

Introduction

My little book *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* was first published in 1996 in the 'Polemics' series of Academy Editions, London. The editors of the series invited me to write an extended essay of 32 pages on a subject matter that I found pertinent in the architectural discourse of the time.

The second part of the manuscript took its basic ideas from an essay entitled 'An Architecture of the Seven Senses', published in the July 1994 special edition of *A+U* entitled *Questions of Perception*, a publication on Steven Holl's architectural work, which also included essays by Holl himself and Alberto Pérez-Gómez. A somewhat later lecture of mine given in a seminar on architectural phenomenology at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen in June 1995, where the three writers of *Questions of Perception* presented lectures, provided the basic arguments and references for the first part of this book.

Somewhat to my surprise, the humble book was received very positively, and it became required reading in architectural theory courses in numerous schools of architecture around the world.

The polemical essay was initially based on my personal experiences, views and speculations. I had simply become increasingly concerned about the dominance of vision and the suppression of other senses in the way architecture was taught, conceived and critiqued, and the consequent disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities from architecture.

As this new edition was first discussed between the publisher and myself, I was hesitant to expand my text of the original edition, as I consider the original edition a historical document, which is grounded in the understanding and thinking of the senses at the time the book was written, more than a quarter of a century ago. However, I agreed to make minor corrections and clarifications, which do not alter the original arguments, but make them easier to understand. The additions also intentionally expand the original arguments beyond the senses to the existential sphere of architecture.

During the years since I wrote the book, interest in the significance of the senses, both philosophically and in terms of experiencing, teaching and making architecture, has grown significantly. My assumptions about the role of the body as the locus of perception, thought and consciousness, as well as about the significance of the senses in articulating, storing and processing sensory responses and thoughts, have been strengthened and confirmed by other writers. In particular, philosophical investigations on human embodiment, experience and atmospheres, as well as recent neurological research on the senses, have provided support for my assumptions.

In the 28 years since the first publication of the book, my thinking has deepened and widened. For instance, I have understood the significance of atmospheres in our multisensory experiences and evaluations of environments and architecture.

With the choice of the title 'The Eyes of the Skin', I wished to express the significance of the tactile sense for our experience and understanding of the world, but I also intended to create a conceptual short circuit between the dominant sense of vision and the suppressed sense modality of touch. Later, in a conversation with the American light artist, James Turrell, I learned that our skin is capable of distinguishing a number of colours; we actually do see by our skin.¹

The significance of the tactile sense in human life has become increasingly evident. The view of Ashley Montagu, the anthropologist, based on medical evidence, confirms the primacy of the haptic realm:

[The skin] is the oldest and the most sensitive of our organs, our first medium of communication, and our most efficient protector [. . .] Even the transparent cornea of the eye is overlain by a layer of modified skin [. . .] Touch is the parent of our eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is the sense which became differentiated into the others, a fact that seems to be recognized in the age-old evaluation of touch as 'the mother of the senses'.²

Touch is the sensory mode which integrates our experiences of the world and of ourselves. Even visual perceptions are fused and integrated into the haptic continuum of the self; my body remembers who I am and how I am located in the world. My body is truly the navel of my world, not in the sense of the viewing point of the central perspective, but as the very locus of reference, memory, imagination and integration. All the senses, including vision, are, in a way, extensions of the tactile sense; the senses are specialisations of skin tissue, and all sensory experiences are modes of touching, and thus related to tactility. Our contact with the world takes place at the boundary line of the self through specialised parts of our enveloping membrane. We humans, just as all animals, are extending ourselves into the world through our actions as well as material and mental constructions. As representatives of Homo sapience, our image of self does not stop at the skin, as we relate and extend ourselves in countless ways by means of mobility, technology, materials, culture and beliefs, both scientific and religious.

It is evident that 'life-enhancing'³ architecture has to address all the senses simultaneously, and help to fuse our image of self with our experience of the world. Architecture is fundamentally a relational art; it relates us with both the intimacies and immensities of the world. The essential mental task of buildings is relational accommodation and integration. They project our human measures and sense of order into the measureless and meaningless natural space. Architecture does not make us inhabit worlds of mere fabrication and fantasy; it articulates the experience of our being-in-the-world and strengthens our sense of reality and self. Most importantly, it projects experiential meaning to our existence in the world.

The sense of self, strengthened by art and architecture, also permits us to engage fully in the mental dimensions of dream, imagination and desire. Buildings and cities provide the horizon for the understanding and confronting of the human existential condition. Instead of creating mere objects of visual seduction, architecture relates, mediates and projects meanings. The ultimate meaning of any building is beyond architecture; it directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our own sense of self and being. Profound architecture makes us experience ourselves as complete, embodied and spiritual beings. In fact, this is the great function of all meaningful art.

In the experience of art, a peculiar exchange takes place; I lend my emotions and associations to the place, and the place lends me its atmosphere, which entices and emancipates my perceptions and thoughts. An architectural work is not experienced as a series of isolated retinal pictures, but in its full and integrated material, embodied and spiritual essence. It offers pleasurable shapes and surfaces moulded for the touch of the eye and the other senses, but it also incorporates and integrates physical and mental structures, giving our existential experience a strengthened coherence and significance.

In creative work, the artist, craftsman and architect are directly engaged with their bodies and their existential experiences rather than focusing on an external and objectified problem. True artistic works are always relational entities, fusing and integrating our external and internal worlds, our bodily experiences and mental imageries. The message and value of a piece of sculpture or an architectural structure is not in its material existence, but in the poetic experiences and emotions that it mediates of our life world and its meanings.

A wise architect, also, works with his/her entire body and sense of self. While working on a building or an object, the architect is simultaneously engaged in a reverse perspective, his/her self-image, or more precisely, existential experience. In creative work, a powerful identification and projection takes place; the entire bodily and mental constitution of the maker becomes the site of the work. Ludwig Wittgenstein acknowledges the interaction of both philosophical and architectural work with the image of self: 'Working in philosophy – like work in architecture in many respects – is really more a work on oneself. On one's own interpretation. On how one sees things [. . .]'.⁴

The computer is usually seen as a solely beneficial invention, which liberates human fantasy. I wish to express my serious concern in this respect, at least considering the current role of the computer in education and the design process. Computer imaging tends to flatten our magnificent, multisensory, simultaneous and synchronic capacities of imagination by turning the design process into a passive visual manipulation, a retinal journey. Design is not merely a rational, technical and performative task; architecture relates us to the

course and depth of culture and makes our existence understandable. Architecture helps us give human existence its human as well as metaphysical meaning; we do not dwell only in space, place and time; we also dwell in hidden myths and spirit. Existence and life are not abstractions, and the task of the art of building is to clarify and relate human existence and give it meanings that exceed the mundane.

The computer creates a distance between the maker and the object, whereas drawing by hand as well as working with models put the designer in a haptic contact with the object, or space. When drawing, we touch the object and hold it in our hands. In our imagination, the object is simultaneously held in the hand and inside the head, and the imagined and projected physical image is modelled by our embodied imagination. We are inside and outside of the conceived object at the same time. Creative work calls for a bodily and mental identification, empathy and compassion. Recent research on mirror neurons provides an experimental basis for the understanding of the complex processes of embodied simulation.⁵

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We tend to think of the sense of vision only as the focused vision. However, the role of peripheral and unfocused vision in our lived experience of the world, as well as in our experience of interiority in the spaces we inhabit, has evoked my interest. A remarkable factor in the experience of enveloping spatiality, interiority and hapticity is the deliberate suppression of sharp, focused vision. This issue has hardly entered the theoretical discourse of architecture as architectural theorising continues to be interested in focused vision, pure and clear form, conscious intentionality and perspectival representation. The very essence of the lived experience is moulded by unconscious haptic imagery and unfocused peripheral vision. Focused vision confronts us with the world, whereas peripheral vision envelops us in 'the flesh of the world', to use an expression of Merleau-Ponty. Alongside the critique of the hegemony of vision, we need to reconsider the very essence of sight itself and the essential collaboration of the various sensory realms.

Photographed architectural images are centralised images of focused Gestalt. Yet, the quality of an architectural reality seems to depend fundamentally on peripheral vision, which enfolds the subject in the space. A forest context and richly moulded architectural spaces provide ample stimuli for peripheral vision, and these settings centre us in the very place, both material and experiential. The preconscious perceptual realm, which is experienced outside the sphere of focused vision, seems to be more important existentially than the focused image. In fact, there is medical evidence that peripheral vision has a higher priority in our perceptual and mental system.⁶

These observations suggest that one of the reasons why the architectural and urban settings of our time tend to make us outsiders, in comparison with the forceful emotional engagement of natural and historical settings, is their poverty of the field of peripheral vision. Unconscious peripheral perception transforms retinal Gestalt into spatial and bodily experiences. Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators.

Architectural theorising, education and practices have primarily been concerned with form. Yet, we have an astonishing capacity to perceive and grasp unconsciously and peripherally complex environmental entities and atmospheres. Atmospheric characteristics of spaces, places and settings are grasped before any conscious observation of details is made. Despite the obvious importance of atmospheric perception, it has hardly been introduced in architectural discourse. Again, neurological investigations suggest that our processes of perception and cognition advance from the instantaneous grasp of entities towards the identification of details, rather than the other way round.

Since writing *The Eyes of the Skin* 28 years ago, I have expanded my critical analysis of the neglect of the embodied essence of perception, cognition and consciousness in two later books also published by John Wiley & Sons: *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (Chichester, 2009) and *The Embodied Image: Imagination and Imagery in Architecture* (Chichester, 2011). My next book *Rootedness: reflections for young architects*, currently in the editorial process at Wiley, is more deeply engaged in the existential issues of architecture, as well as of studying and practising this significant craft.

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