

STEPPING THROUGH THE TACTILE-KINAESTHETIC PERCEPTION OF ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

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Percepția tactilo-chinesteziică a spațiului arhitectural [The Tactile-Kinesthetic Perception of Architectural Space] / Alexandra VIȘAN; Paideia, Bucharest, 2018, 134 p.

ISBN: 978-606-748-267-6

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.23740/TID120206>

INTRODUCTION

Lately, architecture has been the victim of a very narrow perspective – the visual apprehension of the built environment, most notably the distant viewpoint that rarely leaves room for a close

exploration anymore. Although this tendency has been criticized for several decades, the trend continues as more and more architectural objects get consecrated on and are sometimes especially built for visual internet sites like *Archdaily* and social networking services like *Instagram* that heavily rely on imagery for promoting value.

In stark contrast, many prestigious architects recognize the role of all the senses when it comes to experiencing architecture. Peter Zumthor, for example, describes his approach on architecture as a “concrete matter,” eventually creating a sensuous body: “all design work starts from the premise of this physical, objective sensuousness of architecture, of its materials. To experience architecture in a concrete way means to touch, see, hear and smell it” (Zumthor, 1999, p. 58).

Following a few but well recognized theoretical works like Juhani Pallasmaa’s *Eye of the Skin. Architecture and the*

 **paideia**

individul – centrul percepției și corpul – sistem de referință

ALEXANDRA VIȘAN

importanța simțurilor în arhitectură * spațiul arhitectural

PERCEPȚIA TACTILO-CHINESTEZICĂ

semnificația tactilului * semnificația chinesteziicului

A SPAȚIULUI ARHITECTURAL

arhitectura percepută prin intermediul mișcării

52



Senses (Pallasmaa, 2015) and Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (Rasmussen, 1964), Alexandra Vişan's *The Tactile-Kinesthetic Perception of Architectural Space* further develops the theme of a plenary experience of architecture, this time focusing more on the less likely senses of touch and dynamic body exploration of the built environment.

Pallasmaa was the first to thoroughly criticize the growing appetite for visual apprehension of architecture as the only way to judge aesthetic value. In citing Heidegger, who introduced the notions of the nihilist and narcissistic eye, Pallasmaa postulates that our over glorified sight nowadays separates us from the object of our perception, from the world itself, which becomes a hedonistic visual journey but lacking in sense and deeper meaning (Pallasmaa, 2015, p. 43). The world, he goes on throughout his book, is meant to be perceived haptically, immersively, by a collective gathering of information through all senses in a collaborative and holistic way. Architecture, in this respect, should be perceived just as richly as a hike through a forest, teeming with life, sounds, gusts of wind and other vibrant sensations.

Rasmussen, on the other hand, had an entire chapter dedicated to hearing architecture (Rasmussen, 1964, pp. 224-237). He plastically described how architectural scale was in connection with the social scale through the reverberations of sounds in a Baroque castle, for example. From the loud stone paved entrance where the carriages would enter through the gates with much uproar, and the high hall where large ceremonies were held in great reverberation and solemnity to the quiet intrigue and whispers of the silk padded boudoir, the inhabitants experienced and expressed quite different attitudes according to the rich echoes or their complete lacking. He further lamented that only our humble bathrooms maintain a high level of reverberation nowadays and how therefore most of us sing during taking a shower.

Yet, while these two main senses we possess, mostly related to distant perception, are easily connected to an architectural experience, the merit of Alexandra Vişan's study is to point out the importance of other two as well, notably the touch and kinaesthetic experience which also bring the viewer much closer to the building and account for a better experience in proximity and during the architectural promenade itself.

PERSPECTIVES

The book does not claim to be an exhaustive study on the very vast domain of architectural perception through all the senses but aims more to give the reader a fresh perspective on what experiencing architecture really is to us all. It is indeed a feeling that we were quite accustomed to earlier in history as we used to take in the environment at a much slower speed. We used to measure distances in paces and miles (which actually come from 2,000 steps) or cubits and feet, whereas the highest available speed for us was that of a galloping horse. Naturally, at these low speeds, our perceptions were different as we had more time to take in the rich details of scenery and architecture. Urban and architectural spaces alike, as opposed to Euclidian space, are not defined by Cartesian coordinates but by the limits of their built shell, which becomes a background for life itself.

The study is structured into three parts. Firstly, the author talks in general about architectural perception of space, which is actually centred on the individual who gradually discovers it, in tribute to the phenomenological line of thought. Thus, there are three concentric "rings" of space in the viewer's proximity that follow him/her in their journey, one of personal space – the

closest one – , one of action space – closer than 30 meters – , and one of vision space – further on. This view is derived from E.T. Hall's introduction of proxemics and the four distances in man (intimate, personal, social and public) (Hall, 1990, pp. 113-125), which strongly affect the way we interact with each other and many times denote the close or distant relationship we enjoy with our conversation companions. When talking about the built environment, Vişan identifies several senses that come into play, from distant to closest: sight, hearing, smelling, pacing, touching and the kinaesthetic (including the thermal sense, active touching surfaces and body weight as we deploy to open a heavy door, for example). As memories are stored in the limbic domain, where emotions are also born, we always tend to associate a moment or object with a feeling we experienced at that moment. What this further means is that a picture taken has a whole different meaning for the person that took it than for a first time viewer who is bound to forget it unless the image triggers a strong emotion on its own and, even then, the experience is probably a lot different from what the real object would cause on the person in the first place.

The second part is closely related to the experience of touch and the tactile, whether be it active or passive touch. Touch, smell, and taste are more primeval senses for us than sight and hearing and, surprisingly, many more early memories are connected to these than we would suspect, as Proust would testify. Naturally, we do not need to touch every surface of the building for us to experience it for our brains and interpret what we see through the memories of earlier tactile experiences. In this way, a close view is actually interrelated to the sense of touch, and the eye and hand become intricately connected in experiencing the tactile. As Vişan would put it, the eye lends the hand a bit of a long reach, whereas the hand gives the eye a depth of perception (Vişan, 2018, p. 45).

It is true that modern history of architecture is closely correlated to the history of new building materials. These offer their properties to the spaces they create, and we have hard and soft, heavy and light, rough and smooth, warm and cold or humid and dry surfaces and, accordingly, interior atmospheres. Vişan further differentiates between the superficial and profound sense of touch, one being focused on the surface finishing of the material or texture, while the other hints to the nature of the material itself.

Finally, the third part deals with the complex kinaesthetic experience. In order to fully grasp an architectural or urban space, one has to walk through and explore it physically. Movement, balance, and scale are felt subconsciously by the body. The body has a very complex feedback system that uses all senses to orient itself, to find the vertical upright position and to maintain walking on two legs. The merit of the architect is to consciously employ the means at his/her disposal to induce a desired experience on the person that makes the journey through the designed space. Great architects, like Liebeskind for example, use this "power" to convey strong feelings to the visitor, effectively re-enacting anxiety and distress during a visit through the Holocaust Museum in Berlin, which in turn assures a memorable impact.

On the other hand, the use of mechanized means of transportation, even inside a building, ruins the authenticity of the experience. Elevators and escalators "teleport" the person from one story to another, creating a confusion of sorts, and, as Bachelard would put it, annul the heroism of the staircase and the proximity to the sky, making everything artificially horizontal and bland (Vişan, 2018, p. 110).

CONCLUSIONS

A thought provoking study, with sensible and sensitive arguments and ideas, *The Tactile-Kinaesthetic Perception of Architectural Space* encompasses several aspects that unfortunately have been grossly disregarded lately in architectural and urban design, although they have been very common knowledge a few centuries ago. We seem to forget and let ourselves be enveloped by an aseptic environment, as E.T. Hall would put it, promoting a neutral and bland built environment that seldom leaves its mark on us as visitors (Hall, 1990, p. 45). We avoid reverberations or strong colours just as we tend to disregard the role of strong smells/flavours and textures on the individual. Architecture should do the very opposite, creating a sense of vibrancy, addressing all the senses at once, and striving to be memorable.

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