

After moving to Pittsburgh from Los Angeles, I discovered a museum on the north side unlike any other. One dedicated to installation art, pushing toward architecture, in the sense, the artists create a transformative space.

Yoshihiro Suda's work was one of the first I experienced. When I entered his room, it looked empty, thinking it was not part of the show I moved on to the next room. But, I distinctly remember thinking this museum was so unique and a great venue for experimenting artists, because it wasn't the typical white sterile box hermetically sealed, this museum breathed. Although it had brick walls and squeaky wood floors, remnants of an earlier factory, it was the occasional weed growing up through a crack that made it seem as if anything was possible in this museum. A small thing, but a very powerful detail.

But this weed, in this room, was not thriving in a museum that seemed to leave such things unattended. It was placed there by the artist and that was his only installation into the space. With that single minimal gesture, he achieved his effect and in a way that cemented for me the power of small moves operating in the realm of a secondary forum. Not a primary arena where things are obviously presented as the main attraction, set on a pedestal and framed, as if to say this is what you are to look at, bringing with it all of the context and precedent of an establishment. No, this background medium is understated, intended to operate directly on the senses bypassing the conscious mind. And, in that format, the effect is much quicker, a visceral response, the kind of thing that happens with a first impression. One often can't put a finger on it, but the feeling stays with you. Resonating on a deeper level, these feelings become lasting memories and set the atmosphere for all the other elements that operate on the surface.

Rolf Julius experiments within the same dimension, but with a different device, the ears. Pitch and volume are modulated to sit at the edge of conscious awareness. In this case, the sounds of birds chirping emanates from crevices in stones walls of an outdoor garden, the entrance to the museum. Again, one walks by thinking nothing more than a few birds must be nearby, as if one was walking into an aviary. But the effect is undeniable. Everyone perceives it and their impression of the space is influenced by it, even though the reason and cause might go unnoticed.

James Turrell takes it a little further. In one of his permanent installations into the museum, he uses the medium of light to play on the subconscious mind, but he is upfront about it. Entering a darkened room, feeling your way to a seat, the stage is set where you expect to see something. You are looking for his piece and it takes a few minutes to find it. The light projected on the wall in front of you is so dim, that your eyes need to adjust before you begin to see it. At least you think you see it, but as time passes you begin to think maybe not. You become unsure. There is a faint spot visible, but it is difficult to determine if it is something in the room or in your eyes, much like the spots visible after looking at a light bulb. Boundary is blurred between you and your surroundings.

The Mattress Factory Museum forever shaped my view on architecture, making clear where its true strength lies. Even more, the museum has become a standard from which I measure my own work and a place I can return to frequently, tuning my subconscious sensibilities.

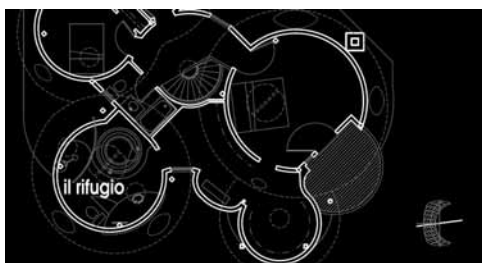
Keeping the senses sharp is the life blood of an architect. And one has to continually work at it, selectively exposing oneself to particular environments, to improve their tool set.

Manfred Honeck's debut as the new music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony was one such event. My wife and I were sitting in the last row of the balcony, my favorite place to sit. On the second piece, a prelude written by a Russian composer, something happened reminiscent of these experimental artists.

Mr. Honeck is a soft spoken man. So much so, watching an interview of him almost becomes a strain to comprehend his words through his whispers tainted by an Austrian accent. Before this performance, I thought it just an oddity, but on the last few bars of this piece, it all became apparent.

A musical phrase repeated to conclude the movement and as conductor, Mr. Honeck brought the volume down progressively with each play. To the point on the last rendition, I could not tell if the sound was coming from the instruments or they had fallen silent to the gentle and slowing motion of his baton. From the last row of the auditorium, the faintest of notes do not always carry. And in this case, they may not have. All that I might have heard was the sound of the previous bars still ringing in my head. I listened intently holding my breath, focusing my attention, as hard as I tried I couldn't be certain. Those last few notes ventured into the roots of the mind, where perception is suspended between the internal and the external.

*La Jetée*, a short film by Chris Marker takes this duality into a medium at the heart of architectural space. A story of explorers able to travel back through time, by probing the depths and power of emotional memory. Through the mind places are visited, not replayed as a past memory, but using the catalog of information to tap into an earlier moment. Division between personal memories and shared experiences becomes unclear, calling into question the location of the subconscious and its role linking the two. Space is cerebral, without limits.



i cinque punti di architettura:

l'uovo

shelter, warmth, shade... a sense of safety and comfort.

An external envelope, for protection from the natural elements.

la vita

living, laughing, conversing... the open part of a home.

A place to entertain guests and grow social relationships.

la cucina

cook, dine, bond... the source of nourishment.

A fire and table, for family to gather around and share.

il rifugio

recline, rest, rejuvenate... a private suite.

A familiar place, to escape the stresses in daily life.

il vuoto

void, śūnyatā, nothingness... the source of creativity.

A personal space for reflection and giving thanks.

In undergraduate school at Ohio State, our studio was reprimanded for what was called a 'shanty town'. Sheets of chipboard and foamcore pinned to cantilevering balsa and basswood sticks, enclosing the drafting tables of naive students eager to inhabit their own designs. But the administration, just as eager to bring potential donors through the studios, wanted first impressions of an idea foundry, not a slum settlement.

Equally emphasized though, was focus on 'affordable housing' design for low income and homeless found in urban centers. The recent population shift, with a majority of people now living in cities, has one out of three urban dwellers living in shanty towns, nearly a billion people. These settlements on the edge of civilization, often lack urban planning, formal streets, sanitation networks, electricity or police, medical, and fire fighting services. What they do offer is a knowledge base for sustainable living, efficient footprints, low energy usage, reclaimed materials, community centered, handmade by the inhabitants, and the maximization of existing topography. Occupying the leftover spaces, squatters are the largest builders of housing in the world, mixing more concrete, laying more brick than any commercial developer or national government.

A house is more than a luxury, it is necessary for survival. When society does not provide enough, ingenuity steps in.

Essential needs are met, beginning with the external elements, a roof overhead and walls to enclose, followed by a proxemic layering of space, from the place defined by social interaction down to a private spot for personal reflection or meditation.

Form follows need.

To escape the heat of the day and the cold of the night, merchants traveling the desert trade routes would put up high ceiling tents, covering the sand and sides with rich carpets, then light them with spectacular pierced bronze lanterns. Nomadic people, they carried only the essentials. Practicality is the great reductionist, quickly identifying frivolity. Decorations such as these served more than a wind break and comfort extended beyond the physical body or pleasures of the eye. The vastness of the desert can overwhelm the mind. Merely a grain in a sea of sand, these travelers pitched ceilings and walls so they could define their space, rather than be defined by it.

What is this need for a lamp post at night?

To see where we go in hurry or flight?

No... it is to mask our fear with light  
of truth hidden in stars only visible at night.

Nature's unknowns are too much for many. Separation at a safe distance is often provided by muted boxes, a vocabulary foreign to the universe, to give credence we are beyond it. What little exposure we allow ourselves is carefully controlled through shaded windows and closed doors.

My graduate thesis studied the affects of architectural form and space on people. Installations tested visual perception and proxemic variations. Since that time, in my professional practice, I have come to realize the space architectural form defines is personal, perceived differently by every person. Intimate within the space of a home.

Daily life is filled with feelings, intuition, premonition. And yet, when a friend asks what you have done today, responses rarely include 'I looked at the sun's reflection in the window or rain drops running down a windowpane.' Solitude can sometimes bring intense moments of fullness. It's all these little things, often too personal to share, that define a person.

Consciously, most of these moments are forgotten. Every once in a while though, one will resonate on some level and become a memory lasting a lifetime. Life is not a series of sunsets, it is a particular sunrise, taken in at a specific time. In the end, these intimate moments are the great driving force behind motivations, our doings, even if we are not aware.

Days are filled making memories from moments, it is natural. The act of doing so, the act of creating, is so fundamental to existence, the desire to create externally is merely a reflection. Creating a home is no different. An intimate act, in the doing, the manifestation of walls and a roof are simply a housing. When we vacate the walls, home goes with us, as a memory.

Our primary home is our being, this is where we live our lives. The world around us is filtered by it and when that world is brought into our mind as a memory, our being distorts it, shapes it, makes it our own. When overwhelmed by a world with such vastness of space, distortions become a survival mechanism for the mind, to find relief.

We never regain the level of security, comfort, connection as we had in the womb, though we never stop trying. Further back, cravings originating from long lost ancestral habits can never be fully quenched. And the original loss, a return to the source of creation is impossible in the flesh. Rather, we are sentenced to a lifetime of searching and home becomes a substitute, temporary attempt to fulfill longings.

The beholder beckons to their home and vacancies in their being shape the space they inhabit, a palimpsest of memories. And it's in the context of this triangle that architecture is made, distortions of perception the mind creates filling voids.

Solace can only be found within the space of a home, by our own doing. An architect has no place in the matter.

The day was not intended to be a special day beyond any other. But as it turned out, it was one that changed my perspective irreversibly from that moment forward. I was researching sliding stones of Death Valley and made a general word search on the internet for images, when the results page popped up an unrelated photograph.

A young child crawling to a UN food camp nearly a mile away is head down on the ground, resting nearly an hour, to build up the energy to continue. Just beyond a vulture stands waiting.

As a father of two children, my first thought was what kind of world do we live in, where a child is left to fend for themselves at such a helpless age. Looking at the vulture preying over the child, put the human race right back into the animal kingdom. Before that day, I lived in a world where humans were at the top of the food chain. Our babies at least had civilization to protect them. That was the primary reason we banded together in the first place, building homes tightly clustered behind walls, to separate ourselves from the beasts.

Exactly three weeks earlier, I watched a film by Cao Fei at the Carnegie International. It was a piece about the lives and dreams of factory workers making light bulbs in China. The screening was set in a noisy stair hall, where the voices of school children touring the exhibition drowned out the soundtrack as they shuffled by. I found it an interesting commentary on two societies bound by economic forces, one's existence surviving on the insatiable consumerism of the other. And yet, the ignorance and indifference these school children paid to a film documenting this endless mass of people, who sacrifice their dreams for a life in their world, was emblematic of the disconnect that exists between these two cultures. It crushed my belief in the value of a single life. If a billion people can go unnoticed, what chance does a single life have to find fulfillment? If there is no chance, what's the point?

In Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, assembly line workers were special. Each and every one of them. In the entire world, there is no one else just like you. That might be true, but what is the meaning of a life when the numbers become so large that individuals are lost in the madness and dreams are abandoned?

Cynicism toward the human race was inevitable.

I guess it was always there for me, but the timing of these two experiences made it crystal clear. I always felt uncomfortable living at the top of the food chain. In my mind, the human elitism of western culture is a setback, not an accomplishment. Setting ourselves apart from the other life forms had a subtle, but profound implication on our perspective.

Numbness to our surroundings.

This is primarily why I forced myself to watch the beheading of Eugene Armstrong by a man on a crusade of terror against America. An image that will haunt me forever, of an act that no one should be subjected to witness. But, to live my life without facing the ugliness that exists to afford my lifestyle, would perpetuate the numbness in me.

Politics aside, it was an act of barbarism, the horrors of which have no justifiable reason in modern day life. Denial is almost a natural defense mechanism, to preserve one's sanity in an insane world. However, the same act is depicted in American cinema far too often and the entertainment thrill is only possible by numbness toward the barbaric nature.

It is widespread, permeating every facet of society. But, it is on the subtle level that carries the greatest threat.

Recently, I noticed a curious development in the road construction for the Pennsylvania Turnpike where it crosses the Allegheny River. Typically, rolling hills in the path of motorists are cut into, to minimize elevation change, making transport safer and easier. Often those cuts exposed bedrock within the hills that weep groundwater during Spring rains and collect ice sickles during Winter months. Most people think nothing of it as they hurry past to their destination. Here, at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, the exposed bedrock is layered sediment, horizontal bands of shale and sandstone with the occasional coal seam adding a rich black shade. On this particular stretch of roadway, adding more lanes resulted in steeper cuts, which required a wall to stabilize the hillside. Retaining walls are nothing new, but this one scored lines into sprayed on concrete to simulate the horizontal banding of these sedimentary rocks common to southwestern Pennsylvania.

This marked a change in society's perspective. The exposed bedrock, a byproduct of the high speed roadway, was no longer just a consequence but now had become nostalgia. Society's numbness toward transfiguration of the natural landscape enabled a sentimentality to emerge. A fondness for a new aesthetic based on the remnants of human indifference.