

# Study on enhancing architecture appreciation



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Frank Lloyd Wright believed space was the essence of architecture. The reality of architecture is actually not in the solid elements that seem to make it, but rather - " the reality of a room was to be found in the space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves." Spaces have intrinsic meanings that result from their spatial and visible forms and extrinsic meanings that evolved out from each of our different experiences with regards to each individual's own background and profession. We experience the space's interior space in terms of their form, their structure, their aesthetics and how others and us relate to them. " This constitutes the reality of our physical experience, but spaces not only have an existence in reality, they also have a metaphorical existence." They express meaning and give out certain messages about the space, just as the way we dress or furnish our homes gives people certain messages about us. They tell stories, for their forms and space planning give us hints about how they should be experienced or perceived. Space is meaningless without its inhabitants to experience it and to experience a space is the only gateway to understanding space.

At certain periods architects have chosen to create exciting, complex spaces with curving, undulating walls. " The period of the baroque and rococo in Europe was one such time when interiors were designed to entice and captivate the onlooker and draw them into a world of illusion created through painting, sculpture and the curving forms of architecture." Craftsman played the prominent role at that time when only good workmanship and complicated work pieces would amaze anyone. Now in this totally new era, right here in this century, wonders are different and

expectations higher with meanings and philosophy equally deep but entirely unlike. The heightening desire and importance of communication among the space and the perceiver with the spatial experience created seem to become a dominating factor and a characteristic of spatial design in this new era.

“ If architecture can be said to have a poetic meaning, we must recognise that what it says is not independent of what it is.” (Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *The Space of Architecture: Meaning as Presence and Representation, Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, 2006) Architecture is not an experience that words can translate later. Like the poem itself, it is its space as presence which constitutes the meaning and the experience. This experience in turn differs for every individual. What one perceives is a result of interplays between past experiences, including one’s culture and the interpretation of the perceived. Different aspects of the experiential spaces and the perceiver also ignite different spatial perceptions.

Understanding the different experiential components, the philosophy of perception and how spatial perception affects and reflects people differently helps us to enhance our appreciation for architecture and to heighten our enjoyment of space. My aim in this paper is to explore this hypothesis and my exposition will be presented and discussed in the following thesis.

### **Categories of different experiential components**

Spatial experience created is the most complex and diverse of all the components of architecture, for it involves how architecture engages all of our senses, how it shapes our perception and enjoyment or discomfort of our built environment. Understanding this is perhaps the area with which most

people, architects and users alike, have difficulty. This is partly because it involves, at every turn, subjective responses which differ from individual to individual.

Since the spatial experience we derive from architecture is generated by our perception of it, we must start by considering how the human eye and mind receive and interpret the visual data of architectural experience. How does the psychology of vision and sensory stimulation affect our perception of architecture? Perhaps the most fundamental concept is that the mind, particularly the human mind, is programmed to seek meaning and significance in all sensory information sent to it. The result is that the mind seeks to place all information fed to it into a meaningful pattern. The mind does not recognise that incoming data mean nothing. Even purely random visual or aural phenomena are given a preliminary interpretation by the mind on the basis of what evaluative information it already has stored away. Hence, what we perceive is based on what we already know- our knowledge. Our perception of space also differs from individual to individual, based on the person's psychology, mentality, physical state, background, memory, observation and the overall environment together with time - Era and Culture.

The spatial experience of architectural spaces evolves and becomes established by the experience it provides and we in turn read our experience into it. Experiential spaces evoke an empathetic reaction in us through these projected experiences and the strength of these reactions is determined by our culture, our beliefs and our expectations. We can relate so well to these spaces is because we have strong feelings about our environment and about

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what we like and dislike. We all have our preferences and prejudices regarding certain spaces as in anything else and our experiences in these spaces determine our attitude towards that space. “ People looking at pictures have a remarkable ability to enter a role which seems very foreign to them.” This can be interpreted into how these experiential spaces play an important role in affecting our mood and behaviour. When we enter these emotive spaces, we are tuned in to the frequency of the space, going through all the emotional processes with it.

**Architects and designers manipulate space of many kinds:**

There is first the purely physical space. One cannot see let alone touch space! Yet something that is invisible and untouchable has to be there, just to keep objects apart. This can be easily computed and expressed as how many cubic feet or cubic meters.

But there is also perceptual space, the space that can be perceived or seen. To understand this, an example will be in a building with walls of glass, this perceptual space may be extensive and impossible to quantify.

Related to perceptual space is conceptual space, which can be defined as the mental map we carry around in our heads, the plan stored in our memory. Concepts that work well are those that users can grasp easily in their mind’s eye and in which they can perceive with a kind of inevitability. Such spaces can be said to have good conceptual space.

The architect also shapes behavioural space, or the space we can actually move through and use. Architecture space is a powerful shaper of behaviour.

Winston Churchill said “ We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”

One very good example to support this statement is the Houses of Parliament in Germany. When Parliament first begun to meet in the thirteenth century, it had been given the use of rooms in the palace and had later on moved into the palace chapel. A typical narrow and tall Gothic chapel with parallel rows of choir stalls on two sides of the aisle down the center. The members of Parliament sat in the stalls, dividing themselves into two distinctive groups, one the government in power and the other usually the opposition members. During Parliament meetings, members from both parties have to take the brave step of crossing the aisle to change political allegiance. In my opinion, this enforced behaviour has a negative impact on the overall operation of the government bodies as this form of meetings unintentionally made politicians from both sides to feel and sense hostility and unconsciously insinuated the perception of challenge.

When the Houses of Parliament had to be rebuilt after a fire in 1834, the Gothic form was followed but Churchill argued that the rebuilding of the Parliament ought to be done with a fan of seats in a broad semicircle, as used in legislative chambers in the United States and France. To change the environment, to give it a different behavioural space, would change the very nature of parliamentary operation. The English had first shaped their architecture, and then that architecture had shaped English government and history. Through Churchill’s persuasion, the Houses of Parliament were rebuilt with the revised layout. Space can determine or suggest patterns of behaviour and perceptions by its very configuration.

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There is yet another way of determining spatial experience, and although it is not strictly architectural, architects and designers nevertheless must take it into account. This is personal space, the distance that members of the same species put between themselves. For most animals, this zone of comfort is genetically programmed. However humans have proved themselves to be extremely flexible in their determination of personal space; they seem not to have any programmed genetic spatial code. Instead, human's personal space is culturally determined and is fixed in childhood, so that enforced changes in personal distance later in life which they experience in different spaces may produce different perceptions and emotions. The Italians and the French prefer much more densely packed arrangements in their cafes, compared to the English. Even in the same culture, different sets of rules and factors determining experiences are adopted by men and women. Two unacquainted men will maintain a greater distance than two unacquainted women. If an architect or designer violates these unstated rules of personal space and places people in a space that is not catered to these needs, the result may prove to be an environment that is resisted by the users with negative perceptions and responses that follows.

### **Philosophy of Perception – Categories of different Perception**

Historically, the most important philosophical problem posed by perception is the question of how we can gain knowledge via Perception. The philosophy of perception concerns how mental processes the space and the spatial perception depends on how spaces are observed and interpreted by the

perceiver. In order to grasp this, we need to understand the different categories of spatial perception.

We can categorize perception into 4 categories:

Just as one object can give rise to multiple percepts, so an object may fail to give rise to any percept at all. If the percept has no grounding in a person's past experience, the person may literally not perceive it. No perception occurs.

Specifications are 1: 1 mappings of some aspects of the world into a perceptual array; given such a mapping, no enrichment or experience is required and this perception is called direct perception. This is usually knowledge or information gained through education or other mediums like books, television programmes etc. Direct perception occurs when information from the environment received by our sense organs forms the basis of perceptual experience and these sensory inputs are converted into perceptions of desks and computers, flowers and buildings, cars and planes etc.

Some argue that perceptual processes are not direct, but depend on the perceiver's expectations and previous knowledge as well as the information available. This controversy is discussed with respect to James J. Gibson (1966) who investigated what information is actually presented to the perceptual systems. This theory of perception is a 'bottom-up' theory and this bottom up processing is also known as data-driven processing or passive perception. Processing is carried out in one direction from the environment



to the sensory inputs, with our brains carrying out more complex analysis of the inputs which affects our reaction or behaviour.

Passive perception can be surmised as the following sequence of events as:

Surrounding — input (senses) — processing (brain) — output  
(reaction/behaviour)

For Gibson: sensation is perception: what you see is what you get. However, this theory cannot explain why perceptions are sometimes inaccurate, example in illusions and perceptual errors like overestimation. Although still supported by main stream philosophers and psychologists, this theory is nowadays losing momentum as more and more people turn to believe in the next one - Active Perception instead.

The theory of active perception has emerged from extensive research, most notably the works of Richard L. Gregory (1970). This theory is increasingly gaining experimental support. Gregory argued that active perception is a constructivist (indirect) theory of perception which is a 'top-down' theory. Top down processing refers to the use of contextual information in pattern recognition. One simple example to explain this: understanding difficult handwriting is easier when reading complete sentences than when reading single and isolated words. This is because the meanings of the surrounding words provide a context to aid understanding. For Gregory, perception involves making inferences about what we see and trying to make a best guess. Prior knowledge and past experience, he argued are crucial in perception. Thus, active perception can be surmised as a dynamic relationship between "Description" (in the brain) and the senses and the

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surrounding, all of which holds true to the linear concept of experience. What one perceives is a result of interplays between ones past experiences and knowledge (the brain) and the surrounding, including one's senses and the interpretation of the perceived space (surrounding). A lot of information reaches the eye, but much is lost by the time it reaches the brain. Therefore the brain has to guess what a person sees based on past experiences.

According to Richard Gregory, we actively construct our perception of reality. Our perceptions of the world are hypotheses based on our past experiences and stored information.

### **How Spatial Perception reflects Being**

The different ways in which we experience a painting, a sculpture, or a work of architecture reflects on each of our individual being. Our environments ( built environments ) are a reflection of ourselves. Architecture should express our aspirations and our sense of optimism about the future. Nothing can possibly show us better or clearer of our innermost self, BEING, other than the very own living space we create. It shows how we want things to be and what we really want in life- freedom, happiness, power, health, luck, love, etc which reveal our characteristics, attitude and most importantly our being. It is also used to express emotions and symbolise ideas that give out certain messages about the owner.

What is happening above is actually personalising your own space. This has two meanings to it: One is to personalise it and the other is to personify it. The latter is the main point in this whole essay, the living space representing the person who created it with a hint of the creator's being in every corner of the space. This is why we can relate better to our own houses (personal

space) than the outside world. But all in all to personalise the space, you personify it and to personify it, what you are doing is simply personalising that living space of yours. This is crucial in understanding the spaces created, the reasons for creating these spaces and how others perceive these spaces (personifying it).

This same conception is expressed in Greek columns by a slight outward curvature of profile, the 'entasis' which gives an impression of straining muscles - a surprising thing to find in a rigid and unresponsive pillar of stone. This is exactly what happens when we are personifying our own personal space. To personify a thing or the entire space so that it overflows with your being, so that it tastes, smells and feels like you, is so amazingly overpowering over a person who owns it personally. None other than the owner can feel the sense of belonging and comfort created in that amount of space. You own that space and it completely belongs to you, you can even see yourself in that space, you are the space and the space is you. " Even civilized people more or less consciously treat lifeless things as though they were imbued with life."

Designing one self's own space to make sure it is unique and truly belongs to you depends very much on your background, interests and expertise. This will make it special and personalised to the person with regards to his or her living space. But nowadays architecture designs are restricted by so call Style and Taste - ' Superficial Cosmetic' Professor Colin Stansfield Smith. This problem shows not only how things should be built but also what should be built. " Today, in our highly civilized society the houses which ordinary people are doomed to live in and gaze upon are on the whole without

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quality.” This is also why some important buildings are Monuments; some are considered Architecture while others are simply termed ‘ buildings’.

In order to prevent this from happening, we need to have an understanding of the living space. Understanding Living Space does not only mean the way it looks or its construction and materials. “ Understanding architecture does not mean just the way they look but the creative process of how the building comes into existence and how space is utilized.”<sup>1</sup> We need to visit buildings, look at the processes whereby it came into being, the sense of form, space, light and shade, the size and shape of spaces, the relationship between spaces and how space is utilised. We are looking at the Interior Beings. “ You must observe how it was designed for a special purpose and how it was attuned to the entire concept and rhythm of a specific era.”

“ Architecture provides the physical framework for our lives, so it has a public role” a social responsibility. But it is also where we live, work and play, so it has a private role. It has a material form, but it also represents our ideals and aspirations. Consciously or unconsciously everyone is affected by his or her environment. “ He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams.”

This can be further explained by using an example. When we look at a portrait of someone laughing or smiling we become cheerful ourselves. If on the other hand, the face is tragic, we feel sad. “ People looking at pictures have a remarkable ability to enter a role which seems very foreign to them.”<sup>1</sup>

This can be interpreted into how architecture plays a vital role in affecting our mood and behaviour. Buildings have their own characteristics and

emotions, some buildings are feminine and some are masculine, some buildings are joyous and some are solemn. When we enter these emotive spaces, we are tuned in to the frequency of the buildings, going through all the emotional processes with the architecture.

“ We get to the point where we cannot describe our impressions of an object without treating it as a living thing with its own physiognomy.”<sup>1</sup> This is exceptionally true with architecture as such animation of a building makes it easier to experience its architecture rather than as the addition of many separate technological details. Instead of using professional jargons (architectural vocabulary) that most people do not understand or could not fully understand, causing misunderstanding and confusion when perceiving space, using metaphors to convey certain ideas is so much easier and understandable by people from all professions and social levels. That is one of the many reasons why people like to personify spaces literally.

Architecture should be appreciated by everyone from everywhere, which is also another crucial criteria for good architecture as it has a social responsibility once it is erected on the ground.

### **Spatial Perception in the context of ART**

Whether architecture makes an impression on the observer and what impression it makes, depends not only on the architecture itself but to great extent on the observer's " susceptibility, his mentality, his education and his entire environment." It also depends on the mood he is in at the moment he is experiencing the architecture. We all have our preferences and prejudices in architecture as in anything else and our experiences determine our attitude towards it. This can be interpreted in the same way like above. The

same painting can affect us very differently at different times and that is why it is always so exciting to return to a piece of art work we have seen before to find out whether we still react to it in the same way. This proves that a single building or a specific space can affect us differently, gives us a different feeling each time we experience it again and again.

What do you get when you put Art and Building together? Architecture. What do you get when you put Living Space and Architecture together? Living Sculpture. Architecture has been understood as the art of establishing place by bounding space. To distinguish between arts of space and arts of time, between formative and expressive arts, and therefore also between arts of presence and arts of absence. Painting, sculpture and architecture are included among the former, poetry and music among the latter.

The most dominant similarity between art and architecture is - " Art should not be explained; it must be experienced." Architecture is not just simply looking at plans, elevations and sections, there is something more to it - it must be experienced, just like art. No photograph, film or video can reproduce the sense of form, space, light and shade, solidity and weight that is gained from visiting buildings. It is not enough to see architecture; you must experience it.

" You must dwell in the rooms, feel how they close about you and observe how you are naturally led from one room to the other."

The most dominant difference between art and architecture is - An architect works with forms and mass just as the sculptor does, but his is a functional art. It solves practical problems. In other words, the former has a decisive

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factor to it: Utility. Indeed, one of the proofs of / criteria for good architecture is that it is being utilized and perceived as the architect or designer had planned, even after a long period of time.

We stand before a picture; most sculptures invite us to change our position, perhaps even to walk around them; architecture not only invites us to change our position, but to enter and move around within it. Generalizing, we can say that body and body awareness become more important as we turn from painting to sculpture to architecture. Our experience of sculpture involves the body in a more obvious way than does painting; most sculpture invites us to explore it by moving past it. Robert Morris celebrates the observer's relationship to sculpture; his works let observers recognize that they themselves are establishing relationships as they "apprehend the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context." In a more obvious way, architecture is experienced by the moving body: we approach a building, walk by or around it and perhaps enter it. "Architecture is the art into which we walk; it is the art that envelops us." As noted, painters and sculptors affect our senses and perception by creating changes in patterns, and in proportional relationships between shapes, through the manipulation of light and colour, but only architects shape the space in which we live and through which we move.

### **Architecture Appreciation through Perception**

Architectural spaces are more than just a stage of our lives; they also reflect the society, the image of an era and most importantly the culture. Therefore the spatial experience provided has become an important factor in the communication of the architecture and the perceiver. The virtue of a

successful architecture is based on the language of the experience provided rather than the form itself, which mediated between the perceiver and the space. A successful architecture is also capable of transmitting the philosophy and concepts that the space wants to convey and the experience the space provides is vital in terms of introducing the perceiver to the personality of the space. The spatial experience should be something to be enjoyed and shared by the majority of people. If it is shared more widely because more people understand it, take it seriously; chances are the space has being perceived and appreciated by the public and fulfilled its social responsibility.

Enjoyment of space and form is a birthright. This enjoyment can be heightened in two basic ways: through the thoughtful design of buildings and related spaces and through the user's development of awareness and perception of architecture. Architecture can be important to the enrichment of life. And after so many years, architects and designers are still learning how users interact with space and form and how skilfully designed space and form respond to human needs.

**Scenario: Two men attend a concert.**

One studied music. Has a trained ear. Spent years developing a high degree of music appreciation. Loves great works of great composers. This concert is heaven to him. To the other man, the concert is a bore. He has had little exposure to serious music. No real knowledge of music. Never learned to listen and does not even know that he has been deprived of the pleasure of fine music. He can hardly wait until the concert is over...



During intermission, the same two people react very differently as they walk around and within the concert building experiencing its space and form.

Now the music lover is bored. He knows almost nothing about buildings. He is visually illiterate. The other person, however, has spent years developing an appreciation of buildings. He has a trained eye. He derives pleasure from the quality of space and form of the great hall. He is stirred to maximum enjoyment. To him, architecture is visual music.

The term “ architecture appreciation” is used to promote the idea that architecture can be enjoyed, much as the performing or visual arts, physically through the senses. Architecture appreciation, like music appreciation or art appreciation is learned. In music, it is learning how to hear. In art, how to see. In the case of architecture, it is learning how to perceive. Enjoying buildings requires some knowledge and some practice in perceiving space and form. You need to know something about buildings, you need to hone your awareness and you need to know something about yourself too. How do you respond to space and form?

Architecture is a personal, enjoyable, necessary experience. A person perceives and appreciates space and form from three distinctly different but interrelated attitudes: from the physical, from the emotional, and from the intellectual. The architecture experience evokes a response which fulfils physical, emotional, and intellectual needs, effecting an enjoyable interaction between the person and the building.

Space perception is happening everywhere, anytime. Wherever people are, there are buildings. Where buildings are, there are spatial experience.

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Appreciation of the works of creative architects and designers demands creativity from our part. Through accumulated experience and knowledge we design our own appreciation and experience.

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