Positive distractions in urban ambiance - Exploring the elements that help synthesize our healthy modern experiences

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Abstract. *The contemporary city is experienced through a framework of multiple spaces that individuals interact with on a daily and routine basis. These are not merely encounters with the built form, but are environments that are metabolized and personalized by the individual into an "ethos" or "ambiance" of perception: a colourful composition of time, space and the character of place. In many instances these ambiances of perception are not altogether pleasant, leading to negative or unhealthy experiences. This paper aims to explore the modern ambiances that we interact with on a daily basis to promote the cultivation of healthier experiential cities. Particular attention will be given to how we personalize our harsh and unhealthy environments and by what methods we use to cope with them.*

Keywords: human perception, healthy modern experience, positive distractions

The experiential city

Our modern urban environments are a plethora of emerging conditions, ones that we become aware of through our actions of living, working and playing. The densely populated urban grid of city blocks and laneways offer a prime playground for physical and social interaction to occur at an intimate level. Ground level mercantile boutiques spill out onto pedestrian arteries facilitating their goods and services. The rich tapestry of sounds and smells of varying ethnic communities gives us the freedom to willingly explore unknown cultural values. The varying scales of built gestalt (form) visually objectify the economic successes of corporations and private enterprises. These urban conditions vary greatly in their sense of perception by an individual as either healthy or unhealthy experiences. These spaces are not however as positively stimulating as those we have evolved with in the natural world. Many of our modern urban environments are institutional, sterile and even harsh industrialized settings – ones that lack the healthy spatial and material properties that would otherwise exist in the natural world. In order to develop better suited environments that increase the quality of our modern experiences, we must identify the elements that synthesize our healthy modern experiences altogether. Are there coping mechanisms that we use to navigate through our more stressful modern environments? Do we personalize our environments to suit our own individual needs? What, if anything, is an ambiance? Before we can begin to understand how we metabolize our physical environments for reasons of promoting better designed environments, we must demonstrate the tools and constructs that we use to perceive them with.

The body logic

In understanding how we perceive our physical environment we must first and foremost appreciate becoming aware of our surroundings through the primary use of our body and mind. Our experience in the world is based on several key factors: we exist in the universe at a specific time, we create a "sense of place" around us through our memories and imagination and are encapsulated by our physical spatial envelopes. This phenomenological interpretation of our existential being emphasizes a "body-centric" modality of our place in this world. Juahni Pallasmaa emphasizes this viewpoint in his writings of the body's universal centrality, in that, *"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"* (Pallasmaa, 2005). Pallasmaa further enforces the primary role of the physical body in that it is *"the locus of perception, thought and consciousness, and of the significance of the senses in articulating, storing and processing sensory responses and thoughts"*.

The human body thus acts as a physical receptor in space, utilizing all the sense modalities in perceiving our environments. Lawson (2001) illustrates how the *"processing of the world around us involves a complex interaction of the mind and the brain"* and how *"the visual sensations largely dominate our perceptions since over two thirds of the nerve fibers that enter our central nervous system are from the eyes."* Perception is not however singularly dominated by the eye, moreover the eye operates first and the other senses follow. Lawson illustrates this through the idea of human distances (figure 1a) in that *"distance is not abstract, since it quite strongly relates to the way we are aware of our fellow human beings… under normal circumstances, the senses work in a series of nested spatial bubble… we can see, hear, smell and touch people in that order."* This engagement with all the senses creates a multi-sensory experience: the body's metabolism of a wider range of sensorial data and stimulation. Placing the body into the context of a specific time-space relationship further facilitates the creation of a vivid ambiance of perception.

The eye however plays an even greater role than that of strictly "focused vision" – it is able to create the boundaries of our space. Spatial boundaries may seemingly be created by the physical shell of a space we are enveloped by: the immediate ceiling above us and the floor below, by the extent of the partitions in our office workstations or the by the secure main entrance of the building we inhabit. Our spatial boundary can further extend itself into a more infinite world. For example, when a window is opened our boundary of perception can extend itself into an outwardly expanding view (figure 1b). Pallasmaa states that peripheral vision is the driving force that allows us to become immersed in any space (2005). *"Unconscious peripheral perception transforms retinal Gestalt into spatial and bodily experiences.*

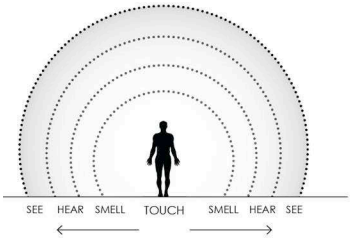

Figure 1(a)

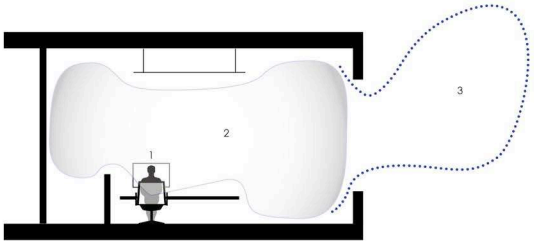

Figure 1(b)

Figure 1a. Human distances. Figure 1b. The boundaries of perception: 1) focus-driven task; 2) our peripheral vision creates the boundary of our space; 3) a greater periphery

Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators." We thus use our peripheral vision to accept greater environmental information. As we focus on a person, object or task at hand, we give it our priority attention, while our peripheral vision places us into a far greater spatial context.

The greater world: the body and the speed of modernity

There is no question that as a species we value healthy experiences, whether manifested as a spiritual walk in the forest or that of a stimulating public market. Not all frames of perception are ideal experiences however. Many of our stressful environments are dictated by the speed and busyness of our modern lives. We go from point A to point B with minimal healthy experiences along the way. On a daily basis we pour into dense cities via overly congested modes of transportation. Overcrowded trains, buses and roadways are the culprits of an even larger economic polarity dictating *"the nervous energy of a society on the move"* (Greenburg, 2011). Modern advertising practices further bombard our senses in every possible direction. Artificial lighting electrifies the "never ending city" into a fluorescent wonderland of over-stimulation. Our technology further introverts and alienates us through the obsession of online status, emails and our need to be updated. This overstimulation makes us lose interest in our surroundings, both in the architecture that we inhabit and the social connections that we make with each other.

Altogether, we spend an immense amount of time unknowingly avoiding healthy experiences. This is primarily due to the excessive hours spent at work and commuting in and out of our congested cities. The city's density suppresses the pedestrian realm and displaces us into vertical working towers. The Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that 16 million adult Canadians spend half of their waking hours at the less than ideal settings of the workplace (Public Health Agency of Canada *in* Vitullo, 2012). Artificial lighting at the workstation incubates us synthetically, while our digital working methodologies exhaust our willingness to engage with each other socially. Similarly, dense housing development reinforces these ill qualities. Vertical housing intensification forces people to live in less than adequate conditions. This is due to the inequalities of affordability and the unavailability of prime land. It seems onerous but designers today are charged with the task of decoding and repurposing our environments to increase human engagement, composure and happiness. Are there any ways that we can be restored from these modern stresses? Scientific research studies indicate that, even in the most extreme cases, we can introduce specific elements into the physical environment that can aid in the coping of such stresses.

Positive distractions

Physical and psychological elements exist that can help relieve us from our modern environmental stressors. Such approaches begin to emerge out of the research used to design our modern hospitals and healing environments. These are extremely fragile environments that are designed around the human occupant in space – environments that harbor extreme levels of stress and anxiety that can ultimately lead to death. This branch of environmental psychology shows the positive effect that healthy natural phenomena can have on a person's general level of well-being. This field, known as *"evidence based design"*, illustrates that by reintroducing nature into our environments we can relieve specific physical and psychological stressors. Through the introduction of *"positive distractions"* as passive forms of natural stimulation, patients in corrective health facilities have been able to heal from complex surgeries faster, reduce the need for pain altering medication, as well as reducing high levels of stress and anxiety. This research can be classified into five primary categories: views to nature, natural lighting, sound therapy, visual therapy and social connectedness.

Studies have found that *views to nature* in a hospital ward (a stand of trees, a courtyard or vegetative planting) can demonstrate quicker recovery times, reduce levels of stress and blood pressure, and show reduced physical discomfort and levels of depression among patients recovering from post-operative surgeries (Ulrich, 1984). Similarly, studies demonstrate the impact that *natural light* has on reduced levels of depression and seasonal affective disorder in hospital patients. Bipolar patients placed into opposite ends of a hospital noticed varying results. Patients that received higher levels of eastern morning light had hospital stays that were reduced by 3.67 days compared to those patients in the westward artificially lit rooms (Benedetti, Colombo, Barbini, Campori & Smeraldi's *in* Joseph, 2006). Anxiety reduction has been further noticed through the *auditory and visual cortexes*. Unwanted sound or noise has been demonstrated to cause annoyance, high blood pressure, increased heart rate and respiration (Joseph & Ulrich, 2007). Contrary to this, sound therapy through the use of "patient controlled" music was able to counteract these effects. Art in the care setting has similar outcomes. Rapp (2008) states that the brilliant colour and the variety of beautiful objects in specific artwork have demonstrated increased patient recovery. Lastly, studies show that *social connection* with patients from family support in times of care can dramatically increase healing and patient wellbeing (Carr J. & Fogarty J, 1999).

Using positive distractions in the design of our built environment may offer restorative healing. The creation of a multi-sensory experience in space is not however as straight forward as designing from a catalogue of scientific parts. Approaching architecture from a formulaic ingredient based methodology may not always strike an emotional chord with its audience. Subjective qualities of space, ones that lie at the core of phenomenological interpretations of architecture, allow for a masterful composition of environmental ambiance. A sense of spiritual and intimate connection with a space must occur on a personal level, one that is more subjective then objective. Environmental research studies have focused on the healthy attributes of natural light for example, yet have managed to avoid the eternal relationship light has with shadow. One cannot enjoy the splendors of natural light without the contextual canvas that shadow facilitates. Thus, subjective architectural interpretations have throughout time been used to engage an individual's personal awareness in space (Figure 2).

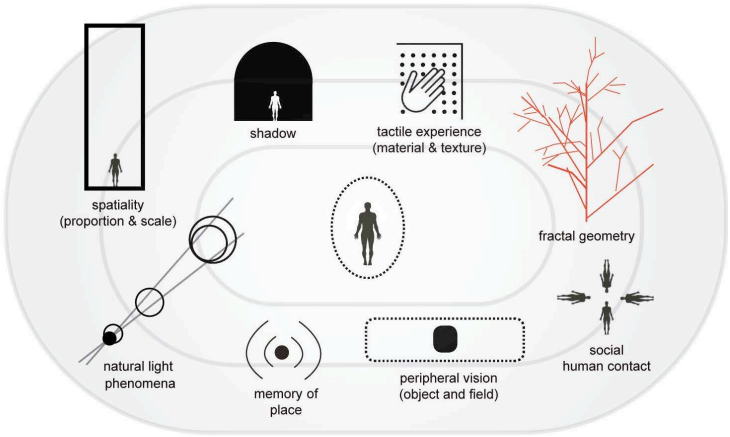

Figure 2. Spatial bodily experiences may occur through subjective architectural interpretations of the designed environment; this increases an individual's awareness of a place

Personalization of self-directed space

If we apply these ideas to our daily urban environments we can foster the creation of more experiential spaces, as well as a more experiential city altogether. Developing the built environment strictly from a formulaic methodology of healthy ingredients however may prove a futile process. There is a sense of individualization and control that occurs on a person-by-person basis. Spatial experiences become self-directed by an individual's own specific value of needs. Personal needs are a basic and fundamental concept to grasp when speaking of healthy human environments. Physical space itself has the capacity to engage our senses and facilitate the needs we require. Some of us for example may seek the comforts of home, and "the good life", while others may seek the rebellious action of "big city nights". On a personal basis, our *"balance of need at any time will depend on several factors, including personality, physical health, age, and social context"* (Lawson, 2001). Figure 3a demonstrates the fundamental emotional needs that space helps us satisfy at any given moment in time: the need for security, identity and stimulation (Ardrey R. *in* Lawson, 2001). Firstly, our emotional balance needs a strong sense of *security* to remain constant. Our lives demand some level of predictability so that we can operate successfully. We find security in knowing the expectations of our work life, the boundaries of social conduct as well as the normal time it will take us to get us to and from work. Secondly, Lawson describes the important human spatial need of *identity*. Identity allows us to be one of a kind in our own right, be it through the clothes that we wear, the cars that we drive or the music we listen to. Lawson illustrates this in that *"one of the roles of space is to create settings that facilitate the acting out of the range of identities we use in our lives."* The spatial environment we seek to inhabit thus becomes an extension of our personalities and our *"manufactured personas"* The third and final human necessity which physical space can help satisfy is that of *stimulation*. We have already spoken to great lengths at how excessive (active) stimulation can lead to stress and anxiety – this can be seen in our busy modern lives. Too little stimulation however can lead to boredom and sensory deprivation. This is not conducive to our successful growth and development. Thus, a healthy dose of experiential stimulation lies in a self directed balance. Figure 3b illustrates the performance stimulation curve (Lawson, 2001). We can see how too little stimulation can lead to boredom, and too much stimulation does not allow us to concentrate. Lawson states that *"the problem is to find that point of balance on the top of the inverted 'U' curve that delivers a level of stimulation appropriate to the pattern of usage of the setting."* Only then may we find our own personal balance of stimulation in space.

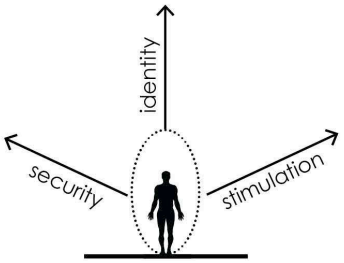

Figure 3(a)

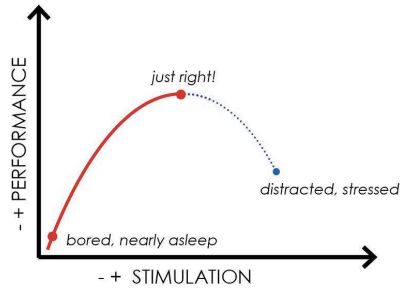

Figure 3(b)

Figure 3a. Our physical environment can be designed to fulfill 3 fundamental spatial needs. Figure 3b. The stimulation/performance curve illustrates a balanced level of satisfaction

Our healthy modern experiences

Designers and architects today are charged with the task of creating more human-driven spaces; spaces that ultimately increase our level of healthy experiences in the urban realm. The economic forces that dictate the shape of our city however counteract these thoughtful approaches. Development intensification overcrowds us into the less then favourable conditions of living and working. Technology speeds our lives and reduces the interaction we have with both the natural world as well as our connection with each other. In order to offset these conditions the conception of the built environment must be viewed through the lens of human health – more specifically through the perspective of an individual's daily healthy spatial experiences. This can occur through the implementation of a wide range of both subjective and objective forms of *"positive distractions"*. This aids in the reduction of environmental stressors and allows individuals to find their own specific balance of spatial needs. The creation of modern spatial ambiances can thus render our daily experiences as vivid encounters with the built form. Our various senses become engaged and further synthesized into multisensory experiences, ones that emerge out of well balanced spatial architectural compositions. This ultimately increases the awareness of our existence in a place, as well as the awareness and connection we have with each other.

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William Harispuru completed his Masters of Architecture degree at Ryerson University. He was recognized by the ARCC with a King Medal for his research on human-centered architectural environments. He has pursued international field research, studies and design competitions. He has also led studios and critiques at design schools within Toronto and is currently an intern architect at Montgomery Sisam Architects.

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