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Experience is Everything: Getting to Grips with a Sensory Buildings Analysis

by RUPERT GOULDING

This paper questions the validity of approaches to architectural analysis that depend upon visual methods and materials; and champions an experiential buildings analysis built upon the concept of the multi-sensory encounter. In part one the dominance and problems of two-dimensional building study is critiqued, and the limitations of formal spatial analysis are discussed. These problematic approaches are explored in relation to the modernist ideology of today's western world. Part two offers an analysis methodology that explores human agents engaging with a multi-sensory building encounter. The framework for analysis offered invites a broad, meaningful and innovative approach to building study.

Keywords: archaeology, architecture, experience, multi-sensory, vision

Introduction

Juhani Pallasmaa in his engaging and poetic book, *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005), investigates and critiques the deficiencies in contemporary architecture. For Pallasmaa our society is ever more fragmented and people are increasingly isolated socially, and responsibility for this process, though broad, is partly architectural. In our desire for buildings that look good, we fail to demand structures that feel good; and it is this feeling that is critical. Pallasmaa contemplates how contemporary buildings are the product of our age of visual supremacy; we are only interested in building image, even if the deficient buildings we demand only alienate us further from society. His book is a call to arms for architects to think about all the senses when designing - to create buildings that envelop and engage with the multi-sensory individual - this would quite literally build a more cohesive society. What might this have to do with archaeology? The ideas Pallasmaa explores in today's architecture are pertinent to how we consider the buildings of the past. I am not offering a rose-tinted view of the past, as some long lost and golden age of social cohesion engendered by architectural excellence. Instead, I suggest that our cultural obsessions with the visual have flavoured how we consider past architecture. If we want to better consider the structures we study, we need to consider them as multi-sensory spaces, and then maybe we can understand them more fully.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first section I shall explore how the visual obsessions of our culture are played out in archaeological approaches to building study, including a consideration of access analysis as the apogee of such interests. In the second section I shall outline what a sensory buildings analysis could be, what it engages with and for what purpose. I outline the methodology I use: an attempt to connect with the sensory realm in architectural study. The ideas presented in this paper form a key component of my PhD research, as such this is very much work in progress, however the core theories are firmly held. I apply these ideas to my work on the palaces of Henry VIII, though a detailed exposition of this is beyond the scope of this paper. Further, I have tried to adopt a more engaging writing style than we see in most traditional archaeological papers. My project has been influenced by those in archaeology who have sought in their writings to express some of the excitement and richness of the past we study along different lines (Deetz 1996; Johnson 1999, 2002; Joyce 2002).

Part One

If you are in any doubts over my (and Pallasmaa's) claim that we live in the age of the image then consider some of today's popular debates. Magazines illustrated with photos of ultra-skinny models have increasingly taken the blame for perpetrating increasing cases of anorexia and bulimia; this is no longer a theory and instead is the popular assertion. But the process continues: millions of pounds are spent on gym membership to lose weight and gain fitness; fad diet books are bestsellers; we take morbid fascination in obesity; low calorie convenience snacks and meals abound. Cosmetic surgery is ever cheaper and readily available. These are all part of the wider issue of body politics, yet at the core of this issue is the visual image of the body. The body, the multi-sensory organism, is increasingly in the

Rupert Goulding – rupertgoulding@hotmail.com
University of Reading

West becoming moulded by the eyes of others and ourselves. To give another example, the rise of political spin can be traced through an over interest in the visual. The political sound bite, the modus operandi of modern politics, is a visualisation of something we can't see: a short ear catching statement, adopting the quick fire techniques seen in MTV. MTV launched in 1981 with the Buggles' *Video Killed the Radio Star*, the aim was clear to all who tuned in, seeing music was preferable to merely hearing it, and these videos were often shorter versions than that on the album or even the radio. MTV clearly proved in its success that our society wanted things snappy and exciting, or was that just short and visually communicated? Other examples are that we all judge books by their covers; green cars have a lower second hand value than red ones, and lastly that economy products in supermarkets are often indistinguishable to their more expensive alternatives once they are unwrapped. In these examples I don't want to offer any judgment. I'm not advocating that economy products are no different to branded versions, or that a red car is as desirable as a green one – just that our society is increasingly driven by visual characteristics over other sensory considerations.

Now to archaeology, and how the hegemony of the visual in our society has limited how we practise the discipline. I'm suggesting this has been done in two broad ways, through a fundamental consideration of architectural space in two-dimensional terms, and by explaining standing buildings through stylistic categories. Before I go into some detail on these points, I should first explain the problems I see in the relationship between the world today and the past we endeavour to explore. This argument is something of a foundation for many of the ideas and arguments this paper covers. As has been illustrated above, the practices of our society have consequential results beyond the intended – magazine photos not just influencing fashion but the body politic for example. The same is true for the relationship between archaeology and the world today; it is more critically entwined than we may care to think. Julian Thomas (2004: 2) in *Archaeology and Modernity* has eloquently argued that the discipline of archaeology is 'a distillation of a modern sensibility'. In essence, the modern western world we live in has created the very practice of archaeology for its own ideological ends. Thomas (2004: 199) echoes Pallasmaa when he suggests that we isolate vision from the other senses because we conceive ourselves as observing subjects, for whom nature no longer governs our life; men and women are extra-nature, we operate independent of it, and as such can gaze upon nature at our whim. Archaeology affirms this belief by being a practice that utilises visual methodologies to ascertain knowledge and understanding. Excavation is a process of visualisation, as we dig into the past we can see with our eyes what has happened. Archaeology is a method totally bound to the premise that sight is knowledge; archaeology uses visual methods to find facts and develop ideas. This process then reiterates and strengthens the modernist position that we see therefore we *are*.

The two-dimensionality of archaeological practice is best understood in terms of what we create and remove from site, be it an excavation or assessment of a standing building. Projects are written up off-site, though notebooks are filled with on-site observations and theories. The detailed interpretations happen back at the ranch. We reach our conclusions by the careful study of those notebooks as well as other documents specifically produced for desk based analysis. In particular we draw plans, sections and elevations. These then become the immutable record of what is either excavated or observed. These graphical documents *become* the study subject; our drawings transubstantiate solid material to paper and ink. But the charts we produce are problematic, something architectural theory has started to consider recently, but archaeology has not (Borden 1995: 214; King 1996: 248). I suggest that these graphical documents, be they plans, sections or elevations, are at best a graphical representation of distance, material and position, achieved through a distillation, filtration and reduction of that we happen to observe. If I have laboured this point, then forgive me, but I feel it important to emphasis that the two-dimensional documents we make are problematic in their entirety, and these problems have implications for how we then use them to make assertions about the past. We tend to base our conclusions on the lines on the paper. Unfortunately life operates in the areas we tend to leave un-inked, or as Bruno Zevi put it 'the void itself' (1993: 23).

Access analysis of space-syntax modelling is increasingly popular in archaeology, and I suggest it is problematic in ways previously under considered, because archaeologists use those abstracted plans mentioned above as the core of this method and the resulting interpretations. I want to suggest that access analysis for the archaeologist is a double

distillation of understanding. It may produce a more intense singular interpretation, but it strips away the subtleties, harmonies and variances of how people use a built environment. Hillier and Hanson's (1984) *Social Logic of Space* has been quite keenly adopted by archaeologists, and one can see why. The book offers a method to analyse and assess spatial arrangements that actively use and glorify the research material we have - the plan! It also offers a methodology that is as adept to use in either a Roman villa or an Elizabethan manor house. In the space available a full critique of the method is not possible, but I want to offer one consideration as food for thought: it certainly challenged my views of formal spatial analysis. Hillier and Hanson developed their methodology with the aim to understand why the socially progressive housing developments of the 1960-70s failed so catastrophically in their utopian aims. The geographer Doreen Massey (2001) wrote about one such estate, her childhood home of Wythenshawe on the edge of Manchester. The estate aimed to give inner city families a more green and open spatial environment, which was intended to emancipate. Massey writes poetically about how this aim, though initially successful, has now failed. Neglect has been the affliction, and though nothing has changed significantly, it is the small details that make the biggest impacts. Little that Massey discusses could be picked up by a formal spatial analysis, yet these are absolutely the type of spatial understandings we strive to find. Massey wrote how the proliferation of dog muck and the un-repaired cracked paving necessitate constant looking down when one moves along the paths of the estate. One's spatiality has been closed down – which only emphasises the social restrictions that do the same, through crime and vandalism. Constraint is not to be found in the walls and ceilings of Wythenshawe, but on hazardous paving under an open sky.

The second problem in archaeology's approach to buildings is the convergence of stylistic categorisation and meaning. The way a building looks is fundamental to understanding, but we should be careful not to prioritise the image of a building over other considerations, or conflate image with meaning. Too often a building is analysed from its visual characteristics, categorised by how it looks, interpreted through its visual nature and then understood in stylistic terms. There is a cycle at work that serves to perpetrate the visual qualities of a building, excluding other considerations. For example English Romanesque or neo-classical churches are essentially understood by their decorative differences, although they reflect changes in doctrine, ecclesiastical structure, secular authority and many other issues more significant than their building style. Part of the problem with the easy alliance of image and interpretation is that it strips out the most fundamental part of a building or space, and that the greatest level of meaning comes through encounter. Being inside, outside or near a building is to engage with the totality of what those spaces offer, and not just the way they look. Pallasmaa (2005: 12) summates this issue well – 'an architectural work is not experienced as a series of isolated retinal pictures, but in its fully integrated material, embodied and spiritual essence'. One can extrapolate from Pallasmaa's ideas an insight into how archaeologists approach buildings analysis. It is as if we take photographs of different elevations and stick them to a plan of the layout, and call this architecture. It is as if we study the architect's models and not the buildings themselves.

Part Two

In this section I outline what a sensory buildings analysis could be, and how I am at present moving in this direction. Fundamentally I'm interested in experience. I'm interested in what it was like to visit, occupy or use the buildings of the past. I suggest that by starting at this premise, it is impossible to limit oneself to considering how a building looked, or to use analyses that develop from two-dimensional beginnings. In the pages afforded I will limit my discussion to this issue. In my methodology, there are a wide range of additional theoretical considerations which should also be considered such as the validity of phenomenology, or the dangers of being both selective and casually subjective. There is insufficient space for such theoretical frameworks, but I can at least briefly explain the critical heart of my work. In part one I explained how the over-visualisation of society is a by-product of our modern world, how archaeology is a wholesale product of the modern condition, and how the union of vision and knowledge in our society has impoverished our understandings. Taking this on board, my methodology shifts this perception by turning these modern obsessions on their head. If I am accused of being un-archaeological by not playing by archaeologies rules, then this may mean I am on the right path!

My research deals with the palaces of Henry VIII, and as such my range of data is fairly

broad and deep. I do not suggest the methods I use are suitable for any era, but I hope that the broader themes may spark ideas for others. A central tenet of my project is to get to grips with a method for a phenomenological approach to building study that can assert its validity more clearly. Critics of phenomenology cite the fragility of the process; the lack of evidence, and the fact that the process of making conclusions is non-transparent. This method attempts to counter these accusations and provide a potential process or initial framework for an embodied, sensory and dynamic building analysis.

Stage one is to assemble the data range, and I champion a full and rich data set. Anything that existed in, on or near a building is equally valid for inclusion; hence textiles, brick composition, crockery, dress, paintings and letters are all in my data range. This is then delineated along three lines: material culture, architectural and documentary evidence. The terms are broad and encourage a wide and varied data set. Stage two is the practical way to draw together the huge array of evidence considered above, into a meaningful exploration of a building. I use four analytical themes to consider specific issues, but along wide lines. They are as follows: Corporeal Positioning, Visual Impact, Codified Action and the Intangible. Each theme is described below.

Corporeal Positioning

This theme considers the body and space: how a person was framed or contained by architectural works. This theme considers issues such as movement or restriction, enclosure and exposure - though not to be couched in binary polarities, it can help to consider the opposites of themes of interest to spark dialogue. This theme considers how a human agent engaged with a building on a human scale; how the spatial environment met with the proportions of corporeal identity. We can consider how a space controlled individuals, guided them around, framed them or even liberated them. This theme enables the meaningful interaction between space and the body to be explored.

Visual Impact

This theme is not a contradiction of this paper's argument. The visual quality of architectural cannot be ignored because it has dominated previous analyses. The key here is dialogue – we must integrate our study of building image, our understanding of buildings as visual commodities and our investigations of how architecture communicates visually, with all other considerations. Humans are creatures that rely upon sight to a disproportionate cognisant extent, but it is always in conjunction with other senses, whether we articulate it or not.

By way of an example and caveat, I want to pause to consider recent research on medieval society that has explored how visual modes of communication dominated culturally. Take the relationships between society at large and the Church. The processes of education, doctrinal interaction and spiritual satisfaction were played out through visual communication: wall paintings and sculpture told stories and allegories, seeing the host provided a path to spiritual nourishment. Indeed Michael Camille (1994: 62) has written how the bodies of the laity were controlled by the Church's 'intense visual scrutiny and surveillance'. This may seem contrary to the above arguments for downplaying the visual in our interpretations. However, it actually illustrates the potential in opening a dialogue with the other senses as argued for above. Medieval religiosity *was* inherently visual, but it also engaged with the other senses in ways that were subsequently challenged by the Protestant reformations (Aston 2003). The use of incense, processions, singing, kissing relics and ringing bells all contributed to a multi-sensory experience, one that uses visual communication in *dialogue* with the other senses.

Codified Action

The activities of encounter, and their rules and procedures contribute considerably to how we understand architecture. This theme addresses the specifics of experience, providing an opportunity to integrate the practices of encounter with the experience of space. In the historic context of my project I research rituals, routines and special events, but also consider dress codes, etiquette and deportment. A lot of the material in this section is usually the preserve of the historian, but I suggest we need to claim these areas, to better appreciate our spaces as the stages of such activities.

The Intangible

This is a term borrowed from the debates in global heritage management. In places such as Australia, the heritage industry has had to face the very real issue of preserving and explaining a cultural heritage that has no solid or material remains to display and curate. Incidentally

many believe we do not have intangible heritage in Britain, our heritage is the stuff of castles, burial mounds and churches. But I suggest the intangible is equally relevant here. We may not have an aboriginal population, but we have heritage that is not in solid form: food, drink, dance, accent, language, stories and legend for example. So the term intangible covers those issues not easily defined in architectural terms, but which clearly affected the way buildings were understood. In this section we can consider leftfield, alternative and innovative considerations with impunity. I have considered the issues of memory, climate and cultural mood regarding the palaces of Henry VIII.

Once these four themes have been worked through in relation to a certain building or a built landscape or any space, we can then consider interpretations along the broader themes of culture and identity. We can engage with issues including gender, ethnicity, religion, society, status, politics and many other categories of interest.

Conclusion

In this short paper I have opened a debate as to what a sensory buildings analysis could be. If it is anything, it is a concerted attempt to get nearer to what it was like to experience a building in the past. Walk into a room today and you will instantly, maybe unconsciously, but certainly tangibly, meet with different sensory stimuli. You will feel the change in temperature; your eyes will adjust to the lighting; you will identify the smell and locate the various sounds. These are the types of issues that weave through the four themes of enquiry offered. Imagine a space, how are you corporeally positioned – did you duck under a low beam or tip your head up at the high ceiling? What was the visual impact – did you read a sign or choose the door with a bright paint job? Are you observing any codified action - have you taken your shoes off or knocked at the door? Anything intangible – have you sensed a tense atmosphere; remember how bad your last meal was here; is it a bit damp? These are the processes of everyday life, and these are the understandings we need to grasp in our studies of past buildings. When we engage with these types of issues, situated in a considered historical context, we may get somewhere nearer the reality of our buildings' pasts. It is not easy to do sensory buildings analysis. There are many problems and pitfalls along the way, but I suggest this method could improve and expand our historical understandings if we tried.

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