

WHITE SPACES

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Abstract

This paper brings white as a colour in designed interiors and whiteness in race together. The 'invisible', unacknowledged prevalence of whiteness in race is aligned with the silent yet pervasive ubiquity of white in architectural space. The paper asserts that both are privileged, that is the colour of the paint and epidermal whiteness. White walls, white surfaces and white expanses are designed to place all other colours into sharp contrast. The smoothness of these white surfaces also shows up texture and variation; the sameness of white in design is positioned as a basis for designed interiors. White in this sense becomes the one upright against which all else is peripheral and as such the paper argues that it has an elite status. This status is more often than not evidence in the all white interiors of expensive architectural spaces. The paper also argues that white as a colour is problematically conflated with light and its associated mythologies of goodness and cleanliness. In this way white as a colour is the insignia of white wealth and ostensible superiority. Specific architectural spaces are described and analysed in relation to white race privilege.

Introduction

What is it about this colour white? It pervades and invades interior spaces, covers and clothes bodies and seeps both into and onto numerous products in inhabited spaces. Have you ever heard or been part of a conversation that goes something like this: Q: 'What colour are you going to use'? A: 'Oh, I am not go-

ing to use any colour, I just want to keep it white and simple.'

'I just want to keep it white and simple.' The assertion is that white is not specified, it is there but not there. Having researched modernist design over the past decade and located that research within the context of the home, I am continually reminded that not only was modernist design supposedly 'simple' i.e. modular, standardised and geometric without 'unnecessary' embellishment, but it was also predominantly 'white'. Mark Wigley makes this point in his book *White walls, Designer dresses: the fashioning of modern architecture*, a text that addresses the silence surrounding white as a ubiquitous choice for exteriors, and more specifically interiors, in modernist architectural and design theory literature (Wigley 1995: xiv).

My interest now is to pursue the continued dominance of white in a socially designed postmodern world. Postmodernity, in design terms, is a celebration of colour and a liberation of the palette in a design era that is ostensibly free from the dogma of totalitarian modernist design orthodoxy. Indeed contemporary design has been posited as a departure from the constraints of the monochrome or the pure primary and the grid. Robert Venturi's scathing criticism of modernist architecture called for a 'messy vitality' over an 'obvious unity' (1994: 53). Given the current rejection of modernist design principles, why is there still so much white in interior architecture and contemporary design? Who is responsible for this whiteness and what does it signify? Do the white interiors have any connection with whiteness in race? To put it another

way, is the continued use of white in certain exclusive or 'expensive' interiors an extension of white hegemony in particular societies?

Methodology

The paper will attempt to arrive at possible answers and will begin by providing detailed and objective visual descriptions of photographed and advertised spaces/forms in contemporary Australia. The visual descriptions attempt to recreate the visual space so that the image can be pictured in the mind of the reader and it is hoped that they present as objective data. A formal and contextual analysis of the pictorial examples will follow the descriptions. This analytical design methodology will combine with a hermeneutic approach that incorporates whiteness theories.

Criteria used for selecting the examples is based upon my observation of white spaces in buildings that are designed by architects and which probably hold some sort of prestige, status or position. As a result some of the interiors described below come out of a typical example of an interior architecture magazine and others are taken from my own photographic survey.

Visual descriptions

Example 1.

Six white lights hang from a high ceiling on several thin white cords; all have vertical undulating cylindrical and repetitive curves. From the photograph they look like thin paper or fabric folded in rounded tubular formations. The ceiling above is blurred into a shadowed grey extending down the wall. The room appears spacious and the photographed view shows a large single articulated white leather sofa that has adjustable back rests and other flexible features

that include changing its orientation. The entire piece rests on slim polished steel legs. A dark suited young man stands in shadow on the extreme left with one hand casually in his pocket and a wine glass in the other hand as he talks to a seated young woman in a backless knee-length cocktail dress of sheer pale green and pink and high strapped sandals. She is twisted around to address the young man, thus exposing an expanse of her pale white back to the viewer. On the other end of the sofa another young woman in knee-length cocktail dress and stiletto sandals, sits listening to a standing couple: a man in a dark closed suit and a woman in a thigh length dress and heels. All five people are white and all hold wine glasses. There is a plain rectangular screen some distance behind the sofa that provides a backdrop for the intricate geometric criss-crosses of a round monochrome string floor sculpture. The colours of the photograph are predominantly greys against brilliant whites. The floor gleams with reflections and is contrasted by a red and cream oriental woven carpet in the bottom foreground. Highlights are captured from the hanging lamps upon white leather, white skin and shiny floor. Below the image is a caption printed in narrow grey-blue sans serif capitals. It reads: 'Some saw a cloud ... we saw a light'.

Example 2.

The photograph is taken from a corner of the outside balcony of an apartment and shows the grey granite floor tiles, uninterrupted by outside furniture as they meet the balcony wall of varying white diagonals and horizontals on the right edge of the picture. On the left and taking up most of the picture space is the interior of the lounge room of an inner city apartment as viewed through the large rectangular balcony window. The room reveals a section of a smooth white sofa arrangement that has a wide

extended section the size of a double bed. The back rest and cushions are all white. A white shawl is draped neatly over the double bed section. A pale slab of wood sits on narrow steel legs serving as a coffee table, which is positioned upon a thick piled white rug on the surrounding pale yellow wooden floating floor boards. The ceiling and walls are white expanses that meet each other without the punctuation of cornices. The main wall on view in the photograph is decorated with a single unframed image of a pale yellow sphere, which blurs out if its orbit into a white painted background. The other wall some distance behind the sofa has a ledge or table (also pale wood) with white ceramic vessels displayed upon it. The only things that are not white or pale yellow in the picture include a small green arrangement in a low glass bowl on the coffee table and a large standing mortar. There is also a small sectioned view of a dark brick warehouse-style neighbouring building. The picture is also made up on light reflections from the many long architectural lines. There are no people in the space. A heading printed below the image in yellow slab sans-serif reads: 'Inner-city Metamorphosis'.

Example 3.

Looking down from a high mezzanine or bridge, the image takes in a large area of a school building and yard. The left foreground reaches into the middle and background by way of a long white concrete bridge with vertical grey railings. This flat high white painted concrete expanse is photographed in full sunlight. Tall, repeated pillars of similarly slabbed concrete form a colonnade from the ground level up to the very top. Below on the unshaded hard white tiles, sit and stand informal groups of children. The white of the architecture is contrasted by deep shadows caused by the bright light and hard angles of the archi-

ture. The top area of the picture is a total contrast to the school because it shows the surrounding cottage street architecture and some of the skyline of the city. The top level of the school has a roof garden that is filled with green foliage in planter pots that are angled into the architecture. Some of the school children are seated up there but they blend into the foliage and background street scene unlike the stark contrast of the dark uniformed shapes in the courtyard below.

Example 4.

A section of a hospital foyer is photographed showing a wide staircase with one banister side support in clear perspex with a steel riveted rail and the other side in sheer white painted concrete, each with a stainless steel rail, steps up to a mezzanine level of white walls that are hung with identically sized paintings in rows. The under section of the staircase as it rises up to the top level is seen from below (the vantage point of the photograph) as a solid white sculptured object suspended in the open well of space from the ground floor foyer up to the top level. The photograph features the staircase with its combination of simple but large forms.

Example 5.

The room is a long rectangle that glasses onto a green garden at the end and side. It is a kitchen and living area in one long sweep. The white ceilings move down without cornices into white walls on the one side and then equally seamlessly the expanse of white moves on to long white floor cabinets that are clear of utensils. The surfaces of the cabinets against the wall have one stainless steel sink that looks pale and white because of the reflected sunlight from the opposite picture window strip. This length of white is continuous except for a short dark section of the stainless steel stove that is flush with the cabinets. In parallel

placement to the wall cabinets is a wide white rectangular island that stretches straight down to the far glassed end, which accommodates neat bookshelves, sofas and a postmodern rendition of Le Corbusier's *chaise longue*.¹ This island has a decorative display of oversized ostrich egg forms in a rectangular container at the far end but besides this one piece the surface is clear. The photograph has no human inhabitants. Colours that contrast or merge out of the white dominance are the pale browns of the floor, wooden window beams and the abundant greens from the outside garden.

Example 6.

This is a photograph from a series taken by the author of the new Adelaide airport. The floors, walls and ceilings of the enclosure are all white as one walks away from the check-in counters towards the exit. The rows of trolleys offer no contrast to the top to bottom white expanse because they reflect the bright white lighting upon their chrome surfaces. This large open area designed for crowds and queuing does not have shops or vending machines and appears as a totality of whiteness.

Example 7.

The ground floor of a Melbourne business' premises in the central business district was photographed at night with street lights shining upon the huge white three dimensional numbers of 121. The interior foyer is clearly visible through the glass wall frontage, with a deep space of white tiles and chrome.

Example 8.

A white boardroom table and white chairs from the new Kaurna Building of the South Australian School of Art and is an example of furnishings chosen by the architects who designed the building, which was completed in 2005. The large tapering oval table with its twenty com-

pletely white matching chairs takes up most of the space in a double glass sided meeting room.

Analysis and Relation to Whiteness Theory

The above examples of a lighting advertisement, an apartment lounge room, a school, a hospital foyer, a suburban kitchen/dining/living area, an airport, a business premises and boardroom have other things in common besides the dominance of the colour white. Most give the impression of spaciousness by means of extended parallel architectural lines and surfaces. Most also give the impression of luxury with gleaming chrome, steel and large glass window-walls. These elements are without exception represented as uncluttered and free of busy ornamentation. The white surfaces and forms in the examples are shown to have large dimensions, whether in length, breadth or height. The surfaces conform to a sharp geometric alignment or angularity that also emphasise space by means of deep linear perspective or a horizontality that stretches out of the picture plane. The colour white is represented in a brilliant hard light thus making all other pale tones even fainter and causing them to blend into the white painted surface and the space of the picture. This accentuation of whiteness results in *any* contrast of dark or varied surfaces as being stark and obvious. Sara Ahmed writes:

Whiteness is only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don't, it is hard not to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere. Seeing whiteness is about living its effects, as effects that allow white bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape, spaces in which black bodies stand out, stand apart, unless they pass, which means passing through space by passing as white (Ahmed 2004: 1).

Ahmed is referring to black people as showing up in an environment that is not only populated by the physicality of white people but also dominated by white privilege. I am saying that this is exacerbated by the use of the colour white in designs that are associated with status and elitism in a white society that applauds material success. The white people in the white space discussed above blend in by revealing long white limbs and pale dresses in the lighting advertisement, whereas the dark suited men are suffused into shadows. In other examples that contain people such as the school and the airport, the dark shade of the people's clothes contrast against the white expanses of the architecture.

While hospital-white is something that people have come to expect over time on account of the practicalities of showing up dirt so that it can be cleaned, the impracticalities of maintaining such a visage of cleanliness is extended to other interior spaces that do not require sterility. Even in the hospital example, the monumentalisation of the white staircase dominates all other colours and forms in the space. In the other examples the wide expanses of white tiled floors and white counter and table tops all proclaim an obsessive cleanliness. Hygiene and neatness are middle class domestic preoccupations and manifest the struggle to separate the interior from the exterior and perceived chaos of nature. Mary Douglas reaffirms the Victorian belief that 'dirt is matter out of place', a notion that still seems to apply in contemporary design (Douglas 1966: 36). The Melbourne business premises discussed in example seven could equally have been a private hospital foyer in the sense that whiteness takes on the colour of the idealised and sterile corporation.

White as a colour is conflated with angularity, order, cleanliness and simple design, which makes it a more encompassing agent for white superiority. White design needs support to both exert and maintain its impression of strength because it is inherently fragile, impermanent and vulnerable. Wigley asserts that white is only as strong as the thickness of its surface, which is very thin and in constant need of touching up (Wigley 1995). The colour white cannot cope alone, like white authority in society, it needs its henchmen. The painting of white surfaces and the insurance that forms are bold, hard and free of clutter is an effort on the part of (white) society to reveal anything that does not conform. For white paint and white surface then, this support includes the unforgiving nature of geometric design, a design that excludes softness or texturing associated with humanity. Forms and people that are not long, lean and classical attired count as intrusions in the designed spaces. The photographs of actual interiors in the design magazine are devoid of people. This is a device that serves to emphasise spatial dimensions and ensure that surfaces are not interrupted by any untidy design elements. This lack of humanity was one of the main criticisms of modernist design and indeed what brought about its supposed demise, a demise that heralded the mixed colours and textures of postmodern architectural design. But whiteness in design persists, modernism like so many despots, did not die it just went away for a while only to return with another name and wield a disconcertingly similar rule of law.

Then one also has to ask, if white is a colour at all? According to Isaac Newton it is not. White, in Newtonian physics, is white light. The conflation of white and light and the assumption that white is a non colour has been accepted in colour theory. Colour theory, like formalism in

art theory fell out of vogue with the ostensible passing of modernism. However while postmodern art history and theory eschewed the structural and Cartesian aspects of modernist theory, white has somehow remained a non colour into the post-modern era. By remaining in abeyance or supposedly out of mind, white had the opportunity to gain strength because it was not considered a reality. If something is not acknowledged, it is assumed that it does not exist. Denial is destructive in human relationships and this must also be true in environments designed for human beings. How does one oppose, or for that matter work with nothing? How do black people oppose white authority if the people who are in authority do not admit they are white or that it is their whiteness that keeps them in positions of power? With the use of white in design, it is hard to imagine an opposition to *light* because in this guise white seems to position itself beyond scrutiny? The mythology of light is linked to some religions' belief in light as synonymous with goodness. Darkness in this instance is all that is bad, the dichotomy of light and shadow in the examples used for this article serve to accentuate the contrast. In this way white is transfigured into light in design with all of its concomitant codes of purity, which in turn become part of the ideology of whiteness in race.

The privileging of white light in Newtonian physics was contested by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who asserted that the natural world was overlooked as credible and practical proof of colour action (Jackson 1994: 679). As such he considered Newton's mathematical approach as 'artificial' and confined to the intellect. This narrow Newtonian view in Goethe's mind was a denial of 'Truth' because it dismissed the senses (Jackson 1994: 689). The link between white light's relatively undisputed and yet unacknowledged leadership in colour theory is similar to the privileging of the

is similar to the privileging of the white, yet unacknowledged race in social history. Rendering the apparently invisible, visible is a significant aspect of whiteness theory in race as both bell hooks, Richard Dyer and others in their wake have iterated. The supposedly ethereal, insubstantiality of light is taken up by interior designers and interior decorators as they play upon western myths of divinity and vision in a lit interior. In the examples of lighting, kitchen and interior design, the spatial aspects of white as possessing qualities of boundlessness and by extension an agency with infinity is endorsed by the serene inaccessibility in the visual presentation of such designs. The lighting example, which advertises hanging lamps by well known contemporary designers Michele de Lucchi and Gerhard Reichart portrays a group of people in the presence of whiteness. Classic advertising rhetoric builds upon the myth of a divine epiphany by adding the caption: 'Some saw a cloud ... we saw a light'.

This is the world of the white cube so beloved of twentieth century modernist architects. In Thomas McEvilly's introduction to Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: the ideology of the gallery space*, he writes:

This specially segregated space is a kind of non-space, ultra-space, or ideal space where the surrounding matrix of space-time is symbolically annulled. ... By suggesting eternal ratification of a certain sensibility, the white cube suggests the eternal ratification of the claims of the caste or group sharing that sensibility. ... The *Spectator* is the attenuated and bleached-out life of the self from which the Eye goes forth and which, in the meantime, does nothing else. The Eye and the *Spectator* are all that is left of someone who has 'died' as O'Doherty puts it, by entering the white cube. In return for the glimpse of ersatz eternity that the white cube affords us – and as a token of our solidarity with the special in-

terests of a group – we give up our humanness and become the cardboard Spectator and the disembodied Eye (McEvelly in O'Doherty 1999: 9, 10).

McEvelly's above explanation can be applied to current issues of whiteness in critical race theory. The 'the caste or group' is the white academic, professional elite or if there are black people then it is those who pass as white by conforming to whiteness. That gallery space is the white world displaying its ware and the similarities between the art gallery and the many white interiors in contemporary design is striking. The perpetuation of white as a symbol of authority and status in design in the contemporary postmodern scenario serves to exclude both people and ideologies that favour environmental and social sustainability issues. Simply put, these exclusions are a reiteration of the 'chaos of nature' that the Enlightenment and Victorian era in design were so afraid of. Such exclusions are especially true of urban domestic and inner-city design. Interior design magazine *Indesign* makes the distinction between urban and rural spaces, rendering the one 'sleek' and the other 'charming' (*Indesign* 2004: 162,163). To put it bluntly, white design is an extension of white racism where blackness, colour, variety and ethnic identities in person, dress and choice of interior design, do not have a place.² The positioning of white within the paradigms of western hegemony suits the agendas of such a regime. White is not just a colour it is a code of entry. The clamour of white voices is prevalent in consumer marketing and as previously mentioned in the western paranoia with dirt, darkness and mess.³ White utopias are sold to people in a postmodern era of crowds and busy lives. White is the sought after space that is promised to release individuals from having to cope with anyone besides their own white personas. The term for white that is used in real estate rhetoric is often 'neutral'.

D.J.B. Young uses the heading 'Any colour so long as it's white' in an article on properties for sale in London (2004: 11). Young relates the way in which sellers are encouraged to keep 'a blank canvas' in the interiors so that illusions of light encourage the buyer to enter the space without reservations about previous owners' identities (2004: 9). Roland Marchand compares the confused reflection of the real and the ideal in the history of advertising to the *zerrspiegel* 'a distorting mirror that would enhance certain images' a neat way of presenting the conflict between desire, identity, status and affordability (1985: xvi). Advertising fables of ideal homes and images are fodder for consumption because they represent a utopia that will of necessity never be fulfilled thereby ensuring eternal capitalism as opposed to eternal life.

The reified non-space of the gallery is, as mentioned, a parallel for the spaces shown and discussed in this paper. White is not neutral 'the white wall is precisely not blank' and its inhabitants are invited in only if they comprehend the language, this is the language of a dominant group which is determined to remain unnamed in its masked emptiness (Wigley 1995: xiv). This emptiness is also the visual legacy of 'modern' white western power. Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton put it succinctly when they write:

White supremacy is nothing more than what we perceive of it; there is nothing beyond it to give it legitimacy, nothing beneath it or outside it to give it justification. The structure of its banality is the surface on which it operates. Whatever mythic content it pretends to claim is *a priori* empty. Its secret is that it has no depth. There is no dark corner that, once brought to the light of reason, will unravel its system (2003: 169).

The supremacy of the white space and white surface, in its physicality, is only skin

deep and is a cosmetic layer at that. White paint like white skin has many shades of pale and none are permanent or constant, in fact white skin is not really white. In order to sustain and maintain their precarious position, white surface and white skin have to subscribe to costly cosmetic applications without admitting it.

Conclusion

The paper has posed a number of questions such as: 'Who is responsible for the whiteness in architectural spaces, why is there still so much white in postmodern interiors and is there a connection between white paint and white race'? What the paper has indicated is that we live in a designed world of surveillance, an environment under lights. It has been argued that there is a direct connection between the painting of white spaces and the maintenance of white racial status. The strong conflation of light and white in colour theory has been carried across into design. Therefore, in the semblance of light, whiteness continues incognito and as such strengthens its power base. In design theory, it does so by pretending to be space, in critical race theory, whiteness strengthens itself by ongoing group denial. The brightening and spatial enhancing qualities of light are used to exaggerate white spaces and white surfaces. In this way white becomes the backdrop for identification of an Other. People who are dark or who contrast against the combination of bright whiteness and neatness cause a ripple in the surface order.

The white designed world has been planned; these are not 'spec' buildings but carefully and usually strategically placed edifices in the urban structure. In the case of domestic interiors, they are published with proclaim in architecture magazines. They are symbols of power

and material whiteness, testimonies to a society controlled by a corporation. Those responsible for an extensively white painted environment are those who still believe in the dated notion of 'civilisation', they are not only those architects who subscribe to white elitism but an entire web of associated professionals who live in denial of nature and messy humanity. The interior examples are without exception static, fixed forms. There is no evidence of movement, not only because there are few to no people in the images but primarily because of the hard inflexible architectural lines and shapes in the white spaces represented. White is a death colour, it is the reincarnated ghost of modernism. This whiteness is the corporate control of society and it carries its cold lifelessness into the city scapes of work and life.

Author Note

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2. Francis-Jones Morehen Thorp, Meta Apartments, Sydney. *Indesign* 22 (August 2005): 73.
3. Tanner architects, additions and re-design of SCEGGS School, Sydney. *Indesign* 19 (November 2004): 156.
4. Gray Puksand, Medibank Private, Melbourne. *Indesign* 22 (August 2005): 171.
5. Jackson Clements Burrows, Extension of house in Richmond, Melbourne, 2002. *Indesign* 19 (November 2004): 141.

Endnotes

1. Le Corbusier (Charles Eduard Jeanneret) was a high modernist architect who influenced a generation of architects with his white utopian ideologies of space. The reclining sofa was originally designed together with Pierre Jeanneret and Charlotte Perriand in 1928 out of chrome-plated steel and black cowhide with a steel base; the *chaise longue* in this picture has black and white variegated leather upholstery.
2. Whiteness in sartorial style and also in magazine 'representations' of fashion and colour is too much to cover in this paper and will form the content of a forthcoming paper.
3. Darkness, blackness and the immorality of dirt is something that I have located in the pre-Apartheid period of South Africa and can be read in a chapter, which will appear in Damien Riggs' forthcoming book *Taking up the Challenge: critical whiteness studies and indigenous Sovereignty*, Crawford House, Adelaide.