

The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses.

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The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses (2009) is one of the most relevant books by Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa. In this book, the author advocates the importance of the five human senses in architecture production processes. Pallasmaa has built an internationally recognized career as an architect, whose work blends the fields of psychology, architecture theory, art and philosophy.

Pallasmaa states that architecture is multidimensional. In this sense, the author emphasizes the importance of the sensory dimension, and believes the human senses are essential elements to perception and to fully understand spaces.

“Cada experiência vivida se dá na interface da lembrança e da intenção, percepção e fantasia, memória e desejo” (p. 24).

In addition to these individual experiences, collective experiences also share memories that can be important to cultural identity, because they maintain representations of lived realities. Pallasmaa thus argues that some cities remain mere distant visual images in memories, while others are remembered in all their vitality. According to the author, the most striking memories of cities are those that include their sounds and smells, their different temperatures, lights and shadows. The author also points out that the human mind is able to walk through the most pleasant and meaningful areas through the perceptive memories lived in that environment.

The book is divided into two parts, which go through the historical aspects that Pallasmaa considers the dominance of vision in the design processes of contemporary

architecture, to a more complete and integrated way of designing, in which the senses and the body are the new paradigm.

Based on this comprehensive idea, in which the body is responsible for all the experiences of the world, Pallasmaa approaches a philosophical discussion on the importance of the relationship between people and environment. As abstract as this philosophical debate may be, it becomes poignant and applicable to the process of architectural thought. In developing the first part of the book, the author argues that information from all senses is involved in the perceptive process and that, despite this, contemporary architecture considers only one element of perception - vision. According to Pallasmaa, in pre-determining architecture as something for vision only, architects transform buildings into “image products detached from existential depth and sincerity” (p. 30).

Pallasmaa states that vision is considered the dominant sense in humans, and this is related to the fact that it provides a massive amount of information in a short time. According to Cullen (1983: 10), vision would have the power to invoke our memories and experiences with all its emotions because vision is a highly motivating function for spatial perception.

For Pallasmaa, dominance of vision over the other senses has consequences in the quality of contemporary architecture. For the author, this dominance relinquishes the attributes of art and architecture itself, perpetuating the lack of connection and human sensitivity in architectural projects.

The author believes that the emotions of belonging or of isolation, attachment or rejection, are inside the individual, because places do not produce these sensations. However, he refers that the characteristics of each space will define whether the experiences will be positive or negative for users.

In his teaching practice, Pallasmaa believes that all agents responsible for spatial transformations should focus on understanding the reasons why a space can cause certain emotions in the individual. In a more practical way, the author emphasizes that beautiful and functional are no longer enough to design architecture, so architectural or urban works and interventions should be designed to evoke sensations and emotions that connect people to places.

The second part of the book discusses architecture's main challenges, from the author's perspective, and focuses on what Pallasmaa calls sensory architecture. In his opinion, architecture must work all senses simultaneously, reinforcing the existential experience and the feeling of belonging. Architecture would thus attain adaptation and integration - its main tasks -, as well as establish a feeling of reality and belonging.

Our attention is drawn to the way Pallasmaa interprets the environments based on all the senses, and paves the way for a different perspective of thinking architecture.

For the author, all senses, including vision, can be considered as extensions of the tactile sense, an interface between the body and the environment, connecting to the visual concept of materiality, distance and spatial depth, which would be absolutely impossible without the cooperation of tactile memory. Touch is motivated by

consciousness, it is more than a sense of contact: It is a sense of presence that leads to experience. Touching is to be touched by what is being touched (Brun, 1991).

Vision reveals what touch already knows. In this sense you can consider it the unconscious sense of vision. Pallasmaa affirms that:

“Our eyes stroke distant surfaces, contours and edges, and the unconscious tactile sensation determines the agreeableness or unpleasantness of the experience. The distant and the near are experienced with the same intensity.” (p. 42).

When Pallasmaa refers to the “unconscious tactile sensation”, you may connect this sensation with intuitive attention, defined by Jean-François Camus (1996) as a process that contributes to regulate and modulate the functioning of other cognitive processes, such as perception, thought and memory. This attention does not seek stimuli or information, but is defined by full consent to perform some spatial task. These experiences give meaning to the place, as well as to its smells.

Pallasmaa argues that a specific smell makes us unconsciously enter a space that has been totally forgotten by visual memory. Olfactory channels awaken forgotten memories and the most persistent memory of a space is commonly its smell.

When discussing auditory perception, Pallasmaa refers to this sense as that which structures and coordinates experiences in understanding space. The sound measures space and makes it understandable, and the limits of space are perceived with our ears. In other words, sounds make it possible for users to feel connected with space. In this sense, vision isolates, while sound incorporates. Vision is a directional sense and sound is omnidirectional, because when you close your eyes, you lose contact with the object. This does not occur with sound.

Although visual and auditory senses are linked to space and time, visual experiences are usually stable, i.e., an image can be kept, while hearing is temporal. Vision allows us to perceive an object at one glance: its size, shape, layout and distance in space. Hearing provides motion information.

This experimental approach focuses on the encounter between the human being and architecture. According to this phenomenological method, there are no preconceived ideas or experiences that determine emotion and meaning, and architecture acts as a mediator between the outside and the inside, creating perceptive references that help us understand reality.

The author's writing and narrative style allows readers to develop their own ideas, which are referred to through a simple dialectical discourse. After reading this book, you begin to consider that we experience the aesthetic experience of architecture only partially, since we use vision alone to capture all the aesthetic content of architectural work. Since the world must be understood and revealed through the eye, we reduce architecture to mere visual perception, unable to understand and design works that connect more intensely with its users.

Based on this reading, we can also understand the nature of the places we live in, and how these places influence our lives, habits, behaviours and experiences. These



factors become fundamental to architectural practice. These experiences, which occur in spaces, awaken our sense of empathy, a feature the author considers key for professionals involved in planning spaces and cities.

One of the major contemporary discussions is the social role of the architect, since this profession greatly influences social change. These professionals intervene in spatial organization, in environmental quality, lifestyle and liveability of spaces. In this sense, to understand the subtleties and imagine possible impacts that small changes may bring, though difficult positions, are key to promoting human-centred architecture.

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