

23rd SYMPOSIUM ON SPACE ACTIVITY AND SOCIETY (E5)
Moon, Mars and Beyond: Analogues, Habitation and Spin-Offs (2)

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SKYLAB VS 2001'S DISCOVERY: INTERFACES IN HABITATION DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

By the time NASA's developments for Skylab were under way in the early 1970s, the film production team of Stanley Kubrick's 2001 had finalised their design of the deep space habitat Discovery. Both habitats, the conceptual and the operational, differed in overall programme (extended orbital versus deep space). However, both projects also utilised or referenced the same contemporary state of the art in habitation systems technology and involved, to some extent, an intersecting set of contributors (scientific advisors, design consultants, managers). This presents a rich base for a comparative case study.

Drawing on primary data from archive material of the estates of both Kubrick and Skylab's habitability designer Loewy, this paper explores the interfaces of two, at the time, next generation habitat concepts. The comparison highlights shared architectural paradigms and interpretations in design solutions with a focus on interior aspects such as living accommodations, activity zones, fittings and consumables.

In reading the Discovery as an advanced scenario exercise, the findings are viewed in the context of other design models and analogues available for the planning of unprecedented crewed missions today. This exposes the relevance and potential methodologies of engaging with highly speculative – yet authentically anchored – models through their conceptualisation and physical manifestation, and by situating complex narratives of human activity in them.