

Empathy in the Design of Urban Spaces

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The establishing shot: a city skyline, a helicopter flyby. It is instantly clear that the scene takes place in Las Vegas, in Miami, in New York. Cut to a scene: a body, a character; the story begins. The opening moments to NBC's *C.S.I.* franchise are iconic, appearing in every episode. The first sequence of shots frames the skyline and the city grid but when the story begins, the camera is at street level - the level of human interaction.

Similarly, Michel de Certeau stands atop New York's World Trade Center towers to illustrate his theories of urban living in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He uses this contemporary view of the city in contrast with how people unconsciously navigate daily life. Individuals see and adapt to things at eye level, intimately aware of their surroundings. The hegemonic order favors the overhead view in the design and control of the city. People, however, naturally ignore imposed order and find their own way at ground level, influenced yet never controlled by strategies in place.¹

In *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, William H. Whyte explores the plazas of corporate New York as well as other urban spaces in order to discover empirically how city space is used. Whyte observes from the tops of neighboring buildings and also, more significantly, at street level. From the elevated viewpoint, Whyte speaks of the "what" but not of the "why." Like *C.S.I.*'s opening scenes, it is not until he reaches the street that he makes the social connections that are invisible from above. At street level, where people interact with each other and their environment, the

real story is to be found. Instead of establishing a dominant whole, a story told at street level celebrates the intricacies of life.²

De Certeau named the controlling order's actions 'strategies' and the actions of the everyday individual within the urban environment 'tactics.'³ Whyte, during his career, used his empirically gathered evidence to assist the New York City planning commission in creating a set of guidelines for the design of new urban spaces. In essence, Whyte created new strategies which according to de Certeau, people will unconsciously subvert using tactics.⁴ Some examples of tactics may be as benign as cutting through the grass, crossing the street outside of the crosswalk, and not stepping on cracks in the sidewalk. De Certeau stated, however, that these tactics cannot be analyzed. Being unconscious, they defy analysis. As soon as the conscious mind realizes them, they stop being tactics.⁵ Urban spaces have a great impact on people, and designers of these spaces have a responsibility to enhance and sculpt the elements that most influence the day to day experience. The emotional impact of these elements within the city is a fundamentally important feature that acts on the unconscious mind and shapes the perceptions of urban space. How then can designers discover and utilize what works emotionally in the design of cities?

Everyone uses their powers of observation on a daily basis, using senses and intuition to make inferences about the world, but architects sometimes miss opportunities to apply what they experience. Watching people and

analyzing their actions may serve to better one's sense of the urban impulse – the instinctual response of people to their surroundings, as Whyte discovered, but that is merely the beginning. There is an aspect of architectural training and discourse that has a rich background in the social sciences that is often talked about but hasn't been explored to its fullest potential. This aspect is the utilization of empathy. In the following discussion, the current and historical views of empathy will be presented alongside a case study of Washington D.C. The case study will illustrate the discourse on empathy and show how people interact empathically with each other and their environments. This will illustrate the importance of empathy in architectural discourse.

Architecture and Empathy

The American Heritage Dictionary defines empathy in two ways, the first as "Identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives." ⁶ Within that definition are keywords that architects and educators use quite often. For example, Le Corbusier said:

"The Architect, by his arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of his spirit; by forms and shapes he affects our senses to an acute degree and provokes plastic emotions; by the relationships which he creates he wakes profound echoes in us, he gives us the measure of an order which we feel to be in accordance with that of our world, he determines the various movements of our heart and of our understanding; it is then that we experience the sense of beauty." ⁷

In short, Le Corbusier is imploring architects to do exactly what the definition of empathy requires. Students frequently talk about how their buildings feel as opposed to how they look, sound, or smell. They refer not to physical touch, but the emotive qualities of the space. They refer to the empathic feelings which they desire to evoke through their designs. A more complete understanding of the history of empathy as well as an explanation of the theories on how to become more empathic would greatly enhance the abilities of the architect. It may also shed light onto which aspects of human environmental interaction can be analyzed and discovered,

creating more successful urban environments.

Empathy is primarily investigated in the fields of psychology and social science. An early discussion of the term was written by German Philosopher Robert Vischer. It is from his investigation, as well as Theodore Lipps and others, that the second empathy definition arises. This definition, "The attribution of one's own feelings to an object," is also useful to discussions of architectural empathy.⁸

Robert Vischer was one of the first philosophers to write of a phenomenon called "*Einfühlung*" which translates as "in-feeling." Vischer spoke of the tendency to attribute human feelings and emotions to art objects. He theorized that this comes from a desire to imbue lifeless objects with warmth and life from one's own body.⁹

In order to understand and investigate Ce Certeau and Whyte's empirical analyses, I embarked on a similar investigation in Washington D.C. I chose to walk 8th Street between F and Pennsylvania because it was both a journey and a destination, with people traveling to and through. It contained gathering spaces and a variety of building and space types. I then set out to observe, to "feel-in," and document the qualities of space found along the street. What follows is a discussion of 8th Street alongside empathy theories in order to understand and clarify how the urban street could be improved.

Washington D.C. 8th St. and F. Early morning. The Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Arts and Portraiture stands at the end of the tree-lined corridor. Its Corinthian columns are soldiers, guarding the precious works of art kept safe behind the imposing facade. Small doors, like missing teeth, present the sole means of entry. Bleached by the intense sunlight, the stone reflects the brightness from which the only refuge is a single bench standing off to the side under a tree, in reality an overgrown bush. The people waiting for the gallery to open sit, talking quietly amongst themselves, oblivious to the designed view of the National Archives to the South. "It's a huge building." People walk on the opposite side of the street, avoiding the immense facade hanging over them like a cliff face above the street.

Theodor Lipps, a German aestheticist, further discusses this phenomenon of "*Einfühlung*".

He writes,

"The (Doric) column seems to brace itself and raise itself, that is to say, to proceed in the way in which I do when I pull myself together and raise myself, or remain thus tense and erect, in opposition to the natural inertness of my body. It is impossible for me to be aware of the column without this activity seeming to exist directly in the column of which I am aware."¹⁰

Lipps explains that when one observes an object of aesthetic importance, he or she senses within it forces and movements that can be reflected on using one's own self. His example above, the Doric column, is the "in-feeling" of which he speaks.¹¹

Lipps is clear that the actual art piece is the object of the experience, and one's feelings are the way one senses that object. One sees the skyscraper, built of steel and glass, with a wide base and a soaring height. One knows the erect nature, the strength within the tower, connecting at a basic level to his or her own body, standing upright, strong and secure.

When he speaks of empathy between people, between an "I" and the other, he says that the "I" loses him or herself completely in the other. In this way people, according to Lipps, make connections which are empathic.¹²

Empathy Between People

Edith Stein, a philosopher who studied under Edmund Husserl, takes issue with this point. She says that empathic feelings, feelings that we have of another's point of view, are not primordial. While we experience empathy, we are aware, even as we live totally in another's experiences, that the feelings we have are not our own, but are being felt due to an other.

The importance of empathy in Stein's writings is how it allows us, as a phenomenal "I", to discover the existence of the other. We see an other first as an object. The initial indicator of emotion, be it verbal, visual, or otherwise, cause the "I" to attempt to find understanding. During this process, the "I" begins to appropriate the emotions of the object through sharing its experience mentally. This empathic connection, this "in-feeling," causes the "I" to view the object as another "I." Stein speaks of three grades of accomplishment: "(1) The emergence of the experience, (2) the fulfilling

explication, and (3) the comprehensive objectification of the explained experience." Through these grades, one discovers the experience of the other and is able to experience it, albeit non-primordially. This leads Stein to call empathy "a kind of act of perceiving." This perception is important for architects when dealing with clients as well as the communities affected by their work. With it, they can discover the feelings and experiences of those for whom they are designing and proceed with a surer sense of what kinds of environments would be appropriate.¹³

On 8th street the door to the CVS drugstore becomes a theater, with the script ever changing. People hold the door for the other; smiling, laughing, scowling, pushing, shoving, talking, thanking. The exchange of human emotion is palpable. It makes the 50 square feet of industrial grade carpet the most alive section of the block. Within Stein's purview, the emerging experience is the meeting between the doorways, the threshold between inside and out. The fulfilling explication: the interaction, the smiling, the talking, the thanking. The comprehensive objectification of the explained experience: the acknowledgment of the other "I."¹⁴

The lack of life across the street could hardly be more jarring. Once a row of active facades, this block has become a farce. Completely lacking windows, the buildings have become parodies. Architectural elements have been tacked on in a failed attempt to disguise buildings no longer intended for human inhabitation. Paint has replaced windows, and steel bars are the new molding. No longer used by living beings, these glorified machinery sheds stand dead in a row like tombstones. The only two signs of human life on this side of the block are on opposite ends of the row. At the North end, a solitary condominium wraps around the corner of 8th and E St. The ground floor is blank, with windows hidden by interior blinds. Effectively removing any communication with the street, the building only looks out from the third story up. Here, bay windows are tacked on, a token gesture, adding no street interaction and looking outward like the one way mirror in a police lineup. At the South end, a corner cafe, Teism attempts to interface with the street. While still well fortified against visual penetration, the cafe has added seating outside along the sidewalk. Like the

restaurants only a block away, this adds much needed human interaction to this side of the street, so dead to pedestrian traffic. The sights and sounds of people enjoying themselves tempt passers-by, enticing them to stop and have a cup of tea, perhaps a bite to eat. The smells of the tea and the kitchen waft down the street, triggering memories of meals enjoyed with family and friends. The attraction of Teatism, with its rudimentary outdoor seating, is undeniable; not an hour passes with an empty seat.

The obvious destination when walking along 8th Street South from the Portrait Museum is the National Archives. Situated along the National Mall, this massive classical structure is framed by the rows of buildings along 8th. Running diagonally in front of the Archives is Pennsylvania Avenue. Connecting the Capitol and the White House, Pennsylvania is a major artery of Washington D.C. With two lanes ushering automobiles both East and West, this four-lane behemoth is a major obstacle for pedestrians. 8th Street ends a block North of Pennsylvania, becoming two patches of grass surrounded by benches. The grass is the closest area for local dogs to do their business, resulting in lush green grass which no one who walks past dares picnic upon, lest they find their trousers ruined. This grass, along with the parallel sidewalks on either side, empties rather unceremoniously into the Naval Memorial.

A Social Science Perspective

The current social science of the study of empathy is concerned with many aspects and consequences of empathic behavior towards others. M.L. Hoffman has been studying empathy in order to find reasons for altruistic behavior. He writes that there are at least five means of developing empathy as one matures. The means discussed here are direct association, the newborn cry, classical conditioning, motor mimicry, and perspective or role taking.

Empathy resulting from a similarly experienced situation can elicit an empathic response. As an illustration of this direct association, Hoffman uses an example of a boy who cuts himself. The boy, seeing another person who has been injured in the same manner, recalls his physical and emotional state during his own injury. People whom associate negative

emotions with a certain place will probably wish to change the aspects of the architecture which stir these feelings.¹⁵ An architect needs to be aware of the environment for which he or she is designing and be sensitive to any associative empathic responses he or she may elicit unintentionally. The direct associative properties of the urban environment have been discussed by Kevin Lynch in his book *The Image of the City*. He states, "Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequence of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences."¹⁶ This "memory of past experiences" is key to creating an empathic link through direct association. Through the surroundings of a site, one can create empathic links to other urban settings, other memories, other experiences.

Some of Hoffman's modes may not have architectural implications. The "newborn cry" is learned during infancy. When a newborn infant hears another infant cry, the infant cries as well. This, according to Hoffman, is not merely an emotional response to a loud sound, such as a door slamming. Instead, it is an emotional response to the distress of another human being. The newborn cry is indicative that the beginnings of empathy are formed shortly after birth.

In a similar vein, classical conditioning is when mothers transfer their emotional state through bodily movements, facial expressions, and other physical means which the child then notices and internalizes. Thus, whenever the child senses these cues in the future from the mother as well as other individuals, he or she feels that emotion again.

Motor mimicry is an instinctual tendency of humans to note what they see in the other and imitate it. Small facial movements, changes in stance, and actions observed in others tend to be imitated by the observer, who comes to associate the emotions being felt with these movements and physical expressions. When a person tells a story in which they are happy, they smile. The listener, imitating the speaker, also smiles, creating an empathic link between smiling and feelings of happiness.¹⁷

Children at the Naval Memorial run around the space, climbing stairs, jumping, laughing, playing. Parents and strangers observe, joining in when overcome by shared emotion. The physical activity stirs up long dormant

emotion, which can be plainly read on their faces. Photographers share the best spots from which to take pictures of the events. Japanese tourists find their native country on the map built into the floor of the Oval, the land mass out of one color stone, the sea another. As they find their homeland, other people search for their hometowns, favorite vacation spots, or simply try to identify the land masses. The interplay of strangers is slightly chaotic, resembling a free skate at an ice rink, but within the chaos is a sense of connection. People are sensing a shared well of emotion, caused by the similar nature of their experience.

The empathic mode of role taking occurs when a subject imagines him or herself in the place of the other, sharing their physical and emotional experiences. For example, one sees an other who has lost his or her parent to a disease. Imagining oneself to be the person who has experienced this loss, one can experience an empathic understanding which will enable him or her to grasp the other's experience.¹⁸

The Memorial, a large ovoid depression that lies between Pennsylvania Avenue on the South and two neoclassical buildings facing D Street on the North, presents itself as an accidental success. Intending to be a gathering place of its own, this large, flat, gray stone plaza gathers most of its visitors by virtue of impossibly reconcilable circumstances. Individuals on their way to the National Archives from the Portrait Museum, following the grand designed axis, find themselves at a loss as to where they should go. The axis, running in plan the entire way to the Archives, falls apart for the foot traveler, who finds no direct access to the Archives due to the interference of Pennsylvania Avenue. It is because of this that often, there are many people found sitting on the benches and steps of this Memorial, looking at maps. Eventually they discover the crosswalks located one half block East and West and typically go their merry way.

Entrance to the plaza is provided in a myriad of ways. Small sets of stairs descent from the North and ascend from the South. From the East and West the sidewalk flows into the main gathering space naturally, like an estuary into the ocean. The oval shape is defined by stairs, benches, and fountains on all sides. People

find themselves facing each other by virtue of the shape of the benches, looking at each other whether they like to or not. A fantastic space to watch people; there is always activity. An elderly gentleman, retired Navy, poses in front of the Lone Sailor, a statue of a Naval personnel with his collar turned up against the cold. The statue acts as a focal point for the plaza, and also as an art object people can relate to in the vein of Theodore Lipps; they can feel the cold, the strength of the sailor, standing by himself, with only the contents of his duffel bag. There is an attraction felt towards this statue, and because of this it is one of the most active portions of the Memorial. This space, of people watching and in turn being watched, allows for role taking on an exceptional level. One can let their emotions stretch out towards the other, searching for understanding.

Other Considerations

Congenital Analgia is the inability to feel pain. Only a small number of cases have been diagnosed since it was discovered.¹⁹ Begging questions about empathy, this condition is an interesting discussion point. One of M.L. Hoffman's methods of learning empathy is the result of similarly experienced situations. In his discussion of the boy who cuts himself and later feels empathy, the question arises; if the boy could feel no physical pain, would he still feel an empathic response, and what exactly does this mean for the discussion of empathy? The obvious (and correct) answer is no. The boy would not feel an empathic response due to this mode since he has no shared experience with which to understand the "other". This by itself makes little difference, since many emotions are still intact, such as his ability to experience beauty, emotional pain, and various stimuli, but it does offer interesting discussion points within the topic area of empathy.

The following state in contemporary design offers another interesting discussion. Many current architects are using materials which could be met with an undesirable reaction. For example, Tadao Ando uses concrete quite often in his designs, creating massive geometric environments. When visiting his buildings, one's initial reaction might be a cold feeling, a chill caused by his or her negative experience with concrete as a material in the past. This past experience might have been with concrete used in floors, foundations, slabs, columns,

etc. Rarely have they come into contact with concrete as a finish, a design choice. Therefore, the initial "feeling-in" of Ando's architecture might be cool, sterile, and completely opposite of his intent. Whose error is this? Spending some time in his buildings might give the opportunity to learn the genuine warmth of his spaces, the majesty of his forms, a respect for his use of the unfinished element to create an internal discourse, a what-if scenario that enriches the experience. Much of this change of opinion comes from spending time in the buildings, searching the feelings that stir inside. This is in line with Corbusier's statement of the architect's responsibilities as well as Vischer's statement of how we inject our emotions into an object. One's experiences within Ando's spaces allows the injection of one's own emotions into them, and this, working in tandem with Ando's design choices, helps remove the reaction of cold foreignness, replacing them with warmth and a sense of beauty.

Many urban planners see the built environment as de Certeau does from the top of the World Trade Center, as crossing streets and building lots. Instead, empathy theory shows us how, if instead of remaining distant, designers instead travel down to the level of the individual, their connections to their surroundings and experiences, they can discover a much richer source of influence which will resonate at a level found deeper within a person. Much like Whyte after he steps down from the building top, the empathic qualities of the spaces and the people within them can create more successful urban environments.

Endnotes

¹ de Certeau, Michel. *Arts De Faire. English; the Practice of Everyday Life*. Social History. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984: 480.

² Whyte, William Hollingsworth, and Project for Public Spaces. *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*. Videorecording. New York, N.Y.: Project for public spaces Inc., 2002.

³ de Certeau, *Arts De Faire. English; the Practice of Everyday Life*, 480.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992

⁷ Le Corbusier. *Towards a New Architecture* [Vers une architecture.English]. New York: Dover Publications, 1986: 1.

⁸ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

⁹ Vischer, Robert, Harry Francis Mallgrave, and Eleftherios Ikonomou. *Empathy, Form, and Space : Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*. Texts & Documents. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994: 104.

¹⁰ Langfeld, Herbert Sidney. *The Aesthetic Attitude*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920: 115.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 115.

¹² Stein, Edith, and Waltraut Stein. *On the Problem of Empathy*. The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1964: 14.

¹³ *Ibid*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Nebraska Symposium on Motivation (25th : 1977 University of Nebraska), and Charles Blake Keasey. *Social Cognitive Development : Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 1977*. Current Theory and Research in Motivation. Vol. 25. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977: 169-218.

¹⁶ Lynch, Kevin. *The Image of the City*. Publication of the Joint Center for Urban Studies. Cambridge Mass.: Technology Press, 1960.

¹⁷ Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, 169-218.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 169-218.

¹⁹ Gorke W., "The Differential Diagnosis of Congenital Analgesia and Other Diseases with Diminished Pain Perception in Childhood. Case Report and Review." *Neuropediatrics*. Feb., 1981: 33-44.