

Precedent and Initiative in Architectural Design

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“The works of the past always influence us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how the influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work....The typology argument today asserts that despite the diversity of our culture there are still roots of this kind which allow us to speak of the idea of a library, a museum, a city hall or a house. The continuity of these ideas of type, such as they are, and the esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be effectively grounded.” (Hancock) The influence of past works is undeniable. All new ideas and works are built upon that which has come before it. Yet, with this project, the influence of type, as discussed by Hancock in the above statement, is secondary to the way in which the building is experienced. The project will have its precedents, such as the Welcome Pavilions for the Ireland Governmental Headquarters designed by Bucholz McEvoy Architects of Dublin, but that was not the main focus of the project. The project was intended to demonstrate the only way in which a human being can experience a space: the five senses. In this way, the idea of sensory mapping of a building becomes the focus.

The project description entailed the design of a small residential house based on the multidimensional “string theory” presented in *The Elegant Universe* by Bill Greene. This theory describes a new and different way in which one can look at the universe. According to *The Elegant Universe*, the smallest component of which all matter is composed is theorized as a vibrating string instead of a point or sphere. Due to this theorization, a new set of dimensions have come into being. These dimension are described as sub-planck length and curled up upon themselves, by this very fact the possibility of a human being able to detect them without powerful scientific equipment is zero. Therefore what we can infer from this is that there are limits to which we can experience. The most that anyone can hope to experience is determined by those devices that we have readily available to us: our senses. This is where the idea of mapping a space according to the five sense developed from.

The concept of Sensory Mapping is being used in various forms and in various applications. The Sensory Trust, from England, is an organization that “promotes and implements inclusive environmental design and management.” They are using it to map the different aspects of parks and public spaces and then implement their findings in the design of new spaces. “Sensory mapping allows us to assess what a park has to offer to the five main senses, and also to record other feelings that a particular space evokes. It is a way for us to get away from view-dominated criteria for what makes a good park - the bench with a view of a pond - and to begin to make places that appeal across a broad range of senses.” (Stenberg) It is as Hancock says, “The past is not just that which we know, it is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work...” Where the Sensory Trust uses sensory mapping to map the public spaces, where as this project uses it to identify and give a unique shape to a house. Each sense gives a different dimension to the house and each dimension has its own unique shape as can be seen in Image 1 through 4.

Image 1: Sight



Image 2: Sound



Image 3: Scent/Taste

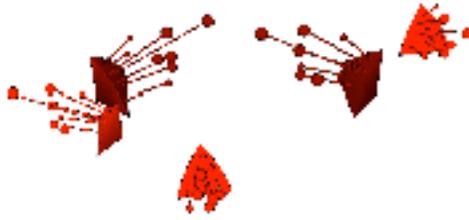


Image 4: Touch



There is a unique quality to sensory mapping that makes it adaptable to an individual and at the same time, difficult to represent. “My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.” (Maurice Merleau Ponty from *Sensing Space: Representation and Merging Sensory Fields* by John K Banner) This quality is that not everybody sees, hears, feels, etc. the same thing at the same time. “[Dr John] Hudspeth [head of the Laboratory of Sensory Neuroscience at The Rockefeller University] unveiled a few favourite science-fair demonstrations involving sound and colour, whose purpose is to show that not everyone experiences sights, sounds, or things in the same way; the world around us, after all, is really just a set of signals that humans interpret according to the genetic predispositions of their sensory systems.” (Vanderbuilt) Each persons experience will be different within the bounds of whatever is being mapped. That is what makes it difficult to represent because people will disagree with what is being shown to them. Yet, this is also what makes it so endearing from a design standpoint. The design becomes versatile and adaptive to each individual that

inhabits the space. Bill Greene said it in *The Elegant Universe*, “Experience sets the frame within which we analyze and interpret what we perceive.”

Even though the project called for an interpretation of a new and experimental theory, the concepts and ideas used in the project were rooted in the various cultures from a wide variety of sources. This demonstrates that which John E Hancock describes in the opening paragraph taken from *Between History and Tradition: Notes Towards a Theory of Precedent*. “The continuity of these ideas of type, such as they are, and the esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be effectively grounded.” (Hancock) The diverging point is that of the idea of type. Type is not the only way in which his ideas can be presented. There are roots in other areas of design other than the typology of the building. The design principles behind the designs carry the same continuity. These design principles can lead into a typology, but they do not necessarily define a certain typology within a building.

The main focus of the project need not be the typology of the building to hold some roots with the past. Projects such as the Sensory mapping of the Sensory Trust, demonstrate that an idea or concept can carry those same effective line of inquiry depending on where it is being applied. In a small residential house, as in this project, or in the design of parks and public spaces, an idea that can be so diverse in its application certainly complies with the ideals that John E Hancock describes in his writing.

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