Architecture and the Senses: A Sensory Musing Park

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Our sensory organs are mediators between what happens in our brains, and what happens in the world around us. However, our brain doesn’t directly perceive anything. Diane Ackerman describes the paradox of our brain’s dependency on the senses, as a silent and dark recipient, transmitting only electrical impulses. This perspective uncovers the critical importance of our sensory abilities. If the brain is ineffective without information gathered by the senses, why aren’t our environments tailored to clarify and illuminate our sensory experiences? If we can understand over time, as John Zeisel explains, how people’s minds work in response to their physical environments, then those environments can be designed to support health, creativity, and life.

1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT
This thesis studies the relationship of architecture and the senses. The first part of the document explores sensory characteristics and how they work. It defines their importance in allowing humans to navigate complex environments. The second part looks directly at environmental stimuli. It seeks to qualify and associate physical variables with particular sensory responses. The third part of the document studies sense-stimuli relationships and the various outcomes.

Research draws from scientific, psychological, architectural, and philosophical contributions, including work by environmental psychologist, Harold Proshansky; architects, Steen Eiler Rasmussen and Charles Moore, and anthropologist, Edward Hall. The goal of the research is to create a set of principles by which architecture can design “for the senses.”

These principles are then applied to a series of architectural installations, located in the “Parco della Rimembranza”, in Rome, Italy. Each installation deconstructs a particular sensory experience, in order to isolate and examine the stimuli involved. The sense-stimuli relationships that comprise each installation use natural and man-made variables to activate the visitor’s experience. Each installation is part of a larger constellation that can be sequenced in a variety of ways, experienced uniquely each time, and even added to by visitors and artists.

This thesis provides a framework for clarifying and enhancing the built environment. It employs the human senses as a common denominator, through which practitioners from all ends of the occupational spectrum can contribute. By cataloging and analyzing the interplay between architecture and the senses, it evaluates human experience and offers a set of standards by which architecture can contribute to the benefit and welfare of humankind.

2. REFERENCES