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TRACING LONDON'S URBAN LIVING ROOM

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Abstract

Responding to the rapid development of indoor public interiors motored by commercial activities, this paper argues that an alternative form that is more inclusive is needed to foster healthier and more socially equitable interactions in the city. It frames *urban living room*, a micro-scale outdoor interior development that aims to inject domestic experiences into the existing urban environment, as the antithesis of the exclusive indoor public interiors. Utilising tracing as a mode of inquiry to look at two case studies of the urban living room in London, UK, this paper aims to reveal the spatial mechanism that makes this public interior provide the much needed intimate experiences that make the city habitable. The finding of this study suggests that the interior mechanisms used by urban living room provide scalar confrontation and heighten sensual experience that fosters intimate social interactions and inclusivity for all urban dwellers.

Keywords: urban living room, outdoor public interior, tracing, London

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Introduction

In many cities around the world, social interaction is more likely to happen in indoor public settings. Although often promoted with being inclusive, these settings are very selective and restricted in nature. Koolhaas (2002) referred to these indoor public settings as *junkspace*, including shopping centres, malls, galleries, and airports. Junkspace is a conditional space where the weather, the light, and even people's behaviour are being conditioned to meet a certain standard of comfort. To run this place is not cheap; it costs money to operate all of the infrastructures such as the escalator, lift, air-conditioning, fire alarm, and surveillance cameras, to name a few. People who run the place will need to get all of that money back from people who enjoy the comfort. The financial aspect of junkspace makes this indoor public setting typically not very public at all; it is subjected to commercial logic where it only serves those who can afford to pay, no matter how socially equitable they are being advertised.

In cities where weather is not incredibly kind and seems to become an obstacle in achieving physical comfort, some would probably prefer Junkspace to be the model of public settings development. In this scenario, outdoor public settings such as streets, plazas, and squares, with their ability to provide inclusive facilities for the citizens, would be ignored. The outdoor would be then strictly designated for facilitating movement, and its quality is reduced from social space to infrastructure. According to Gehl (2010), this trend would physically and socially produce an isolated, introverted and dismissive urban setting.

For the past decades, more and more cities, especially in the western world, have realised the importance of inclusive outdoor public settings to stimulate healthier social interactions. Healthier because without complex architectural boundaries, surveillance and weather control systems, the outdoor encourages more fluid, inclusive and diverse interaction, creating a more socially equitable public setting. Simultaneously, within the discipline of the interior, questions on how to contribute to making the outdoor space more liveable are continuously raised. As a result, the *urban interior* becomes the emerging theoretical framework with a clear message that in working with the urban environment, the *interior* concept is needed to be detached from its traditional association with indoor settings. Urban interiorist such as Attiwill et al. (2015), Hinkel (2011), and Giunta (2009) framed interior as the practice of inhabitation, where it produces liveable spaces as a response to the existing urban fabric, which includes the settings that out in the open. For Pimlott (2016), this urban interior practice produces what he called as *public interior*, space "which we consider ourselves to be free individuals, and where we see ourselves among others; those within which we are conscious of our place in society and in the world" (p.10). He saw the public interior as the site that nurtures both personal experiences and creates an environment for social engagement in the city. However, some of Pimlott's ideas of the outdoor public interior in his book, *The*

Public Interior as Idea and Project, suggests extensive scale development such as gardens or parks, which is very limited and inapplicable for many cities around the world where the urban fabric is already packed and dense with buildings.

This paper argues that grand scale outdoor public interior settings are not needed to nurture social interactions in the city. Instead, what is expected from this interior is to provide spatial comfort and intimacy for urban dwellers, hence scale becoming the least of the concerns. Using *urban living room* as the theoretical framework, this paper proposes that the microscale urban interior initiatives that can be squeezed amid the existing built environment can promote inclusivity and good social interactions. Furthermore, using tracing as a method in understanding two cases of the urban living room in London, UK, this paper also aims to reveal the spatial mechanisms used in producing these outdoor public interiors.

Urban living room

In their contribution to *Interior Tools Interior Tactics: Debates in Interiors Theory and Practice*, Farrelly and Mitchell (2011) introduced the idea of the *urban room*. They referred to it as the space that exists within the interior's intersection, the private realm, and the city, the public realm. In this concept, the term 'room' refers to any spatial devices containing human experience, making the urban room exist in various forms and scales across the city. For instance, Farrelly and Mitchell (2011) explained that urban rooms could be used to describe all sorts of accessible space, including a piazza, a square, or a restaurant that transforms the general urban experience into an experience similar to the inside of a large house. However, unlike the traditional houses, which guarantee privacy above all, these rooms have to be approachable and within the public domain. Eventually, just like any other domestic space, urban room places emphasise on the city's humanist aspect, suggesting that the city should be engaged within a personal level. Although Farrelly and Mitchell's exploration of urban room undoubtedly provides the critical argument of the significance of a room-like-environment within the city to make it more habitable, the descriptions itself is still quite broad, particularly in terms of accessibility where it raises questions like what is then the differences between a restaurant and a square. Furthermore, their urban room concept does not specify what kind of social interactions can be fostered in these rooms.

If Farrelly and Mitchell's urban room is a somewhat general theoretical concept with many follow up questions that need to be answered, Merwood-Salisbury and Coxhead's (2018) inquiry of a similar concept is more grounded and touches on both conceptual and practical aspects; they called it the *urban living room*. The addition of 'living' makes their interpretation of the idea closer to interior practice as the process of making habitable promoted by urban interiorists. For them, an urban living room is the production of social space that relies on site-specific appropriation and scalar confrontation to add domestic

touches to open space in the city. This idea of public interior is not new. A similar concept was introduced as a reaction to modernist city planning in the 1960s, for example, by Jane Jacobs (1992), who suggested injecting domesticity to make the city more personal, intimate and comfortable. Merwood-Salisbury and Coxhead (2018) believed that citizens' sociability performance would be improved by having urban living rooms as inclusive collective spaces.

Based on the interpretation of their writings, Merwood-Salisbury and Coxhead (2018) proposed two types of urban living room: strategical and tactical. An example of the strategic development of urban living rooms is the production of inward urban spaces designed to encourage human interaction, such as pocket parks and walled gardens with plenty of seating spaces and pronounced edges that provide security and a sense of belonging while still physically being connected to the city. This type of urban living room is usually produced through a proper design process by design firms, proper fundings from big capitals, and formal support from the authorities. Because of its production process, these public interiors are usually owned by the government or by a private firm, which is then lent to be used by the general public with particular albeit not too restricted rules. Some of these outdoor public interiors are part of Privately Owned Public Space (POPS).

The other type is the tactical urban living room, made through a bottom-up approach of hijacking the existing urban environment to create a habitable space that usually utilises left-over spaces or streets. Similar to a strategical urban living room, all aspects of this outdoor public interior have a human scale. However, quite contrary with the previous type, the tactical approach of urban living room relies on quick implementation of spatial devices, depends on a self-help toolkit and activates the urbanscapes with just the involvement of ordinary citizens where they rely on timing and opportunities to appropriate the existing space. The result is what Merwood-Salisbury and Coxhead (2018) called highly prescribed with specific uses and temporal public interior space. However, despite illustrating a clearer idea on how two different approaches of interior practice can participate in improving the experience in the city, Merwood-Salisbury and Coxhead's elaborations of the concepts are not yet equipped with a closer look at their spatial mechanisms that makes the two concepts work differently as well as the impact of those approaches on the social interactions fostered by these outdoor public interiors.

Tracing as a method

To understand how urban living rooms works, particularly the difference of spatial mechanism between strategical and tactical, two case studies in Central London are explored: Southbank Centre Book Market and The Fountains at Granary Square. The method used to inquire into these two sites is visual analysis through tracing. Tracing in design practice, especially in architecture and interior, is traditionally done in a transparent

paper where the process involves copying lines from the original drawing to make design iteration or alternative projections of the original. Although it is a quintessential architectural process, its theoretical and methodological progression is pale in comparison with other types of architectural drawings. According to Lucas (2017), tracing is under-theorised because its potential is misjudged, considered only as an act of reproducing. He argued that tracing is an act of discovery, an inquiry process, where the lines are produced through the complex selection process of editing, curating or ignoring unwanted lines in which resulted in "a score ... for further gestures, further inscriptions" (Lucas, 2017, p.4).

During its process, tracing questions and opens up possibilities. In architectural practice, these abilities are usually used to find suitable forms or organisations. However, in this study, tracing is utilised to understand the mechanism of the urban living room. For that purpose, the tracing process was not done on top of two-dimensional architectural representations such as plans, sections or axonometric. Instead, this study took what Lucas (2017) suggested as the road less travelled by tracing three-dimensional visuals. However, this inquiry went beyond Lucas's suggestion of tracing perspective drawings to learn about the geometric aspect of the space. Photographs are used as the original because they reflect situations rather than form, revealing the space's intimate and domestic qualities, which would then be distilled, extracted, and analysed.

The inquiry started with visiting the two sites in Summer 2021, where each urban living room was observed in real-time and photographs were taken. Four photographs for each urban living room were then selected that reveal different situations and angles. Each of these selected photographs was then traced using Adobe Illustrator that was chosen because of its ability to mimic the work of the manual tracing method through its digital layers. The result of the tracing process of the photographs and the reading of the drawings are as follows:

Southbank Centre Book Market

The first case study is located in Queen's Walk, a promenade of River Thames's southern bank in Central London. Situated in front of BFI Southbank's Riverfront Bar, underneath the Waterloo Bridge, this book market is one of the only outdoor second-hand book markets in Southern England (Harrow-Smith, 2021). The origins of the book market is a humble one. During the 80s, a couple of sellers started their business with a single box of books, targeted the theatre sellers as prospective customers (Harrow-Smith, 2021). However, when I went there in August 2021, there were at least ten stalls, and the book markets had already become an urban fixture of Queen's Walk. From the market's history, the growth of this urban living room is an organic one. It did not begin with a careful and calculated move, but rather the exploitation of presented opportunities by several eager ordinary citizens. For this reason, the Southbank Centre Book Market can be classified as a tactical urban living room.

Thresholds

By tracing the photographs, it is learned that the book market relies on both existing urban elements and temporary spatial devices to construct its interior threshold. A threshold is an essential component of an urban interior where it acts as the boundary between the interior (the site of comfort, intimacy and familiarity) and its context or between separate interior rooms within a more extensive interior system. Threshold organises the rules of the activities; it provides regulations on how to inhabit the space. According to Winton (2013), a threshold can be defined in various ways by location, function, and material. The tracing results reveal that the book market hijacked two existing urban elements to serve as two types of thresholds. The first element is the bollards used to mark the edges of the market and separate the circulation of ordinary pedestrians and prospective customers. The next element used was the tiles, utilised as guides in organising the stalls, differentiating the sellers from each other's and creating the gaps in between that allow pedestrians to browse the stalls comfortably. When the market closes, these two existing urban elements back to their original roles, serving their purposes to the pedestrian as a protective perimeter or a visual guide and a walking surface.
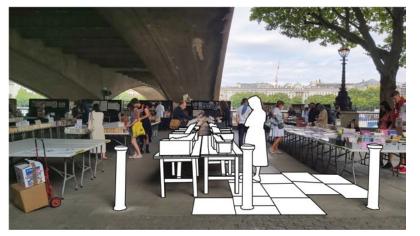
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The book market also uses temporary spatial devices or fittings to construct interior thresholds: the long tables and the black wooden boxes. I called them temporary because: (1) most of the tables can be folded and all of them are easy to be moved and stored away; (2) the tables always appear in the mornings when the market opened (at around 10/11 AM) and cleared towards the end of the day (7 PM); and (3) unlike the metal bollards and the stone tiles, the black wooden boxes are not made from sturdy materials and can be easily pull apart if needed. Along with the tiles, the tables were used to construct make-shift stalls that indicate different sellers. Each stall was organised in two columns of tables and variations numbers of the row, depending on how many items were displayed. Overall, the market was made by nine long columns, hosting at least ten stalls, with a considerable width of a gap between different stalls for circulation.

Figure 3. The tracing of Southbank Centre Book Market #2 shows black wooden boxes to construct interior thresholds

Looking from BFI Riverfront, on the back of the make-shift stalls, several black wooden boxes were lining up, following the line of the river. These boxes are storage. However, when their lids open and slight adjustment is made, these boxes can transform into another form of make-shift stalls. As a threshold, the two boxes at the other end indicate the market edges, where the urban room ends, and pedestrian infrastructure begins. Furthermore, unlike the tables, these boxes stay put after the market closes. During this time, they become the remainder on what would happen and where it would be happening.

Tools

The tracings also reveal that the operation of this book market depends on *tools*, which in this context refer to supporting devices used to carry out particular functions to ensure the fluency of the activities. The tools utilised in the market are varied in shape and function. Each of the tools have a human scale and operate as the extension of the sellers' bodies. Among those are the carts used to transport heavy materials; the cardboard boxes, to store and move the books; the plastic boxes, to help display the books on top of the table; and signages, to advertise the stalls and inform prices of the books. The market's tools are all movable and adaptable, just like its threshold markers. Because

of its scale and nature, when not in use, these tools can be kept away from the view, such as underneath the tables or inside of the black wooden boxes. Worth noting that these tools are far from the sophisticated and built-for-function devices most likely used in a more formal similar setting. Instead, the book market uses devices that can easily be found in our domestic spaces and adapt, or rather, hijack them to serve the purpose of the market.

Figure 4. The tracing of Southbank Centre Book Market #3 shows cardboard boxes and carts to activate the urban room

Objects

The centre of gravity of the market is the objects, the books. This paper defines objects as things with specific cultural values that can physically be seen and touched. Every stall in the book market displays its objects on top of the tables. However, the type of books offered and how they were organised are varied. The variations of book genres and book arrangements determine the activities surrounding the stalls. Furthermore, they determine the demographic of people who approaches the stalls (children books attract children and parents whereas comic books attract teenagers), and they also influence how people interact with the objects (do they need to flip through the boxes, or can they be seen from a distance).

Figure 5. The tracing of Southbank Centre Book Market #4 shows books as the object

The Fountains at Granary Square

The second case study is located on the banks of Regent's Canal, just in front of Central Saint Martin, University of the Arts,
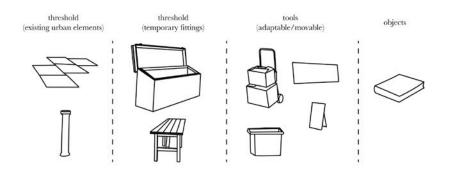
Figure 6. Diagram of Southbank Centre Book Market's urban living room interior components

threshold (existing urban elements) threshold (temporary fittings) tools (adaptable/movable) objects

London. The fountains consist of 1,080 jets, each controlled and lit individually ("The Granary Square," n.d.). When I went there in August 2021, the fountains mainly attracted young children to relieve summer heat during the day. It was pretty clear that people purposefully travel to this area from other parts of the city to let their children play with the fountains. Based on the on-site observation, most parents came prepared with their children dressed in swimming clothes and brought along towels and a change of clothes. Contrary to the Southbank Centre Book Market, the fountains were designed by Kent-based company, The Fountain Workshop, for King's Cross Central Limited Partnership as part of a more significant regeneration project in the area. This information places the fountains into the strategical urban living room category.

Figure 7. The map shows the location of The Fountain at Granary Square

Thresholds

Since this urban room was purposefully made, the distinction between the fountains area and the rest of the urban context is relatively straightforward, and it was easier to spot the threshold makers during the tracing process. Based on the tracing results, the area of the fountains is generally divided into dry and wet areas. The dry area consists of two distinct seating spaces. The first one is the double-sided settees that mark the entrance of the fountains and separate the pedestrian area and the fountains area. These seating spaces are made

from heavy materials that would be impossible for ordinary people to move them. The visitors sat facing the fountains and used these spaces as their preparation area before letting their children play with the water. They also used the seating space to store their belongings, such as placing shoes underneath the bench or hanging the towel on the posters.
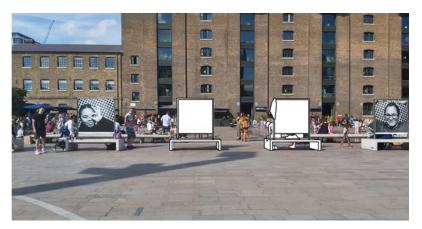
The other seating space consists of two long benches, also made from heavy materials, located at the other end of the fountains. Along with marking the edges of the fountains, these benches are much closer to the fountains; hence, people used them to watch over their children rather than using them for preparatory activities. In addition, the tiles underneath these benches are smaller than other areas as they are seemingly used as a marker that separates the wet and dry areas, placing them within a transitory territory.
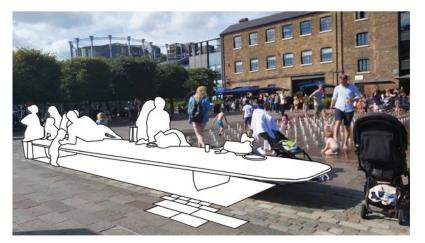
For the wet area, the threshold is marked by the drain, the excess of the water, and the tiles' wetness. To cross the wet area, the visitors did several preparation actions such as taking off one shoe or folding the hem of the trousers or taking the children's hands to guide them, making quite visible contrast with what happens in the dry area. However, one similarity bounded these thresholds together; they are all stationary. All of them were built with the purpose to stay for a long time, utilising sturdy material and complicated plumbing and lighting system.
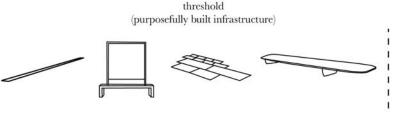
Tool

There is only one tool recognised through tracing in this urban living room: the jets. The fountains used 1,080 jets to push the water out and control the intensity of the water. The jets are individually controlled, meaning each jet creates distinct water pressures and has different timing. If combined, the jets produce dynamic water movement that affects how the children behave in dashing through them. Most visibly was how the demographic of children enjoying the fountain was divided according to the water pressure of the jets. Babies and younger children crowded around the soft pressure jets, while older children who like tall fountains were drawn into stronger pressure jets. Compared to the book market, the fountains did not have objects as a catalyst of the activities. Water cannot be classified as an object as it does not have cultural value. Like the thresholds, the tools' operations in this urban living room are also pre-determined with careful choreography that is rigid and inflexible.

threshold
(purposefully built infrastructure)

purposefully built tools

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Conclusion

The microscale urban living room has the same potential to nurture social interactions with its indoor or grander-scale counterpart. This outdoor public interior provides spatial comfort and much needed domestic experiences for the urban dwellers without giving them financial pressures. Using tracing to understand the intimate components of two types of urban living rooms, this paper elaborates the differences of approaches and spatial devices that split the urban living room into two types: tactical and strategical. As illustrated by the first case study of Southbank Centre Book Market, the tactical type is composed mainly of temporary and make-shift devices. The sellers hijack the existing urban space and elements using humble tools and objects. Quite the contrary, the strategical urban living room were produced through careful planning. All of the spatial components are made purposefully for the space. While most of the tactical urban living room components are mobile and operated manually, the other one consists of stationary spatial elements constructed using heavy materials and operated by complicated computerised plumbing and lighting systems. However, although it seems like the two types of urban living rooms are at each other end, eventually, both produce a porous outdoor public interior that invites people to browse, touch, sit, and play freely. Even though The Fountains at Granary Square is POPS, it has no visible selective devices that filter the visitors; they can sit anywhere with no reservation and dash freely through the fountains. These urban living rooms give their respective existing environments a scalar confrontation, an intimate experience with something that can be held, touched, and felt. They provide the city with domestic space that not only fosters social interactions but also promotes inclusivity.

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