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# Life

**FROM THE INSIDE**

VOLUME 1 | Perspectives on  
Social Sustainability  
& Interior Architecture



EDITED BY DIANNE SMITH, MARINA LOMMERSE & PRIYA METCALFE  
FOREWORD BY TIM COSTELLO

*The field of Interior Architecture is defined by the way we act, and the opportunities for a shift in, and challenge to, perception.*

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CHAPTER



An introduction to social  
sustainability and interior  
architecture

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Environments people inhabit and experience have the power to enhance the wellbeing of individuals and their communities. In this unique collection of writing, *Life from the Inside: Perspectives on Social Sustainability and Interior Architecture* shares new ways of thinking about interior architecture by reconsidering theories, processes and outcomes that relate to how people live now and in the future. The issues raised by the authors are relevant for individuals, government and non-government organisations, professionals, students and communities.

While writing we considered the term ‘social sustainability’ – a concept that captures how sustainable practices apply to the way people live. However when applying social sustainability principles to interior architecture, we found the question that needed to be asked was: does social sustainability need to be redefined and developed to suit this discipline?

It became clear that there are three key areas within social sustainability where the discipline can meaningfully contribute: Community Engagement, Social Justice and Cultural Heritage. Each area is critical to understanding the relationship between social sustainability and interior architecture in the twenty-first century.

Social sustainability captures the human dimension of the sustainability discourse, and to define it in terms of interior architecture it was necessary to think about the terms ‘sustainable development’ and ‘sustainable communities’ as well.

Sustainable development is: ‘... development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’<sup>1</sup> whereas sustainable communities are characterised by a strong connection to place, building capacity and resilience to external forces; these stronger connections protect the community and create alliances beyond that community.<sup>2</sup> The former is an eco-centric approach, emphasising the effective use of resources, and the latter is an anthropocentric approach, focusing on human relationships, needs and quality of life.<sup>3</sup>

It is the emphasis on people and communities that resonates with interior architecture. As a result, an anthropocentric focus is adopted in this book or, as Helen Jarvis puts it, the connection between people’s ‘livelihood and environments.’<sup>4</sup>

We believe that social sustainability is the ability of a society or an individual’s lifestyle to continue in a way that suits their needs and those of subsequent generations. The values and spiritual aspirations of the people should be complemented in their interior environment, and the processes and activities involved respect their history, current needs and future potential beliefs and rituals. Access to such environments should not be at the expense of others.

Social sustainability recognises that the environment and its design facilitate relationships and experiences fundamental to who we are as people and as a society; and that the basic human rights to dignity, security and shelter are met now and into the future.

## DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Intersections between the interior architecture discipline and the intrinsic connectivity between people and their environment create an awareness of social and cultural contexts. Geographical location and cultural practices form a number of cultural and social discourses that assist to define that society. Therefore, societies that are both socially and environmentally sustainable cannot be identified without recognising the cultural and social discourses within which they currently exist. Likewise, built environments are constructs formed through geographical and cultural practices.

As the disparate needs between societies are linked directly to geographical and social constructs, how the discipline of interior architecture may provide new insights into these needs is addressed in the following chapters.

Social, economic and environmental requirements need to be met, which include the physiological needs as well as the psychological wellbeing of a population. In order to understand the interconnection of these multiple relations we can refer to



Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, which places physiological needs (food, water, sanitation and sleep) as the most basic. If we examine how many societies do not have these needs met within the global context, then it is these people who could be described as the most vulnerable and, therefore, most deserving of our attention.

The 1996 World Food Security and the World Food Summit Plan of Action pledged their political will and their common and national commitment to achieving food security for all, and to an ongoing effort to eradicate hunger in all countries. Their immediate view was to reduce the number of undernourished to half by no later than 2015. At present 925 million people in developing and transitional countries continue to be hungry.<sup>5</sup> The most basic needs within these developing countries are not being met, therefore, '... it is important to realize that if sustainability is concerned with the balancing of social, economic and environmental needs, then this balancing of social, economic and environmental issues will obviously vary from place to place and between one person and another.'<sup>6</sup>

It is from this ontological viewpoint — of being within the world and of it — that frames human experience — that we begin to understand the concept of a 'sustainable society'. By identifying the issues of a society, the relation to place, and contextual and cultural practices that it sustains, we can then start to define what is sustainable for that particular society, and in association the relative needs of its members. Each of these members of the society is intrinsically linked to the 'cultural capital' within their community, which includes intangible social values and resources linked to a particular geographical and social context. These produce an implicit way of understanding the world as a 'habitus', the 'embodied feelings and thoughts connected to commonsense understandings of the world ... and arising from particular social positions, including those of class, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.'<sup>7</sup>

Many vulnerable societies are rural, and therefore at the forefront of increasing climatic change and economic uncertainty, with local practices and commodities subject to global markets. Their cultural practices are interconnected to the

access that they have to available natural and social resources. Through engagement of the community, the inherent social capital can be harnessed and developed in collaboration to empower these communities against external forces. As a result, these communities and/or individuals could have the ability to meet their most basic human needs by becoming self-sufficient. As defined by Jarvis: 'Social sustainability ... is mainly concerned with the relationships between individual actions and created environment, or the interconnections between individual life chances and institutional structures.'<sup>8</sup>

It follows that 'all forms of sustainability are ultimately local sustainability.'<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the politics of geography and the associated social constructs are inherent in our understanding of what 'local' may be.

By defining the discipline of interior architecture in relation to the interface between person and environment, the notion of the community as an entity is addressed as a number of complex and interconnected relationships. Our communities — or the connectivity between local spaces and the general social, economic, political and cultural forces — act to form a complex web of relations that may transcend locality itself but still exist within social spaces; 'Importantly, it includes relations which stretch beyond the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside.'<sup>10</sup>

Understanding and including these actual and potential forces will create opportunities for improvement in the qualities of environments and people's interaction with those environments. Interior architecture, with its discipline knowledge, should provide a reflective and responsive practice that addresses both the broader context and the needs of communities. Interior architecture as a facilitator of fundamental needs should be championed by practitioners, educators and academics. This discipline has the potential to make real changes in the lives of the people with whom it engages. As Dillard et al. state: 'The challenge of sustainability is to limit the environmental harm while reducing the deprivation and suffering resulting from poverty as well as excess.'<sup>11</sup>

Interior architecture practitioners, educators and academics are well positioned to deal with these issues. These players are enmeshed in the theory and application of the person–environment relationship. Therefore, in a profession where the creators of the built environment deal with the integral interface with people, Social Justice, Community Engagement and Cultural Heritage are implied. These three areas are embedded within social sustainability and have common social capital and concerns, which overlap but are distinct. Collectively they belong to and concurrently construct the field of interior architecture.

The potency of the relationship between these three areas of social sustainability was highlighted by an investigation of the field of interior architecture undertaken as part of a Curtin University 20-year retrospective of the program. After an analysis of graduates’ work experiences, combined with the staff’s experience and aspirations, a number of foci became evident. The interrelationship between these foci evolved to distinguish social sustainability as an outcome, while Community Engagement, Social Justice and Cultural Heritage were concerned with practices, codes of behaviour and attitudes towards others. As professionals within the field of interior architecture we recognise their importance for both practitioners and educators.<sup>12</sup>

## **SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE**

*Life from the inside: Perspectives on Social Sustainability and Interior Architecture* positions the debate in relation to our practices through the three key areas. We define each theme in relation to social sustainability as follows.

Community Engagement is predicated upon the consent and active participation of the community whose social capital, processes or environments are being considered, thereby playing a vital role in social sustainability. Here interior architecture works ‘with’ the community. Through Community Engagement we see the potential to identify the needs – and more importantly the assets or social capital – of people and communities and so we can begin to develop a range of options to consider. These options may be environments, ways of working, and transferable and discipline-specific skills and

knowledge that are able to reflect that community, rather than a homogeneous approach to all products or processes. Community Engagement allows for the exchange and sharing of social capital between people in the community and interior architecture practitioners, students, educators and researchers.<sup>13</sup>

Within the broad field of Community Engagement are numerous relationships and projects that focus on issues of equity of access to basic human rights that pertain to Social Justice. To have the capacity to access these rights is an aspiration for all, but the ability to do so is often taken for granted. In order for all people to have an authentic existence, their ability to have access to resources and practices to facilitate their needs and requirements, while maintaining their dignity and identity in an equitable way, is fundamental.

Social sustainability captures the relationship between a culture and how it operates as a society in its immediacy while embracing its longevity and evolution, and Social Justice issues are embedded. Interior architecture deals with both processes and the environments that are implicated, and if harnessed can foster positive change at a micro or personal level. Veronique Vienne states that ‘we are about to redefine the very nature of design’ and there is a pressing need to consider how interior architecture relates to the quality of life for those who are without, disadvantaged or non-mainstream.<sup>14</sup>

While basic human needs of clean water, shelter and sanitation are crucial to existence, the world over, people’s lived experiences embrace other aspects of life. Aspects such as community, cultural, social and ritual behaviours are equally important in the minutiae of daily life. The sites of these aspects are both natural and man-made, and encompass work, social interaction, traditional religious or cultural rituals and domesticity. It is the constructed environments that we are concerned with here, and their social sustainability through continued use – sometimes with evolution over time that reflects shifting social mores and changing technologies – and at other times through adaptive re-use of what would otherwise become redundant sites, settings, buildings and their interiors.

Understanding the importance, or otherwise, of these places comes through recognition of the value these places may have to the local or wider community, in their associations to past generations and the ongoing desire to retain the memories embodied in buildings and their interiors.

An integral part of the understanding of built Cultural Heritage is through a rigorous approach to a place's history, its current use and condition, and the identification and retention of particular values. A fundamental part of this process is identifying the values of places through community consultation with stakeholders – be they government, business or occupants and users – to understand to whom a place may or may not be important and why. Designers of the built environment are and should be concerned with this process before embarking on conservation, restoration, adaptive re-use and/or interpretation.

As an extension of that knowledge Cultural Heritage may not always concern itself with existing early buildings. It also includes working with communities to integrate an understanding of the essence of their cultural heritage within contemporary environments, to enable a sense of continuity, relevance and belonging.

## UNFOLDING THE BOOK

The chapters that follow present possibilities for interior architecture to be involved in social sustainability in a meaningful way. They celebrate important work underway, and question why the discipline is not leading in areas where our core competencies can obviously make a difference. The book outlines the possibilities for action and involvement into the future.

The terms interior architecture and interior design, and interior architect and interior designer are used in various parts of the world to describe the discipline area and its practitioners. The terms are used interchangeably in this book.

The book contains perspectives from an anthropologist, as well as interior practitioners, researchers and educators. Their case studies provide a varied, international overview – set in various urban, rural and remote places in the United Kingdom, Indone-

sia, Africa, Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia – in their engagement with local contexts that are set within larger socio-economic-political contexts and issues.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

Community Engagement is conceptualised as 'ways of working', and in this section, we explore frameworks that make it possible for people to be involved in shaping and managing their environment. These 'ways of working' can be, and sometimes – but not always – are used in the development of strategies, processes, design and construction of the environments debated in the second and third sections: Social Justice and Interior Architecture, and Cultural Heritage and Interior Architecture.

The second chapter begins with three premises: that Community Engagement is a place to learn and exchange knowledge; that it embodies 'ways of working' with a community to identify priorities, dream of possibilities, make shared decisions, and make things happen; and that the interior architecture community can enrich and open up opportunities for other communities. The chapter goes on to define community and conceptualise Community Engagement in relation to design, and the socio-political forces that affect community. Next, examples from fields with established and emerging structures for Community Engagement are critiqued from two perspectives: the ways they engage and their success in progressing the interests and social sustainability of the communities concerned. The chapter concludes with proposed strategies for interior architecture to create 'with' the community.

Featured in the third chapter is the illustration of a framework, possibilities and challenges of a service-learning project utilising Community Engagement principles. Located in Ghana and involving Canadian students and faculty, the design-build project was a partnership between the community, the students and the university. Described are themes of engagement, reflections, challenges and limitations. The chapter concludes with the possibilities and benefits for such Community Engagement projects to facilitate cross-cultural experiences.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE AND INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

This section explores how interior architecture can participate in the debate and in programs that address social equity and social justice for all members of society in relation to social responsibility or sustainability. The section challenges interior architects to use their creative talent and processes to envisage new ways of tackling old problems, that will result in strategies to develop environments in which to live, work and play, where the quality of our and others' lives are enhanced, not lessened.

The fourth chapter begins by defining Social Justice and how interior architecture can engage with the concept. By examining professional organisations and their mandates, exploring examples in practice and surveying university programs engaging in Social Justice, the kinds of involvement the discipline has or could have with Social Justice are illuminated. The chapter focuses on activities that explicitly involve core interior architecture competencies, and/or engage interior architects in order to ascertain how active the discipline is in the area. The chapter concludes with an outline of the role interior architecture can play in Social Justice in the future. A critique of the contextual issues that facilitate and/or inhibit interior architecture practitioners — addressing Social Justice as an area of practice — highlights areas for future research.

The next chapters, 5.1–5.4, provide four perspectives from key players in practice to emphasise the potential interior architecture has to engage with Social Justice. The first perspective, set in the United States, addresses interior architects' involvement in policy development for underprivileged individuals. A shift in thinking about standards for low-income housing, allowing for the needs and identities of residents, opens an opportunity for the discipline's involvement in policy. The second perspective illuminates a case study of marginalised migratory workers' hostels in South Africa, describing the undignified conditions the workers encounter and their battle to express identity and create their own space. It looks at how interior architecture could provide for these real needs of men and women in a disadvantaged situation. The third perspective discusses how culturally distinct practices should inform the design of

housing for Aboriginal Australians in order to mitigate indirect discrimination, which often occurs in homogeneous housing models that underpin government policies. It identifies that current housing for remote Aboriginal communities does not cater to socio-cultural needs, and discusses how, by developing a sensitive cross-cultural methodology interior architects have the potential to make a meaningful contribution. The fourth perspective discusses a Danish guerrilla design movement coined 'social indignation'. The projects presented use provocative design of social spaces in order to challenge inhumane and rational treatment of spaces. Interior architects are challenged to take an active role in confronting current policy through the innovative approaches currently being created by artists.

## CULTURAL HERITAGE AND INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE

In this volume social sustainability also refers to Cultural Heritage. Working with Cultural Heritage is concerned with understanding the importance of particular places to people, in aspects of their daily lives such as community, culture, social and ritual behaviours. Interior architecture can create and/or adapt places through recognition of the values these places might have to the local or wider community, in their associations to past generations and the ongoing desire to retain the memories embodied in buildings and their interiors. The chapters that feature in this section consider the understanding of built Cultural Heritage through the history of places, their current uses and condition, and the identification and retention of particular values.

Chapter 6 focuses on the issues around socially sustainable, adaptive re-use through a critique of current practice working with places that have been identified as having Cultural Heritage significance. There are a substantial number of places in Perth, Western Australia that have been, or should be recognised as having value to the community. While the exterior of these early buildings typically undergo some modification over time, generally the interiors of these places are subject to more frequent modification and adaptation through changes in use, or to improve amenity. The chapter discusses an industrial site in the process of adaptation for re-use as an exemplar of socially sustainable Cultural Heritage.



The seventh chapter focuses on the Modern interior and the question of domesticity in relation to the restoration, conservation or adaptive re-use of buildings. The richness and meanings of the interior past and present are revealed technologically, visually, materially, spatially, psychologically and socio-culturally. The shifting socio-cultural influences and how they impact the interior — relative to domesticity — are explored as to how interpretation relevant to the present uses may be expressed. The chapter concludes with how the field is evolving and the important duty interior architects and allied professions have to search for new interpretations and approaches in order to promote social sustainability.

## PROVOCATION

Numerous issues arising through this book are reported through the three parts of *Life from the inside: Perspectives on Social Sustainability and Interior Architecture* as a collective. Many of these issues may have been addressed — at least in part — by others who are not included in this volume. As part of the continuing discourse and reflection on interior architecture, we are interested in making contact with such people and disseminating information.<sup>15</sup>

Debate in this area of interior architecture is both important and timely. Our research has revealed a cross-section of projects and players, but key questions still remain and processes still need to be developed. Concurrently, it has also revealed that interior architecture is a field through which practitioners, educators and researchers can potentially make significant contributions due to their core skills and knowledge base.

Questions arise such as: How can the core skills of interior architecture be integrated into mainstream practice to ensure Social Justice through design? How do design and construction practices involving client consultation need to evolve to reflect designing with the community? How can Cultural Heritage awareness act as a driver for contemporary design innovation? Is social sustainability an imperative within ethical interior architecture practice for the twenty-first century?

In our quest for answers we invite all — theorists, practitioners, and the general community — to contemplate and to act.

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15. The editors are interested in both retrospective and future projects for the 10 years prior and 10 years onward from the book publication date. For interested practitioners and educators working in the field of social sustainability, contact Dianne Smith, Marina Lommerse and Priya Metcalfe at the Department of Architecture and Interior Architecture, School of the Built Environment, Curtin University on (+61 8) 9266 2288 or by email: [Dianne.Smith@curtin.edu.au](mailto:Dianne.Smith@curtin.edu.au), [M.Lommerse@curtin.edu.au](mailto:M.Lommerse@curtin.edu.au), [P.Metcalfe@curtin.edu.au](mailto:P.Metcalfe@curtin.edu.au).