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Editorial

Reflections on perception and the senses are essential to understanding the moment in which a work of architecture, an urban space or an interior becomes meaningful. When a place is truly revealing, it is perceived as a complete atmosphere, it has musical qualities, textures of different materials, complex smells, a certain degree of humidity; it is the combination of these perceptions, experienced in solitude or in proximity to other bodies – even in the midst of the multitude – and in movement. These places allow us to find some meaning to existence, or at the very least a consciousness of the present or nostalgia for the past. Whether in our everyday lives or in exceptional circumstances, we experience them through our senses. The meaning of architecture cannot be reduced to objectivity; it arises from an emotional, multisensory experience.

In our civilization, it is stipulated that what is essential for architecture is to efficiently meet a list of needs and carry out a function. However, if what primarily interests us is human perception, then time and space constantly expand and contract depending on the circumstances and, therefore, cannot be measured.

Our bodies are the medium through which we think and understand. Since the Enlightenment, feeling has been separated from reason and we have tended to think that feelings and emotions cloud our capacity to understand the world. Modern instrumental thinking sought to order our perceptions of our surroundings, but it has recently been shown that feeling has an enormous importance for the reasoning process. Knowledge arises from our body in a multisensory fashion and is just as emotional as it is intellectual.

Thanks to many recent movies, we can understand how sounds immediately situate us: through the flute of a knife sharpener, the whistle of a sweet potato seller, the siren of an ambulance, we are conscious of the auditory identity of a city. But something must be done to ensure that these sounds do not disappear, as they are incredibly vulnerable. Some foreigners swear that Mexico City smells like nixtamalized corn meal, even from the airplane. In other words, the city also has an aromatic identity, which can also disappear. What does architecture smell like? For this issue, we have proposed an olfactory experiment that smells of metal, lacquer and glass, of modernity and spaciousness. Or in the words of its designer, Izaskun Díaz Fernández, “a fragrance that captures the importance of the sensory properties of the materials, the work, the people that built it and live in it and of all the factors covered by the term ‘architecture.’ Metal, earth (brick), dust (cement, concrete and stone) and wood.”

Contemporary society places all of its emphasis on the sense of sight, but architecture is neither a two-dimensional image in a publication nor a luminous image on a computer screen, mobile device or digital preview. Nor is it a blueprint or sketch. The most meaningful architecture is not necessarily the most photogenic. In fact, it is difficult to communicate the reason why a work excites you through an image. Sight has been granted a false objectivity and clarity; setting aside the subjectivity of a photographic image, let us recall the complex mechanisms of optical corrections utilized by Greek architects to ensure a building's harmony and the fundamental truth that parallel lines never meet, no matter what our vision tells us. There is a great difference between what appears before our eyes and what actually exists in the tactile world.

The senses are not autonomous mechanisms that passively receive data and send them to our brain. The world that appears before us is full of basic information, such as gravity, and its meaning arises from our natural, corporal relationship with things. In our bodies, they act in a kinesthetic and synesthetic fashion. It is possible, for example, to have tactile perceptions through the sense of sight and visual perceptions through the sense of touch. Or to visually represent the way in which sound is perceived in a space, such as in the illustration that accompanies the Spanish version of this text.

Nevertheless, everything seems to indicate that to be able to correctly perceive Art (with a capital A), or to have an institutionalized aesthetic taste, we must expand our sight and our hearing as much as we can, while controlling our other senses, which are considered as primitive or animalistic. The fetishization of Art implies a cult of the original that doesn't allow humans to touch works of art, or perceive them with any of their other senses – not even approach them, to breathe in their air. Official Art is perceived in museums and concert halls through the senses of sight and hearing. But we have so overstimulated our sense of sight that, when in a concert hall where we should only be listening, we don't know where to look. Our sense of sight gets bored and desperate: we don't know how to listen closely without looking at something dynamic or intricate at the same time.

Sight, hearing and touch come together in the major spectacles of our times: stadium concerts and the movies. Walter Benjamin used architecture as an example of a different form of art: “the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation.” His comment refers to what he calls reception in distraction and he associates tactile appropriation with immediateness, closeness, custom and everyday contact; that is, the perception of the masses.

Human perception is currently undergoing yet another change due to the influence of new media; we find ourselves in one of those historic turning points of which Benjamin spoke. Now well into the twenty-first century, we are in the middle of a transformation of one of the dominant forms of perception, perhaps of the same importance as that which occurred at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

As an example, there are two means by which one can read this text. One is in the physical copy of the magazine, which takes up 814.2 cm³ in space, weighs 928 grams, smells of bond paper and ink (similar to plastic), has a rough texture inside (and, in this issue, contains a braille legend on the cover) and has an earthy, bitter taste. The other is in the electronic edition, which is solely visual but can be read from a distance – for example, by someone who cannot purchase the physical edition or someone in the far future. In the latter case, the reading experience would be quite different – incomplete, if you will – but it will have been made possible thanks to the enormous extension of the sense of sight provided by electronic media. Reflecting on the amputation that is a consequence of this extension, that is, the change that this form of media-as-prosthesis has provoked on human perception, is a pending task for the future.

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