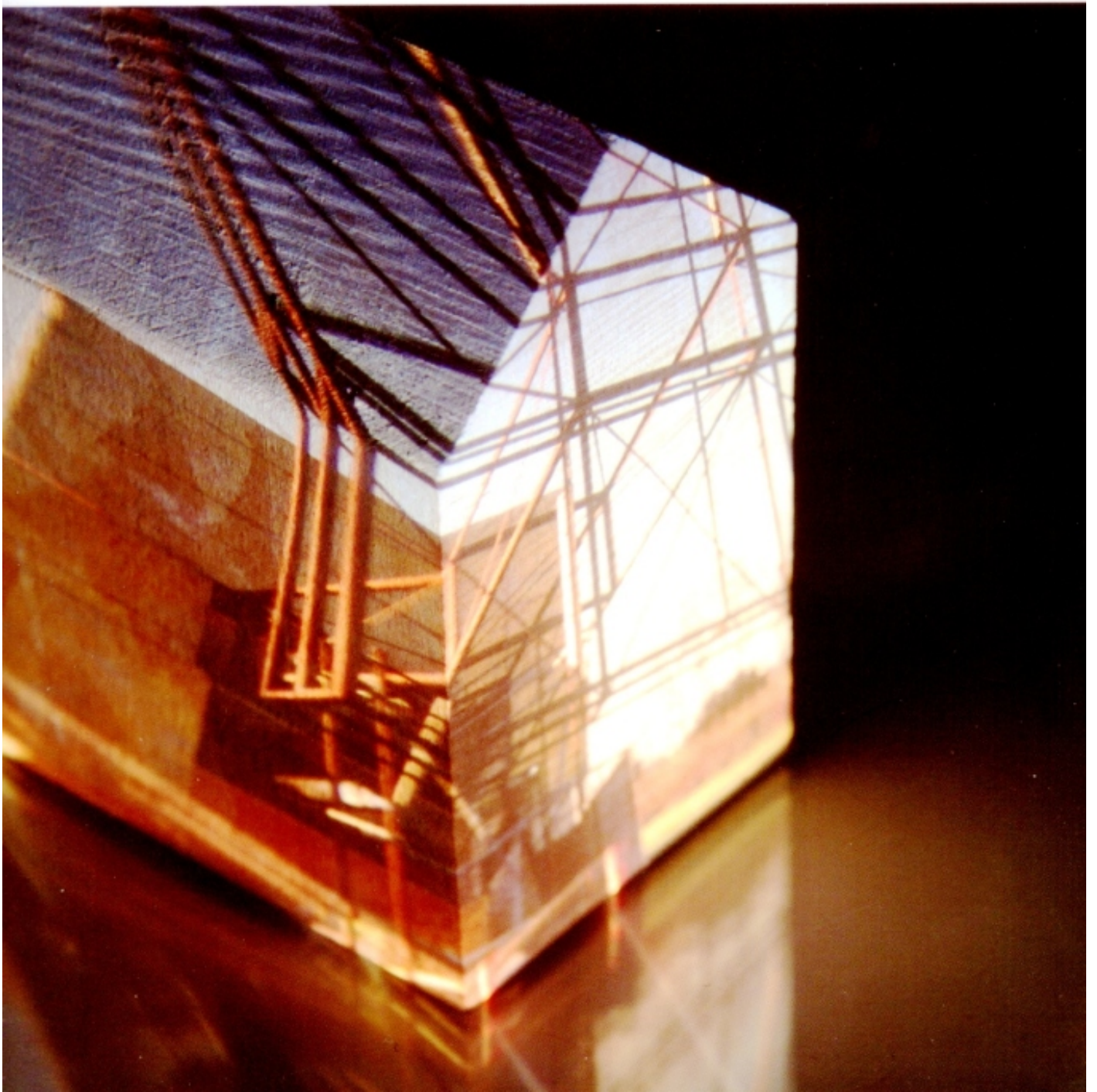


# Communicating (by) Design



Hogeschool voor Wetenschap & Kunst  
School of Architecture Sint-Lucas  
&  
Chalmers University of Technology

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HOGESCHOOL VOOR WETENSCHAP & KUNST

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## Naming Design Practices

*Producing a Body of Knowledge from the Creative Dimension of Interior Design*

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**Abstract.** The Intypes (Interior Archetypes) Project, initiated in 1997 at Cornell University, creates a typology of contemporary interior design practices derived from reiterative historical designs that span time and style and cross cultural boundaries. The project identifies design traits that have not been named, providing designers with an interior-specific, historical, and contemporary design vocabulary. The project's methodological and theoretical approaches create new knowledge from the creative dimension of design rather than from behavioral studies. In concert with its founding partner, the International Interior Design Association, the research will be disseminated through an open searchable web database to be launched in June 2009 as a free site.

**Keywords.** design research; interior design; archetypes; web dissemination.

## Paper

The paper is organized into three sections: the first addresses how the Intypes (Interior Archetypes) Research and Teaching Project, initiated in 1997 at Cornell University, is an example of practice-led research; the second section focuses on the creation of a vocabulary and the processes of communication involved in naming design practices that have not been named, and the role of the vocabulary in communicating design driven research; and the third describes how the research will be disseminated.

The Intypes Project:

- creates a typology of contemporary interior design practices that are derived from reiterative historical designs that span time and style and cross cultural boundaries;
- produces a new knowledge base for the creative dimension of design by examining practice-based evidence of built work;
- generates a design-specific vocabulary for interior designers and others in order to provide a body of knowledge for teaching, practice and criticism.

An Intype (interior archetype) represents an ideal example of a historical and culturally determined practice of design from which similar models are derived, emulated or reiterated.<sup>1</sup>

Until now, the only recognized body of knowledge for the interior design discipline has been behavioral research studies conducted by environmental psychologists and others. Unlike architecture, interior design lacks its own typology. A gap exists between historical and contemporary design in the academy and in practice. In the academy the gap is exacerbated by a chronological approach to history. Linearity limits students' abilities to

<sup>1</sup> Jan Jennings, "A Case for a Typology of Design: The Interior Archetypes Project", *Journal of Interior Design* 32, no. 3 (May 2007), 48-65.

understand connections between creative design processes used in studio and practice and those used to study the past.

A typology is simply another way to understand the history of interior spaces and their contents. The typological approach accommodates high style, vernacular and multi-cultural design. In general, classification aids in describing and criticizing built work. The Intypes typology provides a formal means to classify contemporary design in the context of its usage through time, and in this way, designers come to understand their work as part of a historical reiterative process.

Identifying a cluster of design traits as a typology increases students' understanding of connections and relationships in design. In this way, typology encourages analysis—a means to reveal the complexity of combinations or clusters. In some cases, a space can only be characterized by a cluster of archetypes acting in concert with one another (a condition social scientists would call "loosely organized settings"). This phenomenon speaks to the design of increasingly more complex and complicated spaces. In these instances, students gain a critical understanding of the relationships among typologies with which designers are using to create holistic spaces.

The project's theoretical framework, derived from George Kubler's *The Shape of Time*<sup>2</sup>, suggests that contemporary design has historical scaffolding; design traits can be identified from design practice; and a sequence of design reiterations by designers can be traced through time. Kubler's model may lead to an understanding of the early and late stages of design effort on a problem. Researchers begin their studies by examining approximately sixty years of primary, raw data about published built work, including about 1,000 issues of professional trade magazines, such as *Interior Design* and *Architectural Record*.

The vocabulary of Intypes addresses several aspects of communication. Students develop skills in using words effectively to impart ideas and knowledge in interdisciplinary and complex work environments. They are better able to make references about the relationships between historic and contemporary design. The project's approach allows studio critics to teach contemporary design, linking it with historical scaffolding. The vocabulary also provides designers with an alternative language in situations where programmatic or stylistic references would be inappropriate.

Naming an archetypal practice is one of the most significant responsibilities of the research group. A thumbnail-sized icon, a representative and visual symbol of an Intype, is paired with an Intype word as a mnemonic device (a visual and auditory memory aid). Mnemonics rely on associations between easy-to-remember constructs that can be related back to the data that is to be remembered. This is based on the principle that the human mind much more easily remembers spatial, personal, surprising, sexual or humorous or otherwise meaningful information than arbitrary sequences. In early phases of

2 See Kubler, George. *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962.

the project, the icons were two-dimensional, but three-dimensional imagery makes them vibrant. A carefully chosen color palette also helps to unite the various Intypes visually.

Although the research group may come to an agreement that an effective argument has been made for a typological name, the naming process extends until a term becomes unforgettable, an irrevocable link between word and image in one's mind. Like a term in a dictionary, when an Intype word is used by students or professionals without explanation or translation or gloss, it is considered an accepted part of design language.

In early stages of the project, naming was largely experimental, but it has been normalized for consistency. The Intypes Research Group has established a naming convention, the intent of which is to allow the name to be deduced from its characteristics and research knowledge. All names are concise and if at all possible, forceful and vivid, such as Pulsate.

Expressive language evokes feelings of the user or attitudes about the subject. Naked effectively describes not only the overall aesthetic of some boutique hotels, but also how one feels in a bathroom with glass walls or no walls at all. Lonely Couple describes the generations' old practice of isolating a pair of chairs in proximity of a conversational grouping. Slicker expresses an interior dominated by reflective, glossy or slick surfaces.

The research group has established several sub-categories of expressive naming, such as alliteration, the repeated occurrence of the same consonant sound at the beginning of two words in the same name. Pendant Play describes the intentional articulation of the ceiling plane with a multitude of lighting fixtures to create a spatial event. This Intype began as Animated Field; a few years later, it was changed to Animated Plane. Although the icon made the practice self-evident, the original names were too abstract to remember until it became Pendent Play. The practice of appropriating and mixing cultural artifacts and furnishings, aesthetic styles, and/or time periods without regard for original meanings was originally named Pluralism, a term no one could remember. The alliterated Mix Match manages to be more descriptive and easily recalled.

Seen Scene represents a difficult practice to name and represent. Seen Scene describes a double view effect in which a transparent building envelope or wall mediates between inside and outside to showcase the interior and its users or project them onto a scene depending on the viewers standing point, if on the outside or the inside. Alliteration helps, but it is the spelling of the two words with different meanings that makes the best case for this practice.

Informational language communicates the knowledge base descriptively and to the point. Descriptions are apropos for many of the color-based practices, such as Red Room, White Box, White Out, and Black Out. White Box and White Out are similar practices, but the names and icons provide cues about their differences. White Box describes an undecorated space with white walls

and a white ceiling, but with a neutral floor. White Out describes a space in which all planar surfaces (wall, ceiling, floor), furnishings and furniture are a bleached, bright white. The alliterative term, Showcase Stair, may not need an accompanying icon, because the name is so descriptive and identifiable; a Showcase Stair is a popular figure in film and theatre. Students almost never fail to recall Light Seam, because all the information is in the name, and the icon illustrates the location of a seam. Down the Line and Marching Order express the rhythm of measured regularity.

Initially popular culture terms tempted the research group, and it adopted a couple of these. For example, the display aesthetic in which the size of an object is over-scaled to dramatize the spatial experience was originally named SuperSizeMe, a promotional term for McDonalds in which a food order, such as French fries, was doubled in size. SuperSizeMe dated quickly, and when the practice was identified in several practice types, including art museum, boutique hotel, restaurant, and resort and spa categories, the trait was renamed Exaggerate. Another case is the practice of cladding multiple wall planes in floor to ceiling mirrors to produce multiple reflections. MirrorMirror (from Snow White, “mirror mirror on the wall, who is the prettiest one of all”) was one recommendation, but the Korean graduate student who identified the practice in apartment design was puzzled by this suggestion. MirrorMirror was dropped, because it was not a cross-cultural concept. In general, cute names, those straining for effect, have fared poorly. Home Away from Home, the spatial composition of a boutique hotel lobby that simulates a domestic ambience, was another term that did not resonate with students despite its sentiment.

Using words from different cultures is a new concept for the naming of Intypes, and for an American audience, these words and their spellings have to be memorized. The foreign names we have adopted were not named by the research group; rather they are established words in their native culture. The German *Wunderkammer* describes an historic exhibition aesthetic in which entire walls or ceilings were covered by a multitude of artifacts arranged by taxonomy. The research group broadened this definition by adding a contemporary interpretation to include assemblages that cover entire interior planes of related or disparate objects. A Korean graduate student added a Korean term after she researched Korean professional and vernacular practices. *Numaru* is a traditional Korean wood-floored room to entertain guests and a space for the occupants’ relaxation and contemplation. *Numaru* is often distinguished from a larger living room by a plinth, a partial enclosure (such as shades), and low-to-the-floor furniture.

Directive language, used for the purpose of causing or preventing overt actions, is not relevant to the intentions of the project, but the materials category of Intypes made good use of nouns that are also directive verbs—Ruin, Rivit, Perforate, Corrugate.

An Intype, like culture, is both conservative and dynamic. It is constantly present, but susceptible to change. Therefore, Intypes also bring into sharper focus the critical distinctions that reflect the time and place of their making. Intypes naming can be understood as products of time (now), place (Cornell) and society (American). The processes of naming, visual representation and definition are about reduction. Getting to the essence of a type's name means discarding much that is peripheral to it. Naming also represents a translation of design practices into a formalized language that stems from research, but with the intent to be accessible to a diversified group of users. An examination of Intypes reveals what is in a name, investigates cultural insights, and explores linguistic characteristics of a name.

Archetypal practices offer a new way to invest in culturally sustained design, because they directly address longevity. Archetypes represent embedded and sustained design practices. An archetype's longevity may directly represent the level of its acceptance or desirability; it may represent continuity. For example, an archetypal practice with a history that does not pre-date 1980 may not be as intractable as one that has been in the culture for a hundred years or more.

Intypes are already in limited use at Cornell by students and faculty, and by professionals in the Project's Advocate Network. Practitioners report that when they use Intype names in their firms, they hear the words repeated in similar or new contexts. The Research Group has also begun listening to how students, faculty and practitioners use the terms. Initially, as students learn the vocabulary, they use the names descriptively. In some cases, however, we hear the vocabulary gain power as it becomes a design language. For example, the Intype White Box, found in all practice types, gains new meaning when someone says "it's so white box", suggesting that the practice is over-used or predictable. If performance data confirms that White Box works against environmental sustainability, then its identification and use may also lead to efforts to discard it as a design practice.

The Intypes project is the first of its kind to assemble contemporary and historical design traits in a database using primary source imagery. Research will be disseminated through a free, searchable web database—intypes.cornell.edu—that will launch in June 2009. The web site design facilitates dissemination at two levels, the first a superficial one (descriptive, informational), the second, in-depth research evidence.

The time is right to teach design history in ways that make it more accessible to students while maintaining the depth and range of traditional pedagogy. There are advantages to teaching with a digital resource. The prevalent use of the computer in design education has changed the nature of studying and the ways in which students acquire information and conduct research. Increasingly students avoid the library and the resource center in favor of the computer.

The Project's web site will also open the subject of interior design, its practices and practitioners to a wide ranging group of users.