The Scope of “Empathy” in Architecture From the design process to the user’s experience and back

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1. EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of empathy (and its related processes) can be considered at very different level in architecture, due to the domain’s complexity. In this presentation I am going to review these various levels mainly from philosophical and cognitive points of view.

Along with personal empathy, which refers (in a narrow sense) to an affect-based understanding of another’s inner life, there seems to be a form of empathy directly based on the perception of objects rather than persons, namely objectual empathy. The notion of personal empathy being conceptually and explanatory prior to the notion of objectual empathy, the latter is always an indirect way of understanding other (real or hypothesized) human beings.

First, I am going to discuss five types of object-based understanding and ask whether any of them illustrates the phenomenon of objectual empathy. objects as affordances, imaginative explorations of objects, bodily projections onto objects, objects as traces of action, objects as traces of emotion. Then, I will examine the relevance of these examples to architecture. One might ask, e.g., whether the perception of an architectural drawing can engage the same empathetic abilities that are enabled by the perception of the actual building itself, whether on the side of the designer’s experience (embodied simulation of the future users) or on the user’s (ability to understand the architect’s intentions as a client in a commercial context or as a visitor in an architecture exhibition).

Finally, I would like to show that empathy can be educated through experience and teaching. In this respect, the use of images, artworks and other representational media often plays a significant role in the development of empathy. It has been argued that our experience of representations can evoke empathetic responses that our perception of the world beyond representations does not.

Through learning, a high-level cognitive ability can become implicit and spontaneous, even if it was initially explicit and deliberate.

The study of empathy for the architectural object, its makers, its users, and even its representations, opens the way to future significant discoveries of great interest particularly in the context of architectural education.

Keywords: affordances, aesthetic experience, architecture, design process, empathy, representational media

2. REFERENCES


