

Cotton Lab Urban Lounge: A Manifesto of Interiority

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Abstract:

This article uses the case of a flagship store of a clothing manufacturer to examine the impact of digital technology on urban architecture and everyday lives. It is argued that today people explore environment in a hybrid manner of digitally augmented interaction and immersion, which has transformed the fundamentals of architectural design. The increasing significance of the identifiability of place has to be understood against the indexical space and the interior space. In this regard, the design of interiority is more than an issue of form, but an exploration into the new ontology and methodology of architecture.

Key Words: Interiority, Urbanism, Immersion, Place, Indexical space, Interior space

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The *Cotton Lab* is a clothing manufacturer in Changzhou City, Jiangsu Province, China and one of the earliest online merchants in Taobao.com, the world's biggest e-commerce website. In 2014, the manufacturer moved to an industrial park in north Changzhou City and started searching for an architect to renovate the existing factory building into a flagship store and showroom for the brand. Atelier Archmixing, an architectural practice from Shanghai, accepted the task in 2017. The renovation was completed in the beginning of 2018 and the stylish new store soon became one of the hottest shopping spots of the city. (Fig 1)

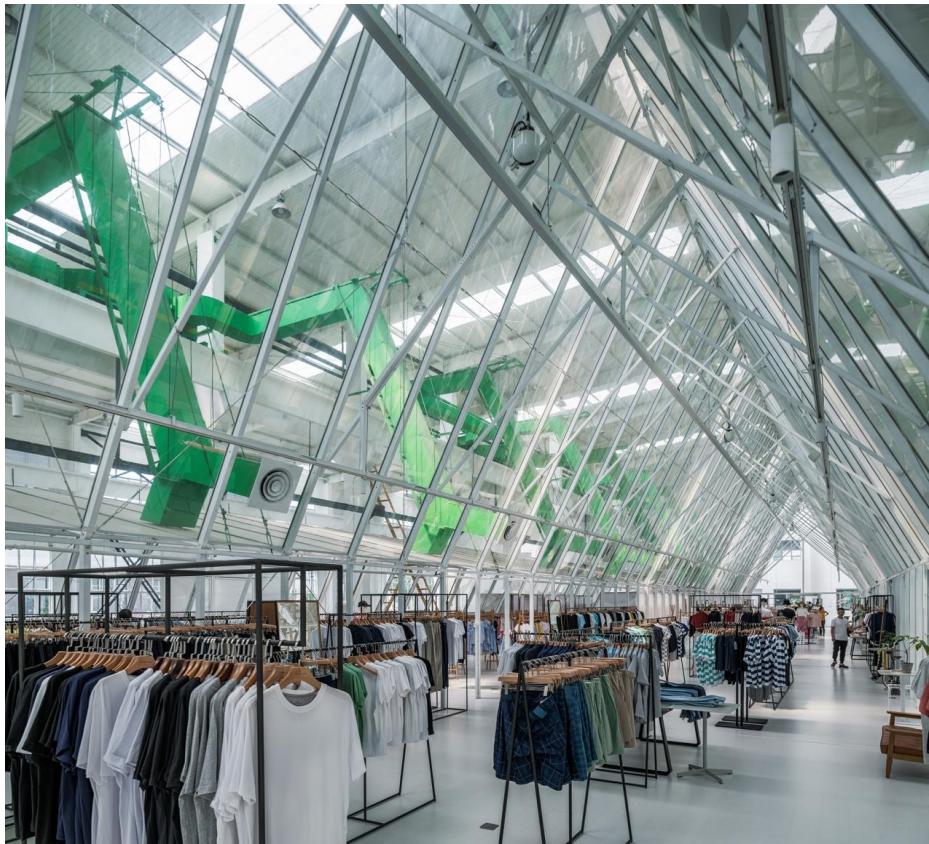


Figure 1: interior of the Garment Chamber, Cotton Lab (photographer: Qingshan Wu)

This is a typical story in the current trend for e-commerce to move back to offline. Such transition was partly due to the sea change in consumer behavior, but also due to the rising agent fee charged by third-party service providers (e.g. Taobao.com). The high conversion rate (ranging from 5% to 30%) rate has made the construction of a physical retail store a cheaper option than operating an online store. In the so-called clicks-and-mortar business model, the online store in Taobao.com functions as contemporary ‘shopping window’, today’s façade,

while the physical retail outlet is comprised of expressive interior spaces, comfortable and identifiable, providing the place for both experience and commerce. (Fig 2)

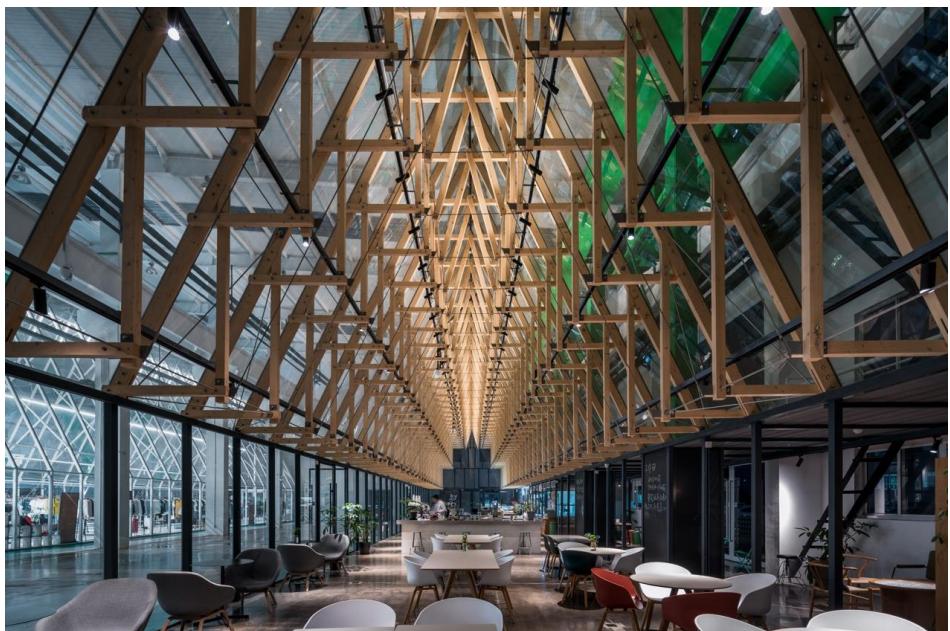


Figure 2: interior of the Dining Chamber, Cotton Lab (photographer: Qingshan Wu)

The clicks-and-mortar model epitomizes a novel type of spatial relationship, through which the interior space exposes itself distantly and its visibility no longer depends on building exterior that was assumed to enclose and represent the interior. The new warped spatial relationship has become a generic condition for contemporary architecture, but its impacts have not yet been fully envisaged. On one hand, the online appearance of a space, often fragmented and multi-media, has replaced the façade as contemporary public interface of the interior space. On the other hand, this entails a paradigm shift in the way people interact and participate in space. The long-standing dominance of perspectival image in the communication of architecture is giving way to a touch-and-view mode at fingers tip. The screens of personal mobile device underpin a landscape of opinions (often via publicly accessible comments) and also act as index to physical spaces. (Fig. 3)



Figure 3: interface of the Cotton Lab in a popular tried-and-true review app

Such transition has invalidated some fundamental presumptions in architecture. Today we explore environment in a hybrid manner of digitally augmented interaction and immersion, rather than through motion perception. We browse (often by keywords), view, compare, read and then search for the place well before arriving at a destination. The virtual place has replaced traditional public space as the locus where people acquire and exchange information. It has disrupted the continuum of built environment that ranges from the city (as exterior) to architectural space (as interior). Interiors are connected to virtual places that are virtual counterparts of the real ones and therefore represent them; or more accurately, the virtual place becomes precondition of the real one, and therefore the physical place is experienced as representation of the virtual place, but not vice versa. In this new spatial relationship, the physical place can be conceived as pure interior and its appearance from the outside becomes meaningless. The long-standing superstition in the discipline of architecture about the integrity and continuity between the interior and the exterior is dispelled. Today architecture need to be envisioned as pure interiority without the outside.

1. TRANSITION TOWARDS PURE INTERIORITY

Atelier Archmixing has provided a design solution for the Cotton Lab that to some extent resembles a miniature city. In the center is a light-steel framing chamber selling garments (henceforth *Garment Chamber*). To the east, there is a wood framing chamber for dining (henceforth *Dining Chamber*). Both chambers have entrance directly connecting to the long lobby nicknamed *Grand Lobby*. (Fig. 4) These entrances on the inner wall of the lobby become the façade for the places that lie behind. (Fig. 5)

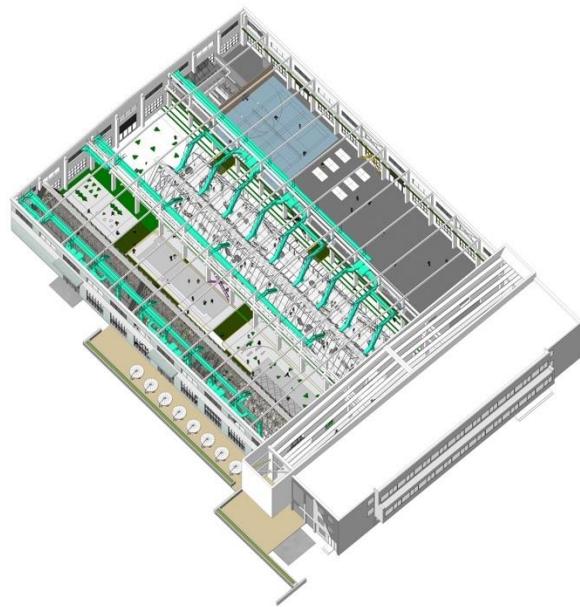


Figure 4: axonometric view of the Cotton Lab (copyright: Atelier Archmixing)



Figure 5: entrance to the Dining Chamber, viewed from the Grand Lobby (photographer: Qingshan Wu)

The interstitial space between the Garment Chamber and the Dining Chamber is rather like an irregular courtyard. It is experienced as exterior to the two functional chambers, but as interior in relation to the Grand Lobby, although the Grand Lobby itself is already located inside the building complex. (Fig. 6) In this project, the almost untouched building envelop is only a peripheral condition and has nothing to do with the intricate internal composition of space. Architecture becomes pure interior space that is controversially redistributed. Such kind of layered interior space is more like traditional Chinese residential space with sophisticated stepped levels of interiority, as for example in the Celestial Hall of Five Peaks in the Lingering Garden, Suzhou, in which the space under one giant roof is subdivided into a cluster of eight rooms to accommodate diverse everyday use scenarios. (Fig. 7)

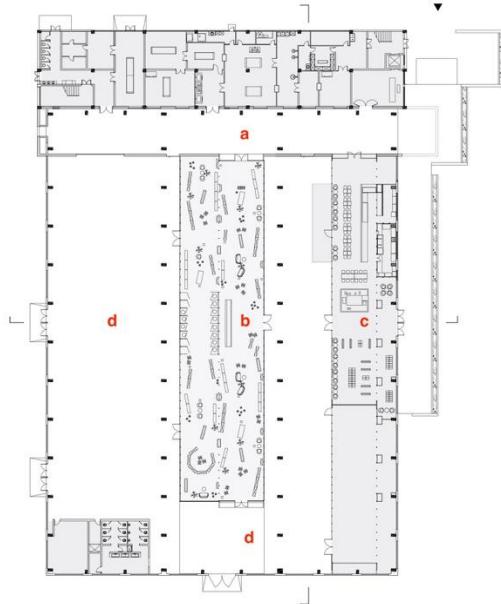


Figure 6: floor plan of the Cotton Lab (copyright: Atelier Archmixing)

a: Grand Lobby; b: Garment Chamber; c: Dining Chamber; d: Courtyard

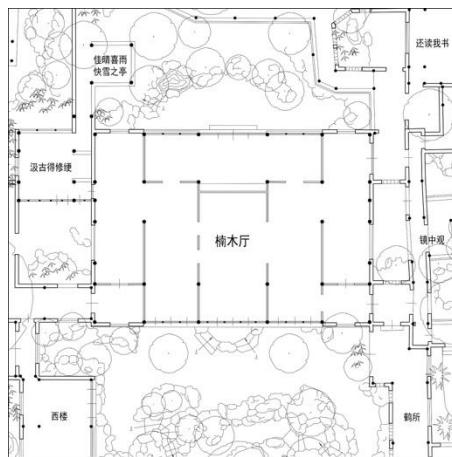


Figure 7: 1930s' floor plan of the Celestial Hall of Five Peaks, Lingering Garden, Suzhou. [1]

On the other hand, such kind of interior space is not detached and secluded but rather highly exposed in the cyberspace. In other words, the experience of the interior space itself becomes the object to be distantly displayed. As such, the space of interiority undergoes an extraordinary subversion like a cavity turned inside out to create a display. In the context of the fusion of the

digital and the physical, the Cotton Lab as an ‘urban lounge’ is indifferent to other buildings (or rather other ‘interior spaces’) located in the same scientific park. The publicity of the Cotton Lab exists only virtually online. It belongs to the whole city more than to the scientific park. This project cannot be simply understood as transplanting an interior into the existing exterior. Its exterior exists only in digital sense but not material sense. Its relationship with the city depends on distant representation via digital media. On the contrary, the actual site, i.e. the scientific park, is a kind of non-place. The place-making of the Cotton Lab Urban Lounge only takes place in the cyberspace and need not to respond to the physical context of the scientific park. In the built project, Archmixing added a suspended entrance that gave a hint to the internal Grand Lobby, which gave the only indication of the interior architecture on the building envelope. (Fig. 8)



Figure 8: exterior view of the suspended entrance to the Grand Lobby (photographer: Shengliang Su)

Such phenomena exist not only in the scientific parks located at the outskirt of the city, but have become a common issue in contemporary cities. This kind of pure interior architecture is irrelevant to its location and no longer gives representation and articulation of the ‘genius loci’ of a place. Their identities only derive from the identifiability of the interiority. Like a chip plugged onto the motherboard of the scientific park, it need not to be able to be identified locally, nor need an attractive appearance from the outside. (Fig. 9) It is a pure cavity. From this viewpoint, the suspended main entrance seems to internalize the outside, more than exposing the interior to the outside.



Figure 9: satellite map showing the Cotton Lab and the scientific park.

Such kind of interior architecture established a new spatial relationship with contemporary city. An indexical spatial relationship directs the explorer to find the detached interior spaces, which are irrelevant to each other but share a common virtual ‘exterior’. This kind of indexical relationship problematizes traditional architecture’s presumption of the correspondence between the interior and the exterior. However, the question remains: Without the restrictions of the exterior, how could the pure interior space lead to a new kind of architecture? Is it a genuinely new architecture? If so, what are the real design issues it has raised and promised to solve.

2. THE INDEXICAL SPACE VERSUS INTERIOR SPACE

The modernist ideas of ‘plan libre’ [2] and ‘free-flowing space’ had eliminated the difference between the interior and the exterior, while the concept of ‘space-time continuum’ [3] had established architectural space as the object of individual experienter’s schema of motion perception. The modernists believed that perception enabled people to experience space vis-à-vis without intermediary agencies. However, in the Cotton Lab project, the validity of the experiential model of space-time continuum in contemporary spatial-cultural context becomes questionable. To what extent is spatial experience still a direct response to the environment? Is it possible to explain the experience of interior space solely in terms of kinesthetics? Is our in-situ experience of the interior space part of a larger and more complicated experiential contract?

In contemporary urbanism, we often experience two kinds of space simultaneously. The first is **indexical space**. It is hierarchical and the relationship between its strata is mapping. For the elements on the same stratum, their location-based relationships are substituted by content-based relationships. For example, the Cotton Lab is more closely related to other shopping places in the city rather than its neighboring buildings. The experienter (both as customer and as user of the space) finds and accesses the physical space through indexical space. In this

process of exploration, the experiencers or more accurately the browsers of spatial contents are performing high level of interaction. They are active explorers rather than passive perceivers. On the other hand, the **interior space** provides a comfortable and identifiable place for people (more than perceiver but a subject with feelings and meanings).

It is noteworthy that these two types of space are complimentary to each other. The indexical space is intellectual, while the interior space is visceral. The indexical space is interactive, while the interior space is immersive. We access the immersive worlds through interactive systems. We frequently shift between the interactive and the immersive experiential modes, and occasionally the two modes are enacted at the same time. This has replaced the ‘spatial promenade’ as the basic schema of contemporary spatial experience and it epitomizes the overall transition towards a digitalized everyday space especially though the Internet of Things (IOT). Our everyday activities are not only influenced by various kinds of mobile phone apps, but also traced, recorded and analyzed. In most occasions, what we experience are spaces augmented by digital agencies. In this context, the perceptual experience in traditional sense will be replaced by semantics of situations.

3. INTERIORITY AS THE SEMANTICS OF SITUATION

Modernist architecture had invented a fictional spatial utopia. The separation between the structural system and the space-envelop system allows the interior and exterior surfaces of a building to become the definer of free-flowing space. Such form of free space targets at spatial experience that inspires human spirit, which is unfolded through embodied promenade in the space. The spatial promenade which Le Corbusier had envisioned may still persist in the space of interiority. However, the key to interiority is no longer the trajectory of promenade nor the perceptual sequence unfolding along the trajectory, but has shifted from syntaxics to semantics.

The interior space, unleashed from the restrictions of the exterior, need to be categorized into various types of situations in order to be more efficiently identified and more easily represented in the cyberspace. Situation rather than geometrical form has become the new unit of space. It operates a semantics of embodied experience that cannot be fully captured by images, but calls for immersion from within. The interior space is not unlike the ways in which traditional Chinese gardens configure the visitors’ spatial experience. The garden was comprised of multiple experiential units, such as the ‘Secluded Pavilion of Parasol Tree and Bamboo’ or the ‘Pavilion of Lotus Wind from Four Sides’. What the visitors experience are situations created by juxtaposing the physical environment and the agency of texts. Situation is both an actual ambience for body to immerse, and an augmented place with textual implications. (Fig. 10)



Figure 10: Secluded Pavilion of Parasol Tree and Bamboo, Humble Administrator's Garden, Suzhou
(photographer: Andong Lu)

The space of interiority and the space of modern architecture is radically different. The latter eliminates the hierarchical differences between and the specific characteristics of each space within the interior, in order to create a smooth space for navigation. On the contrary, the space of interiority endeavors to create differences. For example, in the design of the Cotton Lab, the two primary chambers can be easily distinguished despite their similarities in form and volume. Situation needs to be unique and distinctive. It addresses the embodied mind and identifiability is its core value. (Fig. 11)

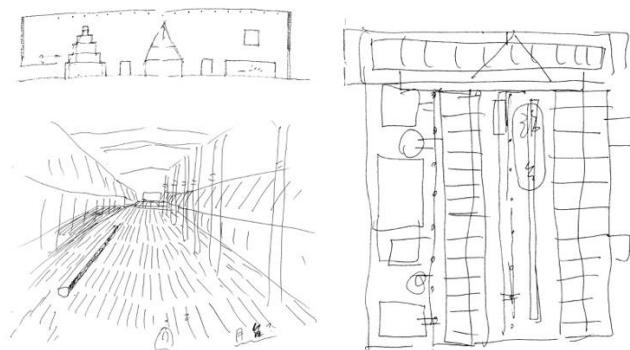


Figure 11: conceptual sketch of the Cotton Lab (image: Archmixing)

4. FORMS OF INTERIORITY: FROM SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION TO SPATIAL STRATIFICATION

The space of interiority is not something completely new. To some extent, it is a return to pre-modern space. Many excellent historical cases have demonstrated the spell of interiority. In his own house, British new classicism architect Sir John Soane demonstrated the intricate internal re-organization of space within a given building fabric as well as the artful treatment to create visual and environmental characteristics (especially natural lighting) for each space. [4] (Fig. 12) And in the Villa Müller, modern architect Adolf Loos used the more systematic method of ‘raumplan’ to achieve similar goal. In contrast to the almost solid volume seen from the outside, Loos deliberately distributed spaces of different forms and heights in the interior of the building, which not only set up a vertical journey from the public to the private, but also created subtle visual connections between the interior spaces. [5] (Fig. 13) In these cases, the complex interior composition is in radical contrast with the austere exterior form of building. The composition of interior spaces created theatrical effects that responded to the differentiated everyday life and everyday spatial experience.

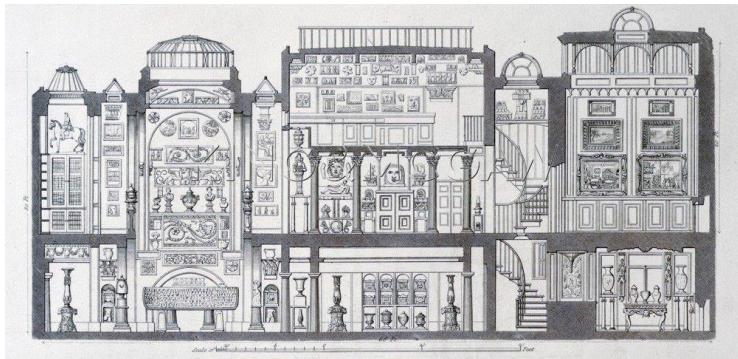


Figure 12: section, Sir John Soane’s Museum, London (image: Sir John Soane’s Museum)

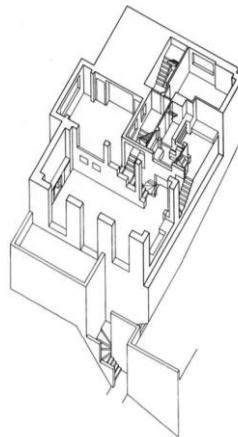


Figure 13: axonometric drawing of the Villa Müller (image: Yehuda Safran, curated, exhibition: ‘Adolf Loos: Our Contemporary’, GSAPP Columbia University, 11 Nov - 10 Dec 2013.)

While in the Cotton Lab project, we can detect another more contemporary prototype of interiority. In both Sir John Soane’s Museum and the Villa Muller, the interior space is a singular unity to be subdivided. Although such distribution did not happen on one floor level, its elements are non-hierarchical and are interconnected to create a spatial whole. The interstitial space between the interior rooms and exterior envelope is made invisible. While in the Cotton Lab, the interstitial space has been greatly enlarged to become a ‘courtyard’. The exposed giant air duct reminds us that this part of space is not interior space in traditional sense, but rather an interstitial space of service. (Fig. 14) Now, the Cotton Lab is no longer an interior in relation to an exterior, but have multiple stepped levels of interiority.

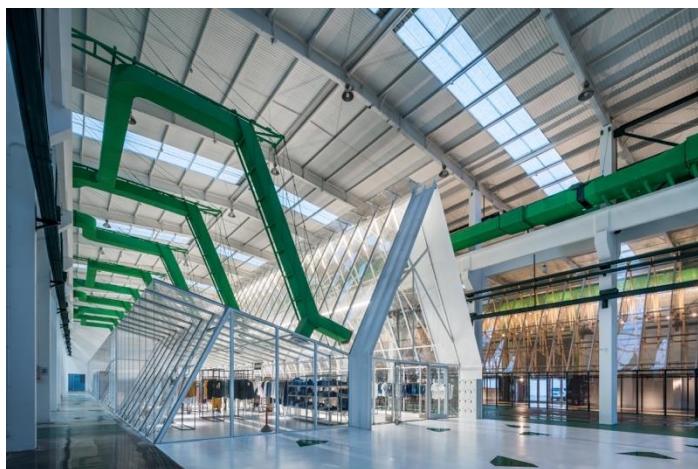


Figure 14: view inside the ‘courtyard’, Cotton Lab (photographer: Qingshan Wu)

The spatial layering of interiority provides new opportunities for design. The connections between its interior spaces are not limited to the organization of accessibility (e.g. ascending, descending, entering or leaving). It is now possible to provide spatial design for the factors of environment, privacy, or community, etc. For example, in the Cotton Lab project, the functional chambers are parts that need air-conditioning, while the interstitial ‘courtyard’ need no air condition and in turn serves as the environmental buffer zone for the two primary chambers. From spatial distribution to spatial stratification, the way to create differences within interior space has changed. If the former is characterised by the method of ‘composition’ (e.g. the Loosian Raumplan), the latter is concerned with ‘topology’: it supports multiple elements to coexist within space independently. (Fig. 15)



Figure 15: view inside the ‘courtyard’, Cotton Lab (photographer: Qingshan Wu)

5. INTERIORITY: A RETURN TO A HUMANISTIC FUTURE

Although the Cotton Lab looks like an extraordinary case of architecture, it is actually more closely related to today’s everyday urban lives. By abandoning the architectural presumption of interior-exterior continuity and by experimenting with the stratification of interiority, this project is more like a built manifesto of interiority. From a historical point of view, modernism architecture had eliminated interiority. By doing so, it separated spatial experience from cultural significances. The activities within space and the situations in which the activities took place were no longer represented by space, and space was transformed into a three-dimensional extension of a perceiver, so as to eliminate potential differences between interior spaces, and at the same time alienate architecture itself as the direct objective of spatial production. In this regard, interior space is a return to and a revive of humanism.

Today, as new experiential modes underpinned by digital technologies increasingly become the priori of urban architecture and everyday lives, the space of interiority (both in terms of architecture and urbanism) becomes an inevitable move. It is crucial for contemporary architecture to avoid the confusion of spatial perception and to envisage the interactive and immersive everyday experience augmented by technological agencies, and further to explore and play with this new spatial experience and its poetics. The design of interiority is more than an issue of form, but an exploration into the new ontology and methodology of architecture. The cotton Lab project had initiated a new pathway: by differentiating and stratifying the interior space, to better incorporate comfort, pleasure and the pursue of meaning.

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