaces in the Semarang Old Town Complex, which provide suitable examples of how the power of time, traces of inhabitation and continuous transformation produce the interior.

## **Interior *in* Time**

### *Adaptive and Transformable Interior*

The interior is a situation, a product of spatial operation called 'interiorization', which is defined as "a making habitable through a process of selection and arrangement to produce an intensive space; a temporal consistency, a 'fabrication of space' which enables inhabitation – spatially and subjectively" (Attiwill, 2012, p. 5). Inhabitation itself involves complex, thrilling and prolonged events that have the ability to constantly change and transform its container, the interior (Brand, 1994). This circumstance forces the condition of interiority, as the substance of the interior, to avoid the absolute condition, considering that the nature of the inhabitation itself requires it to become a mobile and promiscuous being (McCarthy, 2005). It is only logical that the practice which governs the interior deals with the transformation of given spatial situations to reach what is ideal at a certain period of time (Brooker and Stone, 2007). As a consequence, it is unnecessary for the interior to become attached to any particular physical forms, containers, or geographical limitations in producing the setting for inhabitation. In this sense, the interior should be seen as an artifice rather than an artifact, which has a definite form and function. The interior, as an artifice, is a series of spatial operations that involve continuous

adjustment to achieve the spatial condition fit for inhabitation (Giunta, 2009). As an artifice, the interior is operating *in* time.

In architecture, time is usually seen as a threat (Till, 1996). Time has the ability to produce “the temporal conditions such as weathering, programmatic change, night and accidents” that challenge the authority of architecture (Till, 1996, p. 2). The conventional practices of the interior tend to adapt this attitude towards time; they often use the design method and technical knowledge to banish any influence of time by producing immutable spatial artifacts. Such a defensive attitude reflects how the practices of the interior are intimidated by the power of time. Yet, along with the theoretical progression of the discipline, the practice of the interior has begun to shift its attitude towards time. Time is no longer seen as a threat, but rather as an opportunity; these are the forces that make the act of ‘interiorization’ possible. Time allows the transformation of space, and it is the critical factor that frames the process of selecting and organising in ‘interiorization’. By being in time, the interior makes its way to become physically and mentally inhabited, occupied and experienced. It distinguished the art of the interior from the art of the tectonic (Attiwill, 2013). To be able to understand and operate within time, interior practices have to acknowledge the important role and presence of time.

By acknowledging the power of time, the practice of the interior would be able to “make adjustments to a building in a way that is always future-responsible-open to the emerging whole, hastening a richly mature intricacy” (Brand, 1994, p. 209). After all, spatial practices, including the architecture and the interior, are always located at the threshold of the past and the future, which is both sobering and empowering (Till, 1996). One way to be able to envision the future is by acknowledging the past; “honoring the future begins with honoring the past” (Brand, 1994, p. 190). By taking measure of the temporal aspects, the interior turns its occupants into active participants, learners and shapers, rather than the passive victims of the spatial practice (Brand, 1994). In this way, the interior accommodates its space to actively grow and progress along with its inhabitants in their everyday life.

#### *Traces of Time in Interior Surfaces*

Naturally, a building is built with the intention to have a lifespan that extends beyond its current living occupants. But this does not necessarily mean that the building could last forever; in fact, it has a finite life, and without active occupancy, it tends to turn into rubble (Grosz et al., 2013). The life of the building, along with its interiority, is not something that is made just once. Architecture as a cultural

object “is made and remade over and over again each time it is represented through another medium, each time its surroundings change, each time different people experience it” (Forty, 1996, p. iii). The physical form of the building, especially its interior space, has continuously undergone transformations, triggered by the needs of its inhabitants at a particular period of time.

The transformation process of interior space could be seen as collateral with the concept of ‘evolution’ in which, as opposed to ‘invention’, always proceeds through continuity and through time (Grosz, 2013). Any form of interior evolution, whether an alteration, renovation, revitalisation, or restoration, is always shadowed by the traces of the past. The traces may take on various forms, such as gaps, flakes or cracks that are generated by weathering, accidents and human occupation through the years. They represent the signal of time and the mark of temporality that place the building and its interior space as part of the everyday world, the world full of contingency and mishap (Till, 2009). The traces of the past, in any form, not only reveal the passage of time, but also the system that governed it. This system reflects the process of physical transformation caused by the progression of social and environmental aspects of inhabitation through time.

The traces of time are imprinted within several layers of physical attributes that form the interior space. Out of the seven layers of building proposed by Brand (1994), five of them are directly responsible for the physical formation of the interior: the layers of the skin, (hereinafter referred to as surface), services, space plan, stuff, and the soul. Each layer has its own frequency and intensity which reflects the degree of adaptability of the interior in coping with change. The layers with the highest degree of adaptability are the soul and stuff, followed by space plan and service, while the surface is the least adaptable layer. The soul, stuff, space plan and even services are quite easy to transform, and frequently, in the midst of the process of interior transformation, are replaced or have disappeared completely. Although having undergone the same transformation as the others, some parts of the surface substantially stay as is, or just are painted or are covered in every process. The surface witnesses as well as carries the traces of inhabitation, by remaining still in the midst of continuous physical alteration.

As one of the layers that form interior space, the surface offers some degree of flexibility in accommodating change. Its textures, patterns, and colours might be changed, but its physical form is usually left intact, along with its structural aspects. The surface holds the responsibility of producing atmosphere, by linking its most flexible aspect, that of the material, with its rigid components

and its form. The atmosphere is a cultural inheritance that works in different ways, in different periods of time (Baudrillard, 2006). The continuous changes of material in the interior surface reflect the constant changes of spatial operations to reach certain atmospheric conditions that fit its time and place. It also reflects the changes in cultural and social values through time. This paper argues that it is possible to speculate the progression of inhabitation and how it affects our present by looking into the traces of the past that are layered on the interior surface.

#### *Interior Inhabitation through the Passage of Time*

How the traces of the past accumulate over time and shape the present interior setting could be seen in parallel with the geological occurrence which is manifested through the idea of *deep time*. In this sense, time is understood "through its excessiveness, through its continual transformation, (which is) offering a mode of self-overcoming" (Grosz et al., 2013, p. 129). The idea of *deep time* is that our present actually contains all of the specimens of the past, carrying it and continuously transforming it in time (Grosz et al., 2013). According to the idea of *deep time*, the present is an extended version of the past, and so the future is an extension of the present.

The idea of *deep time* in this discussion is related to the human occupation of interior space, which brings us to the Anthropocene "a period that marks itself by human intervention as much as by a surpassing of the human" (Grosz et al., 2013, p. 131). The Anthropocene looks through the traces of human inhabitation to identify the marks of time in particular spatial objects. To look at these objects from the perspective of the Anthropocene is to look at the social and cultural transformation that affected its present circumstances (Palmesino et al., 2013, p. 23).

The contemporary understanding of the Anthropocene implicates that there is a relationship between nature and culture - that the transformation of the social could be reflected through a physical reformation.

The concept of the Anthropocene affords trends of the contemporary scholars, activists, and designers a unique opportunity to reevaluate the terms of theory and practice which have been inherited from modernity. Not least among these inheritances is the assumption of an ontological distinction between human culture and nature. (Turpin, 2013, p. 3)

The Anthropocene suggests that all existence, which is related to the human occupation, is an outcome of the process and not a

given situation.

By embracing the concept of the Anthropocene to read the progression of inhabitation through interior surfaces, the traces of time are not comprehended in a linear or sequential manner. Time is overwhelmingly more powerful, paradoxical and unpredictable to be put in rigid categories. By arranging and ordering time into a timeline “the contingency of the specifics is overwhelmed by the ordering of the system” (Till, 2009, p. 94). Time through the lens of the Anthropocene is not orderly stacked but overlapping and superimposed. By using the idea of the Anthropocene, it would be possible to understand the interdependence between the past, the present and the future, to understand the *thick time* in producing transformable space (Till, 2009). “To be in time, however, is to be in the world, not a world of static objects but a world of social and temporal exchanges” (Till, 2009, p. 98). The idea of *thick time* locates the understanding of interior surfaces in relevance to the inhabitation and culture of humans as they imprint the trace of human inhabitation through time.

### **The Stories of Interior Surfaces in Semarang Old Town**

Rather than being empirical, we propose to read the traces of the past that reflect the progression of inhabitation using the hypothetical narrative of space. The reason is that in considering the use of the Anthropocene in their discipline, geological science itself, where the concept is originated, is becoming more speculative, in a way more suggestive than scientific (Turpin, 2013). In the interior, stories are the most useful vehicle for exploring the phenomenon of *deep time* through the lens of the Anthropocene, since it has a tendency to narrate time through its engagement with human occupation and space (Kulper, 2013). Stories make way for the discipline of the interior to suggest, imagine and speculate the passage of time, in order to envision the future affairs of human occupation in interior space.

The inquiry towards the traces of inhabitation will be presented through the following three stories, each examining the particular case study of building or interior surfaces in Semarang Old Town - or locally known as Kota Lama Semarang. Semarang Old Town originated from the fortified city during the Dutch colonial period. Many old buildings in the area have been dilapidated, and the municipality is currently working on the conservation program as an attempt to revitalize the area. The planning for the conservation of Semarang Old Town includes the renovation of 105 buildings from the total of 245 buildings in the area (Sari, Harani & Werdiningsih,

2017). The following three stories attempt to reveal the possibility of how the layers of building or interior surfaces could be read in such a way to discover the *deep time* embedded within the layers.

### #1 *The Story of the Facade*

Figure 1  
Facade of the  
newly renovated  
building (right)  
and the ruin (left)



Out of 105 historical buildings that have been or are planned to be renovated in Semarang Old Town, one of the recently renovated buildings is the Monod Diephuis & Co. Building (hereinafter referred to as Monod). It was altered from an office building during the Dutch colonial period into a building accommodating several functions: batik gallery, restaurant, cafe, and hotel. The renovation of Monod was aimed at restoring the original state of the building in the manner of the day before it was ever occupied. The layers of paints and wall coverings that had been accumulated through the years were stripped away from its facades until the original layer of paint was found.

Figure 1 illustrates the newly renovated facade of Monod in comparison to its neighbour. The facade of the ruin on the left shows the diversity of evidence that reveals a glimpse of the past occupancy. This is what Denizen (2013) called 'forensic recognition,' a physical circumstance when we discover evidence that reveals the unique duration of those material attributes as the consequences of human occupation. When the evidence suggests the duration of time, that particular evidence carries the traces of past occupancy which are later carried over to the next occupancy and so on. The cracks and the paint flakes that were formed on the surface of this facade show the progression of time that has formed what we now call the present. By looking through the cracks and paint flakes that indicated the transformation of the interior through time, we could suggest a new set of possibilities that produced the interior space in the past and how this would affect our vision to inhabit the space in the future.



Figure 2  
Facade of the  
ruin

Compared to the ruined building, the striking look of the newly renovated facade of Monod looks distinct from its surroundings. It does not necessarily mean that the building is transformed into an ultra-modern building, but it seems to deny its natural process of ageing as well as any traces of inhabitation in it. By scraping off all the layers of paints imprinted in the facades through the years and by painting all the walls with a white, shiny and new finish, the newly renovated building looks like it has frozen and canceled time altogether. At this moment, the new building neither indicates the past nor has any anticipation of the future.

The approach of stripping off all the layers of paints on the facade tends to put the building in an instant aesthetic moment, an instant freshness that represents eternity and stability (Till, 1996). The aims of restoring the building condition at one particular time in the history have consequently neglected the stories of inhabitation that occurred throughout the time up to the present. On the other hand, its neighbour that is still in ruins may tell more stories of its inhabitation in the past, regardless of its current physical condition.

## #2 The Story of the Paints



Figure 3  
The new wall  
(left) and the  
wall with layers  
of paints (right)

Some walls of the buildings in Semarang Old Town are filled with cracks and paint flakes that have resulted naturally by weathering as well as human occupation. These cracks and flakes could reveal, in particular, how the buildings change throughout time. The cracks

and the paint flakes are not just a residue, but a postscript to some processes - the processes of inhabitation. In fact, they indicate a certain process in themselves, composed of many different parts which are assembled as a system that occurs within a specific duration in time and space (Denizen, 2013). The layers of the wall paints reflect the similar process as illustrated in the soil taxonomy proposed by Denizen (2013), where "it produced a pattern of layers, and these are the essential repetition required for the production of a system of resemblances" (p. 37).

The paint flakes reflect the fragments of particular moments of time in the building that has undergone a transformation throughout its inhabitation in the past. Painting the walls of the building has become a common act that marks the change of the state of the building from one time to another. The building and interior walls are often painted when they are accommodating new functions or new inhabitants, or when they are considered obsolete and requiring renewal. These layers of paints assist our understanding of the physical and social processes that have shaped the interior space within the building.



Figure 4  
The cracks  
revealing the  
layers of paints

The layers of paints could be seen in the same perspective as the erratics or the boulders, which act as the references of the multiple scales of time, the multiple agents of change, both living and non-living, both scientific methods and assumptions, which reconstruct our inhabitation (Hutton, 2013). The layers of paints not only show the rendition of *deep time* where each layer indicates a different timescale, but also represent the *thick time*; the expanded present, where the past and present "coexist in a continually evolving relationship - a present in which the anticipation of the future is always at hand" (Till, 2009, p. 97).

### #3 The Story of the Tiles

If walls and their layers of paints reflect the *deep time* in vertical

layers, the tiles narrate how the layers of time could also expand horizontally. Unlike the walls that are filled with cracks and flakes, there are almost no gaps or crannies visible on the floors in most buildings in Semarang Old Town. The floors are packed with various types of tiles, cement and any other filling materials, old and new, sealed together side-by-side. There are clear marks of time that reveal the hierarchical timeline between the tiles. Yet, rather than only showing the modes of inhabitation in different passages of time, these marks also produce visible spatial territories [Figure 5] where the yellow tiles reflect the past and the white marble ones reflect the current occupancy.



Figure 5  
The horizontal  
layers of the  
tiles

In Figure 6, the mismatched puzzle of tiles shows how the patterns of the tiles suggest the traces of the transformation process in interior space, their acceptance and yet their resistance toward time. How the new tile is situated to match with the missing tiles indicates the paradoxical nature of time; how the physical fragments of the past and the contemporary ones overlap and coexist side-by-side in the horizontal layers of *deep time*. In this sense, *deep time* is read, not based on its position in vertical layers, but based on the 'forensic recognition' (Denizen, 2013) of the physical attributes and the physical marks that are visible on the surface.

The arrangement of the tiles in the Semarang Old Town shows that the geological relationship between objects from different periods is still continuously transforming (Denizen, 2013). It is the physical evidence that indicates how the present as well the future in the interior space is based on the accumulation and consequences of the past. "Architecture is both an evolutionary invention, one not made by man but one that perhaps made man's emergence possible" (Denizen, 2013, p. 130)

Figure 6  
The puzzle of  
tiles imprinting  
the traces of  
different time



### Layers of Interior Surface as the Traces of *Deep Time*

The ability of the interior to adapt to time and to transform it has resulted in the possibility to trace the interior inhabitations of the past that are imprinted within the layers of interior surfaces. As suggested by the perspective of the Anthropocene, it is not only architecture that has “agency” but also its context - whether it is time or space; “that institutions, like geology, are not given. They have agency--multiple and conflicting forms of agency. They create different territories, which can be mobilized and reconnected” (Palmesino et al., 2013, p. 22).

As illustrated through the three stories of interior surface in Semarang Old Town, the layers of the interior surface become the medium that projects what the building or interior has undergone throughout different time periods. The idea of *deep time* and how it reflects human inhabitation could be revealed by the layers of the facades, the layers of paint and the layers of tiles of the building and the interior; each reflects a particular form of inhabitation at a different time.

Layers of the facades of the building suggest the evidence of inhabitation of space. However, the attempts to restore the facade to a particular period of time in the past may neglect the continuous transformation of the space and the building at other times. Layers of paint, as revealed by the wall cracks and paint flakes, become the postscript of the processes of inhabitation; it suggests the occurrence of *deep time* within vertical layers. Meanwhile, the layers of tiles illustrate how layers of time could be extended horizontally.

The understanding of *deep time*, as reflected in the layers of interior surfaces, suggests the agency of human inhabitation and culture within the transformation of interior space and highlights the ability of interior space to manoeuvre *in time*. The illustration

from Semarang Old Town provides only a glimpse of the stories of inhabitation as narrated through the surfaces of old buildings and interiors. There is much more evidence imprinted in the layers of buildings and interior surfaces that may narrate the stories of inhabitation through time, which could not be fully covered in this paper. Nevertheless, this brief illustration raises a challenge for architecture and interior practice in dealing with the existing space of inhabitation, particularly on how design intervention should deal appropriately with the traces of the inhabitation that are imprinted on the architectural and interior surfaces. The idea of *deep time*, as well as the understanding of space from the lens of the Anthropocene, needs to be incorporated into the interior practice that not only appreciates the imprinted traces of the past but also creatively utilises such traces as the trigger for developing the vision for the future inhabitation of space.

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