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"At the hub of this approach is empathy, that is, endeavoring to understand or feel what others are experiencing from within their frame of reference."

—Cole Mears, Associate AIA
Sweet Sparkman
Architecture And Interiors

EMPATHY IN ARCHITECTURE: UNDERSTANDING THE PEOPLE IN THE PROCESS

INTRODUCTION

As a student writing a thesis about how architecture communicates, I noticed a pattern living in the subtext of much of my research: even seemingly innocuous design decisions can impact the experiences occupants have in our buildings. It became increasingly clear to me that architects must prioritize the occupant in the decision-making process lest we spiral into conceit. Simply put – architecture should not be about the architect. This vantage point makes architecture not only “a social art and an artful science,”¹ as it has been called, but also a tremendous responsibility and opportunity to enrich lives not just through aesthetics but also functionality.

At the hub of this approach is empathy, that is, endeavoring to understand or feel what others are experiencing from within their frame of reference. At Sweet Sparkman, that means planting ourselves firmly in the shoes of all stakeholders, from owners to governments to workers to the public, with a goal of designing for the greatest good.

It may seem this concept would be implicit, but that is not always the case. In practice, some architects design for what they would say the “building needs/wants.” These are almost all form-related decisions that may or may not positively impact the people using the spaces. Standing as proof are notable, sometimes infamous, examples of architecture that sharply demarcate the difference between designing for people and designing for the sake of design.

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**"Only architecture that
considers human
scale and interaction
is successful
architecture." ²**

Humanist architect
Jan Gehl

UNDERSTANDING THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE

In 2016, my inclinations were further refined by a visit to the Irish Pavilion at the Venice, Italy, Biennale of Architecture. The installation attempted to communicate and interpret some of the changes to spatial perception caused by dementia³ and the design elements necessary to address them.

For instance, while natural instincts and good intentions might lead to assumptions that clear directions and familiar symbols could help people living with dementia navigate their environment, it was discovered that maps were useless to people who could no longer make the necessary connections. Symbols had lost their meanings for them. Instead, it took clear sightlines for them to make sense of their increasingly senseless world. This knowledge, and the pursuit of it, made a life-enhancing difference in the respite facility being designed, standing as an example of the impact of what happens when a structure is designed from the perspective of those inhabiting it.

DESTRUCTIVE DECONSTRUCTION

At the other end of the spectrum are architects such as Peter Eisenman, whose deconstructive designs incorporate fragmentation of structures and geometrical asymmetry. His eye remains definitively on the art; some would say shock value of architecture, famously being quoted that he would never live in anything he designed, as art and life are different.⁴

Among his innovative designs is the Greater Columbus Convention Center, which incorporated a meeting room with tilted wall panels so spatially disorienting that it reportedly caused one visitor to vomit. Though the room later was modified to create a less stomach-churning effect, the original concept was a source of pride for the maverick architect. Other rooms and features, too, gave a slanting effect, reportedly driven by Eisenman's philosophy that a new type of architecture was required to express an age of collective angst.⁵

Eisenman had previously designed the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University, which was described as having "a number of deliberately awkward and discordant moments to complicate the intersection of built space with its human occupation."⁶ The architect reportedly counted those among the great successes of his design, as they manifested his theory of "deconstructive emancipation" into physical form.⁷ Fourteen years later, after making its splashy debut, the building underwent an invasive, three-year renovation to correct design and construction flaws.

“No matter what the spirit of the times, the primary responsibility of architecture is to shape the human environment . . . in three dimensions. That is why architecture is called the inescapable art.”⁸

Jan Gehl

While arguably “cool” looking, Eisenman’s compositions of leaning masses, mixed materials, marginally off-plumb exposed structure, and layered grids have been described as “hostile” to occupants.

High concepts like these can be interesting, enlightening even in the context of an installation in an exhibition. This could be argued for the Daniel Libeskind designed Jewish Museum in Berlin, which has two powerfully uncomfortable spaces or “voids” designed for symbolic ends. The key difference is that unlike the Wexner Center and Greater Columbus Convention Center, these “voids” are not designed for or interfere with any programmatic use, and these emotional/experiential effects are designed for visitors who are expecting to engage cognitively and emotionally with the content. Examples like the Jewish Museum, Berlin are rare exceptions to the rule. Negatively manipulating an inhabitant’s experience is negligent at best, I believe, and the concept of creating “important” buildings at the expense of buildings that fulfill the physical and psychological needs of the people involved is irresponsible and possibly even cruel.

THE ROAD BEST TRAVELED

Personally, I have been greatly influenced by Danish architect and urban planner Jan Gehl’s work on improving public spaces. Gehl is a strong proponent of designing space from the perspective of the inhabitants as opposed to making all the decisions from the top down. In other words, if architects make decisions based chiefly on how things align in the plan, they at the very least run the risk of ignoring the reality that these decisions may only be understood and experienced by looking at a drawing. The main lesson I’ve learned is to really take the time to consider how space is experienced at eye level, in use, in motion, or at rest as the case may dictate.

Putting Philosophy to Practice

At Sweet Sparkman, we have been entrusted to design a large number of public projects. As a researcher at heart, I enjoy looking deeply into the implied and expressed needs of those for whom I’m working, then at the community, and then at how to add value with modifications stakeholders may not have considered in order to take advantage of opportunities they didn’t envision. At the core of it all, of course, is the people using the spaces and how they use them.

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“The architect should strive continually to simplify; the ensemble of the rooms should then be carefully considered that comfort and utility may go hand in hand with beauty.”¹⁰

Frank Lloyd Wright

The fact is that architects have the power to consider and design according to the parts of the human experience that are worth amplifying. In creating public buildings, my colleagues and I often host public workshops to get feedback from the people the building will serve; we survey those who will work in those spaces to understand how they operate or wish to operate, and then we strive to provide space planning that is consistent with their values; make material selections that are comfortable, sustainable and healthy; and do whatever we can to make good spaces.

This learning process is a two-way street with moments of revelation for both us and stakeholders.

For instance, in redesigning one of the dozens of fire stations we’ve worked on, we saw the potential for more windows to open and invigorate the space. The firefighters, however, had another perspective. When they were in that part of the building, they said, they simply wanted to sleep. Point taken.

It’s also important to design a public safety project into the context of its surrounding community, hitting the sweet spot of a structure that both stands out and blends in.

An example here is the Boca Grande, Florida, Public Safety Building, intended to house a fire station, EMS services, and Sheriff’s facility for this coastal island community. Our final design reflects sensitivity to adjacent structures in the town’s historic district. Inspired by the richly detailed exteriors of boulevard homes, the station’s classic look is complemented by a two-story replica hose tower serving as the focal point, fully functioning fire pole, and refurbished antique siren, adding hints of the past for the state-of-the-art public services facility.⁹

Through all types of public buildings, this standard applies to us, whether it’s the Mediterranean-inspired Venice Library or a fire station built in the vernacular of Pine Island, or various beach pavilions that pay tribute to their surrounding habitats. This respect for history, existing structures, and the people using the next iteration, I believe, is paramount in our process for designing public spaces.

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CONCLUSION

Those of us who subscribe to this “people first” concept work hard to make architecture that doesn’t just look nice in a photograph. Our designs are human-centric and consider the needs of all stakeholders. In the case of public buildings, that includes the owners, the individual daily users, and the public. For private residences, it becomes a function of understanding not just what the client likes aesthetically, but is also a meditation on how they wish to live in the space. This mindset informs every stage of design, from space planning to material selection. To me, expertise and inspiration can make nice-looking spaces, but expertise, inspiration, and empathy are what make lasting spaces that improve and enhance lives.

RESOURCES

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