

Wednesday, August 21 | 1:30 PM



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Embodied And Empathic Imagination - Intuiting Experience And Emotion In Architecture

Contemporary architecture and design are frequently accused of restrictive and exclusive esthetics, emotional coldness, and a general distance to life. "Why is it that architecture and architects, unlike film and filmmakers, are so little interested in people during the design process? Why are they so theoretical, so distant from life in general?", the Dutch film scholar Jan Vrijman asks. This criticism suggests that instead of tuning our buildings with the true realities and mental values in life, we have adopted external, intellectualized and formalist aspirations. Indeed, architecture and design seek formal perfection, and this aspiration tends to get into conflict with the spontaneity and imperfection of existentially real life. No doubt, Modernism at large - its theory and education, as well as practice - have focused more on concepts, spaces, forms and aesthetic criteria than the interaction of the designed entity and real life.

I wish to support architectural thinking that incorporates life in all its practical and mental implications. The reductive and formalist attitude denies the essential spontaneity and "messiness" of life and tends to turn life itself into a constrained and predictable behavior. Since the influential books of Sigfried Giedion and Bruno Zevi, during the formative years of modern architectural thinking, architects have been constantly using the notion of "space". However, space is an abstract concept of physics, not an experiential reality or quality; we experience always specific places instead of abstract and conceptual spaces, and architects should aim their thinking to experiential places instead of spaces.

Architectural theories, as well as education, focus on form, geometry and material construction, but the experiential, mental and emotive meanings of architecture are constituted in its experience. As the poet John Keats wrote: "Nothing is real, until it has been experienced". In my view, the most human of our capacities is imagination; we would not even have ethical judgment without our capacity to imagine the consequences of our alternative choices. Artistic and design work is work that takes place in and through imaginative identification, and consequently, imagination should be purposefully taught and trained in education. Today, the uncritical use of computers in education, as well as in the early phases of architectural design, tend to dull or eliminate our natural and biologically evolved mental capacities, especially our embodied imagination and emotive skills.