Inhabiting the public interior: the critical role of personalization in imparting qualities to urban life.

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The ability to connect emotionally to our environment is fundamental to human experience. Architects, designers, urbanists and environmental psychologists have explored spaces from the perspective of experience, to understand why certain places make people feel alive and human, and how to design environments that resonate with human sensibilities. A significant body of research focuses on urban public spaces and shows that the quality of the public realm can impact on place experience, social cohesion and the quality of life in cities. Cities need public spaces people can connect to emotionally to build livable communities. As a shared destination, the public interior is an extension of the public realm and fundamental to our experience of the city because it also contributes social values and impart qualities to urban life. Yet, qualitative research on public interiors is fragmented, with few insights on how they can contribute to the quality of human experience. In this context, this paper asks how the public interior can color urban life by providing opportunities for people to personalize spatio-sensory
experiences, nurturing emotional relations between people and their environment. The
concept of personalization is defined here as the way in which people can shape their
experience of the public interior around their needs and desires to enable them to define
personal territories. Thus, the research explores the critical role of personalization in
impacting qualities to urban life by investigating how the design and management of the
public interior can contribute to people’s ability to personalize their experience of the
interior. It focuses on the public interior of the Royal Festival Hall, a cultural venue in
London UK, because its ownership, design and managerial culture present distinctive
characteristics that can nurture opportunities for personalization and enable individuals
to comfortably inhabit the public interior.

• Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Valerie is a Senior Lecturer and Course Leader at University of the Arts London, London
College of Communication, where she teaches interdisciplinary spatial experience
design. She is also a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the United Kingdom. Her
research centers on exploring and defining multisensory practices for design to enrich
relations between people and their environment. Exploring experiential contexts across
interior and urban environments, she develops sensory research methods with a focus on
emotional connection and wellbeing. Previous research includes investigations into
architectural atmospheres and more recently for Interior Futures, a phenomenological
study of transient domesticity in the urban interior of Bermondsey Street in London UK. She
is currently working on a doctoral research project, investigating how design can nurture
individuals’ ability to develop intimate connections with the public interior.