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Human Response: A Psychological Methodology of Habitats

How does psychology reason the unconscious perception of spaces and places - what does that mean for designers?

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Introductory Words

The idea that homes and places have a great impact on the human mind is not a new theory nor is it hard to grasp, but a psychological study of the effects architecture provides an important research basis for design. When walking into a building or an area you have never been in before, you might feel a variety of emotions. Perhaps you feel amazed, claustrophobic, free, breath-taken or uneasy. The emotions you feel are sometimes conscious sometimes unconscious, the latter being a sensation you might not be able to put your finger on, often caused by experiences buried deep in your unconsciousness. Whilst the aesthetic choices prove almost as important as the functional ones in current architecture, design choices often overlooked are those not visible – but they may just be the most important (Huskinson 2018).

The answer to the emotional effect of architectural environments, might be unpacked in psychology. The psychological scale of ‘*nature* versus *nurture*’ provides an understanding of different theories on behaviour. The psychodynamic theory, based on the studies of neurologist Sigmund Freud, believes all people develop a variety of unconscious thoughts, memories, and feelings throughout their lives (McLeod 2019). Behaviourism on the other side, another of the main psychological approaches, argues the changing of our perception through conditioning, based upon experiments in a more scientific matter. By using psychological theory to dig deeper in the human perception of habitats and environments, the answers collected will be reliant on how the unconsciousness mind perceives a variety of things.

It seems common sense that part of the human personality is based on instincts, but to investigate this deeper – also in relation to architecture – one would have to look at other philosophical theories. There has been made interesting theories on the human relation to habitat, like the theory of *refuge* and *prospect*, which believes in the importance of a safe home in a purely instinctual way.

The unconsciousness controls many human feelings. This can make it difficult to determine exactly how a group of people will react when entering a building – or how different their responses may be. The individual response can be affected by a myriad of personal factors, upbringing, or past conditioning, as seen through the theories of behaviourism and psychodynamics, making it increasingly difficult for architects and designers to approach spaces with everyone in mind. Vernacular architecture has attempted to create commonly liked design, but does that take into consideration the individual experience people may have? How can this be solved? How can you build a home or a building and cater it to certain people?

A Primitive Sense of Refuge

The need for somewhere safe to retreat and hide from dangerous elements such as predators or weather, seems to be essential for human survival. A theoretical example of how the instinctual desire for safety works, has been made by geographer Jay Appleton in 1975. *'Prospect and refuge'* is a theory based upon survival symbols in nature. The theory explains how humans need a safe *refuge* as well as a *prospect* for exploration. Appleton's theories are further explored by architect and architectural historian Grant Hildebrand, by adding additional principles to *'refuge and prospect'* and putting it in an architectural context in his book *Origins for Architectural Pleasure* (1999). The idea that humans have an instinctual desire for protection is investigated by Hildebrand, and he discusses the need for a quiet dark space, in a predator-laden world, for important, yet vulnerable, human experiences like copulation, childbirth and illness. Some explanations for this are merely biological, as humans lack combat attributes that other animals have, as well as a lacking ability to acclimate to weather. It also stems from the longer dependency on support in early childhood compared to other animals, making the need of a safe nest much more important. Followers of psychodynamics would perhaps argue, that if the safe support in the childhood is removed, it might affect how the child perceives homes when they grow up.

The primitive instincts recognise safety as darkness and caves - this is what Appleton refers to as the *refuge*. The *prospect* on the other hand is the openness, the brightness, where we inevitably need to go for food and water. The two can never be the same but must continuously follow each other for the 'perfect human habitat'. There is inevitably more to a perfect home than safety, as discussed later, but without the fundamental ability to safely nest, other factors seem trivial.

Although the concepts of *refuge* and *prospect* sound prehistoric in their core with the idea of 'dark caves' and 'bright meadows', in modern times, the home becomes the *refuge*. Whilst the essence of the *refuge* theory is most suitable for the primitive safety of a home, it can also exist in public buildings by clever use of space and light (Hildebrand 1999) creating an attractive composition of ambiances and settings. However, perhaps it makes more sense to use the concept of *prospect* for public buildings or spaces. You will naturally feel more exposed here, than you do in your own home, but inevitably you must visit to provide food for your *refuge*. The concept of the *refuge* coincides with philosopher Gaston Bachelard's belief in 'The Poetics of Space' (1958) of the home as the ultimate breeding ground for imagination and stability. In his book he quotes painter Maurice de Vlaminck (1931)

"It is striking that even in our homes, where there is light, our consciousness of well-being should call for comparison with animals in their shelters. An example may be found in the following lines by the painter, Vlaminck (...) 'The well-being I feel, seated in front of my fire, while bad weather rages out-of-doors, is entirely animal. A rat in its hole, a rabbit in its burrow, cows in the stable, must all feel the same contentment that I feel.'" (Bachelard 1958:112).

The pure primitive secureness of a nest must achieve the same feelings in both humans and animals alike. Furthermore, Bachelard adds the lightness to the home, possibly to introduce the idea that homes are ultimately safer with the addition of sturdy walls and locked doors compared to a cave in its ultimate primitiveness, with unavoidable easy access for predators.



Figure 1. La Palais Bulles, Théoule-sur-Mer, France – Antti Lovag 1989

Similarly, it could be argued that the primitive sense of *refuge* has had an influence on newer architecture in the shape of conversation pits and the central placement of fireplaces. The, usually rounded, shape alone is fostering comfort and an escape from the dangers of the *prospect*. Figure 1, ‘La Palais Bulles’, is a good example of the theory, despite not being sunken, the rounded sofa creates an enticing space surrounding the fireplace. The addition of the large window offers a view of the *prospect* whilst remaining in a safe cave like space, ultimately creating a comfortable in-between of safety and nesting & guarding and shielding. Furthermore, the shape encourages closer emotional bonds by allowing people to look at each other in an ergonomic position and sustain valuable conversation. The room becomes the human *refuge*, where you feel safe enough to become vulnerable.

The Psychological Response

‘*Nature* versus *nurture*’ is a psychological scale upon which different theories place themselves. The placement on the scale ultimately means, whether that branch of psychology believes a behaviour is learnt through biological and genetic inheritance - *nature*, or through the conditioning of life experiences or exposure - *nurture*. Studies on twins have shown that about 50% of psychological traits and behaviours are biologically inherited (McLeod 2018), which could conclude that the other 50% is based upon conditioning through experiences

Behaviourism as a psychological approach is scientific and heavily based upon the results of objective observation of responses to a variety of stimuli. This means that behaviourism is placed at the *nurture* end of the scale. Behaviourism attempts to explain behavioural responses as learnt through repeated conditioning, ultimately meaning your brain is a blank slate when born. A great example of this is Pavlov’s Dogs, and the idea of dog training is in its essence similar to behaviourism. In the context of architecture, this could mean that any repeated architectural experiences you have had throughout your life alters how you experience buildings in the future. The theory has its limitations, as much of the research is based on animal experiments and the comparison is naturally limiting. (McLeod 2020).

The psychodynamic theory, built on from psychoanalysis, believes that the reason we act or behave the way we do, is buried deep inside the unconsciousness or as a result of the childhood. The psychodynamic theory takes into consideration elements from both *nature* and *nurture*. They believe the instincts of *nature* determines our behaviour, but the way they are expressed is ultimately shaped by *nurture*. The symptoms or reactions that arise in various circumstances are based on stimuli that are not always obvious. The theory believes in the tripartite, where the personality is made up of three parts – id, ego, and super-ego. The first, id, is controlled by instincts and could be the reason we feel a need of *refuge* to survive. The psychodynamic approach gives little credit to mediational processes, ultimately being very deterministic in the explanation of behaviour (McLeod 2020). This is limiting in the search for a wider spectrum of answers to psychological architecture.

Behaviourism is created upon mounts of experiments, providing a very scientific base to abstract ideas, whereas psychodynamics is limited in its ability to conduct scientific experiments. One of its biggest critiques is the subjectivity of the concepts. Furthermore, the psychodynamic approach is critical towards behaviourism, as it does not consider the unconscious mind and instincts and how that will influence behaviour (McLeod 2020).

If you grew up with large fields filled with children's play you might associate open meadows as freeing and liberating as an adult, due to the happy connotations deep in your unconsciousness. In the same way, if you have gotten stuck in an elevator on multiple separate occasions, you might avoid ever going in to one again to avoid the claustrophobic recollections. One slight change or experience can completely alter the perception of a home or place (Bachelard 1958). The comfort of a home only exists in the one reality it is currently in. The matter is more recently discussed by ecologist and landscape architect Frederick R. Steiner (2016). The four walls surrounding you gives you a, perhaps false, sense of comfort and stability. One that can be removed if a wall is removed, exposing you to the reality around you, the real world surrounding your illusional house (Steiner 2016). Perhaps a certain event changes a person's perception of a room, filled it with negative memories or connotations. The opinion of the room becomes entirely unconscious, leaving little room to past opinions or current personal design preferences. The primitive, stable *refuge* is suddenly gone, and the person is left feeling out of place.

In a similar way, the perception of a space completely changes once it is no longer occupied or if it has been occupied by someone else. The entire atmosphere and the memories contained within, is changed. The reality that was previously prevalent is altered, broken, and can never exist again. Bachelard (1958) uses the analogy of a nest, creating a similar proposition of the sudden lack of a living organism within a space.

“Indeed the nest we pluck from the hedge like a dead flower is nothing but a “thing”. (...) And yet it is living nests that could introduce a phenomenology of the actual nest, of the nest found in natural surroundings, and which becomes for a moment the center – the term is no exaggeration – of an entire universe (...)” (Bachelard 1958:115)

The nest has had an important role in the lives of the birds, the same way the home is important for humans. Once it is ‘dead’, the liveliness that once occupied it, is dead as well, and others finding it may never know the memories and events that happened within the walls, whether made of sticks or studs. Furthermore, if the home is a playground for human imagination and daydreaming (Bachelard 1958), how does that affect the lack of a home? You could arguably say the human life becomes idle once there is no home left, as the significance of daydreaming, possible with complete immersion in safety, is an important part of the human experience. The safe home becomes the most important part of that time in your life, a place that at some point will be left as an empty nest when you move on.

The Demolition of Vernacular Architecture

Vernacular architecture is by the definition of Cambridge Dictionary a piece of design or art based on the style of the local area or commonly liked by most people. Vernacular buildings are in their essence incredibly practical as they utilise local materials and building techniques, which is admirable from a sustainability standpoint. It also takes into consideration the cultural and traditional values of the area (Ghisleni 2020) which could potentially encourage deeper connections with cultural identity. An example of this is shown in figure 2, as a traditional piece of Danish architecture. The half-timber frames and painted surfaces protect the buildings from weather. The paint was also traditionally made from natural local sources. Meanwhile figure 3 shows a contemporary interpretation of the traditional style, built amongst an old 17th century farmhouse. The new buildings have been carefully constructed, by following the existing layout and building values from the original construction. By doing this, the architects manage to maintain the cultural and traditional values of the old farmhouse. Furthermore, the layout of the buildings has created small, individual roads turning the whole area into a small village. This will encourage human connections between the students living in the apartments (Lenschow, K. and Pihlmann, S. 2017). This project provides a good example of how vernacular architecture is locally sourced, but more importantly, how it values cultural identities within the local area, to encourage the fundamental spirit of a place and the history it holds. Additionally, the architects provide historical imagery of the site on the project website, creating a direct link between history and the contemporary renovation.



Figure 2. Oluf Bagers Gård - Odense, Denmark – commissioned by *Oluf Nielsen Bager 1568*

If vernacular architecture aims to benefit the layman of the area, is it possible, that it can contain an array of multiple individual people's unconsciousness? Vernacular architecture becomes rather deterministic, not allowing your unconsciousness to collect opinions, but instead doing it for you, by creating a universally liked piece of design. Perhaps the idea of psychological architecture is the opposite of the vernacular counterpart, as it will be fostered and curated on individual people's response and emotional background, instead of appealing for the masses? Therefore creating an ultra-specific solution for a home, that only fits the group or family, studied during the research phase. Furthermore, if psychological architecture is used for public buildings, perhaps it almost automatically becomes vernacular. A public building should in its essence appeal to the masses. Of course, there will be specific buildings for specific areas of interest, hobbies, or activities, but even then, those buildings should appeal for that subgroup. Applying psychology to vernacular public architecture, would ultimately be about creating safety for everyone entering – and by doing that, speaking to the primitiveness within us.



Figure 3. Student Village, Viby, Denmark – Lenschow & Pihlmann 2016

A vernacular building is static and fits with the specific place. If moved, the context is completely abolished, and the primary intention becomes obsolete. The reality that was once present is destroyed, so even if the building is moved to a similar location, the reality needs to be built up again from scratch. If moved further away, it can no longer foster the cultural identity of the space. The exemption to this, is perhaps if the building or artefacts are acting as part of a cultural exhibition, but no one would be able to repossess the emotions that was previously prevalent.

A similar critique could be said about psychological architecture, as it is so perfectly curated for the context it is built upon, that once moved it becomes nothing more than Bachelard's 'dead flower', the empty nest picked off the tree. On the contrary, the practical and contextual approach of the vernacular home does not mean it is turned into a home instantly. No matter how contextually curated the building is, no one can instantly create a home for anyone. A home is purely created upon the addition of memories and emotional connotations. What is created will still be a safe nest, a primitive *refuge*, from the climate and predators, but not a home.

Is it even a possibility to predict what the unconscious opinion will be of a space? If the unconsciousness is as complete chaos as philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche presumes in his Apollonian and Dionysian concepts, later presented by Lucy Huskinson (2018), is there even any chance we can predict it? Furthermore, Nietzsche believes the ultimate creative composition is achieved by the appearance of both Apollo and Dionysus – the conscious and unconscious. Perhaps this is relevant within architectural research, to provide an experience that we can both pinpoint in our conscious decisions and one that speaks to an emotional reservoir deeper within our unconscious mind. Despite rigorous research into the psychology of design, the answers are not simple or straightforward. The way to truly speak to people's unconsciousness is perhaps instead to appeal to their instinctual needs, creating safety and a place for vulnerability. Clever use of shapes, hideouts, corners, and corridors can ultimately create a variety of experiences. This can be done in multiple different ways by offering the ability to feel safe in public, examples of this could be the following: By offering darker, more comfortable corners, you allow visitors to feel safe and unleash imagination, without the possibility of interruption. By using larger windows to the outside, visitors can shield but remain in a valuable observatory position, in the same way that the large windows in *'La Palais Bulles'* offers the ability to spectate whilst safe in front of the life-giving fire. The use of long dark corridors, perhaps with something bright and open the end, creates excitement, and encourages walking to explore the *prospect*. Clever use of light and dark ultimately decides where visitors feel safe and where they might feel more exposed, ruling over a large part of their final perception of the building.



Figure 4. Tower House, Alphington, Australia – Austin Maynard Architects 2015

An example of some of the practical approaches is seen in figure 4, Tower House. The darkness of the room makes you feel safe, but the closeness of the bright and budding prospect is just around the corner, inviting you to explore. At the same time, the location of the bookcase in the dark, intimate area, encourages imagination and creativity in a secluded and secure place of the building.

Speaking to visitors' unconsciousness, allows them a much deeper experience in the building. This also means the emotions will not feel forced but will be experienced organically. By using psychological research before designing architecture, the designer applies a greater understanding of how their space will work, ultimately creating a human-centred design. They will have a better understanding of the experience people will go through when entering and allow spaces to accompany different life experiences or be filled with new emotions. By using rigorous research into the human mind focusing on psychodynamics and behaviourism, it also acts as a benefit to the designer. Whilst the final product of a project or experience would commonly be referred to as the final piece of art, and in the architectural world – the final building, Bachelard (1958) argues that this is only the biproduct of a rigorous learning experience. The actual product is the enlarged consciousness, the knowledge acquired during the process that the designers or artists will take on with them. Meanwhile the building will always be fixed in its location and only be experienced when visiting or memorising. The new knowledge therefor proves to be of a much larger importance. This argument is also relevant in other sectors besides art and design and could prove a valuable understanding of the human learning experience.

Is psychological architecture really the opposite of vernacular architecture? The two both add valuable addition, some of which are comparable like culture and identity. Inevitably, vernacular architecture is aiming to benefit everyone from a local area. Psychological architecture can do the same, if your aim is to speak to visitors' primitive instincts, but the second you want to make the design more specified to a certain family, you can no longer call it vernacular. Perhaps a mixture of both is the solution to the ultimate architectural experience.

Concluding Words

Psychological theories have different approached to behaviour and whether it is taught or inherited. The complexity of the means neither is a correct answer, but the thought processes are useful for psychological architecture. Knowing how behaviour affects humans, what is taught and instincts you might already have when you are born, means the designer has a sturdy foundation for any design. The designer can approach the design with the visitor's unconsciousness in mind, making sure they will feel comfortable in the space. Furthermore, when you have acknowledged the situations in which people feel safe, you can reverse your research. By doing this, you can design to purposefully make people scared or exposed. and make an impact in, as an example, a museum exhibition.

Inevitably, architecture is perceived differently by everyone. We all have instinctual needs for safety, that first and foremost meet to be met to allow us to be at our most vulnerable. The safety will cultivate imagination and creativity, allowing us to grow as humans. You ideally want the home building to become the *refuge* and the public buildings the *prospect* to allow for the ideal combination of safety and exploration. The need for a safe nest is inevitable, but just as important is the ability to leave that nest.

Whilst there is a series of practical solutions to apply directly to a project to make visitors feel comfortable, they do not mean that it is the only way to make people feel certain emotions. The individual psychological background of everyone entering a building, will have an impact on their final perception. That background is something very hard to predict, so by speaking to human instincts the success rate of people acknowledging the effort is much higher. If designing a residential project for a single family, the ability to dig deep into their specific psychological pattern suddenly becomes feasible. In that instance, you can provide a catered experience, allowing the family to explore the residential site in a way that feels personal and unique. They can then, with time, use the shell of the psychological architecture, to build their own memories within the house. Whilst guests visiting will possibly feel the emotions within the building, it will never have nearly as much of the same meaning to them as compared to the family living there.

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