

SynaptiCity: The Power of Weakness in the Construction of Place

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I. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Globalization, increased mobility, and fast urban growth, jeopardize our relationship with people and places that used to be important to us. As a result, we feel often displaced and try constructing the sense of place through a connection to the physical environment. Yet, contemporary predominance of virtual connectivity reduces attention to the physical environment and sensory engagement. This paper seeks to understand how can architecture facilitate the construction of place in a world of limited resources.

This is particularly acute in the Pearl River Delta, home to the fastest and largest extension of continuous urbanization in the world. Furthermore, the region's urban population is confined to barely 10 per cent of its territory, making it extremely dense. This fast and uneven growth is one of the greatest challenges faced by Chinese society and calls into question traditional modes of planning cities, raising the urgent need of alternative strategies.

Assuming that the construction of place has a strong affective foundation, this paper studies affect in the experience of space to identify the architectural qualities that contribute most to place attachment. The research combines insights from architecture, phenomenology, environmental psychology, and neuroscience; in order to investigate the processes associated with the perception and encoding of spatial cues that induce place attachment and enhanced use of public space.

The working hypothesis departs from the notion of 'weak architecture' (Vattimo, 1983; Solà- Morales, 1987; Pallasmaa, 2000; Casagrande, 2012) with its inherent frugality and ambiguity as a means to trigger composite emotional states (Damásio, 2010), generally less intense but more engaging, facilitating the construction of place while saving resources.

The analysis is based in the study of a site-specific architectural intervention in a public space in Hong Kong and some other cases from Taipei and Macau. In loco behavioral observations were conducted to assess movement patterns, physical and social interactions with the object. Interviews were performed to assess attention and affect. This provided insights into the identification of the spatial cues that operate within and outside consciousness and make affect and sensuousness necessary to the processes of attention, connection, and ultimately attachment to a place.

2. AUTHOR BIO

Diogo Teixeira is a doctoral candidate in Architecture at the University of Lisbon (Portugal). Since 1993, he collaborates in various projects in Europe, Africa and Asia, and is also an active researcher with a particular interest in affect and public space, namely understanding how architecture results in meaningful places. He conducted research at the Institut d'Urbanisme de Paris (France) and at the Laboratori d'Urbanisme of the Polytechnic University of Catalonia (Spain). Teixeira is currently a Senior Lecturer at the University of Saint Joseph (Macao, China), where he teaches design studios, and lectures on urbanism and construction technology.

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Menno Cramer is a neuroscientist at heart but works with designers and architects. He is fascinated by the experience of physical stimuli leading to responses, physical and non-physical. He is interested in how humans act, react and interact with the physical and digital world. Former PhD student in Neuroscience and Design, seeking to evaluate the role of built environment in which we live on primarily human behavior and health. Currently working in Lisbon to obtain work experience in the field.