

## 3. Context

### 3.1 Space

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### 3.3 The DDA and Models of Practice



## 3.1 Space

### *introduction*

Seating is often used in the design of spaces to help convey architectural character, perhaps arranged in formal rows or conversational groups. The experience of sitting in public space is often a key factor in determining how we feel about the space and how we use and shape that space. In trying to understand the role of seating and how people sit in public space it is necessary to look at our understanding of the nature of space itself. In this chapter I look at how our understanding of space has changed from that of space as an absolute to space as subjective, a creation and reflection of society, and how this view reflects on our personal interactions.

### *current interest in public space*

Over the last few years there has been an appreciation of the importance and general trend towards the improvement of urban and public space. With the government announcing in May 2003 'the biggest investment in green space since the Victorian age' (Mathiason) the importance of public space on the well being of individuals and communities has been recognised (ODPM).

### *new spaces as catalysts for regeneration*

Investment in public space as a symbol of confidence and a catalyst for regeneration is in direct response to what has been perceived as the hostile and alienating spaces of much of our built environment. Daily life is seen as more difficult and dangerous with the density of modern living making us more dependant on each other and 'more vulnerable to aberrant behaviour than we have ever been before' (Newman p1). Post-war architecture and urban planning is blamed for this situation with its zoned areas, mono-functional spaces, unfriendly materials, iconoclastic form and disregard for the individual. In her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* Jane Jacobs describes, with accuracy and prescience, how this alienating built environment detrimentally affects our daily lives and the functioning of communities.



*seating is an integral part of the architecture of Gaudi's Parc Guell*

*the failure of post war architecture and planning* ●●●●●●●●



## 3.1 Space

### *the origins of the problem*

In attempting to understand why these undesirable spaces were created and to establish a new and more relevant model we must look at how concepts of architectural space have developed. Before the early C20th, although the notion of space as enclosure must have existed, architectural theory did not refer to space but concentrated on structure and proportion (Collins, p285). It is the physical fabric of the building that is the focus of pre-modern architecture not the space that it contains even though, within our understanding, these buildings create recognisable spaces and complex and subtly manipulated spatial relationships.

Classical architecture is understood from a fixed view point and one moves between a series of fixed spaces whereas Modern Movement space only becomes apparent by moving through it. From the concentration on the formal, what can be drawn in Euclidean three dimensions, architectural theory added a fourth dimension of the moving viewpoint or time<sup>1</sup>. But the space that they so consciously led one through was transparent, neutral and passive like their materials of glass, steel, and concrete. The journey, thrilling as it often is, reveals only the form which Modern Movement architects sought to express in the pure typology of what became known as the International Style.

In contrast Frank Lloyd Wright and Alavar Aalto put emphasis on place as well as form and structure. In Wright's buildings the world outside flows into the interior and one is led from light to dark, from high to low and from open to closed; the building block, as it were, is space and the structure and fabric of the building are servants to it. This deliberate manipulation of space becomes a new way of



*Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion is experienced by moving through it but the devices it uses are classical and its understanding of space is, like its materials, neutral and passive*

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<sup>1</sup> The notion of the fourth dimension in architecture and its pre-occupation with space might, however, just be one of Modernism's requirements to invent new and revolutionary viewpoints. The representation of space, in the progression that they saw from the Medieval flat space (which we would certainly contest today) through the three dimensions of Renaissance perspective to the Cubist fourth dimension, was perhaps confused with ideas of the creation of space.



*our culture pervades even this seemingly natural space - in the distance is Kinder Scout scene of the 1932 Mass Trespass which established the, previously denied, 'right to roam' over this landscape*

understanding architecture but, despite its contrast to the universal types of Modernism, reference to geographical location, local materials and allowing nature to interpenetrate the building are inadequate in the urban environment. Our notion of place or 'behavioural setting' (Barker p187) comprises both our physical and social environments. Modernism recognises the observer but as onlooker or subject within space not as participant in and creator of space. Its Cartesian space is an absolute and putting 'object before subject it dominated senses and bodies by containing them' (Tschumi p29).

### *new view of space*

Jacobs contrasts the impersonal, dis-functional zoned areas of Modernism with the success of organic and mixed use neighbourhoods in providing a safe and functioning environment. She describes the 'intricate ballet' (p60) of the thriving street with houses, shops, workplaces and entertainment. Overlooked and seldom deserted the core of interested and interdependent parties create a community which not only protects itself but provides a safe and welcoming environment for outsiders. This is not, as she points out, an idealised Utopia but the natural product of physical and cultural urban diversity illustrating that architectural space is not simply an arrangement of physical elements but 'the spatial patterns of social action and routine' (Shields).

In his 1974 book *The Production of Space* the left-wing humanist philosopher Henri Lefebvre suggests that far from being abstract space is a social construction. Space he argues is not the transparent space we are encouraged to feel in Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion but is instead thick with meaning shaping and shaped by our every action. Not only are individuals participants in and contributors to the production of space but the space produced by our culture interpenetrates and permeates our physical and mental world in an 'ambiguous continuity' (Lefebvre p87). Space, then, is the scene of our very existence carrying within it our social and political hierarchies as well as our sense of self.

## 3.1 Space

This shift, from the heroic (and imposed) to the subjective (and created), is mirrored in post-modern moves towards democratic pluralism and inclusiveness. The implications to our understanding of space is that social structures act on the individual through space and that individuals are involved in the creation of space.

### *spatial manners*

Space regulates our behaviour with social codes or 'spatial manners' (Lawson p126) that are often implicit; the lowering of our voice as we enter a church or the sharing of a game of cricket with strangers on a beach. But as discussed in the next chapter the forms of our physical environment, which are the 'projections on the ground of the images of social institutions' (Tschumi p45), often reinforce the dominance of a particular group and social order. Social and spatial orders thus often serve the same function (Sommer p17) with, for instance, the elite having more space and more spatial mobility – in animal terms this equals more food.

### *spatial devices and social routines*

As 'control over our setting gives a sense of security' (Goffman p98) spatial devices are used to demonstrate ownership, power and status. Thus we see both the conventional hierarchy explicit in the teacher standing before seated students and the spatial devices and social routines essential to our feelings of home and security. One of the main criticisms of Modernist Architecture and particularly the tower blocks it spawned was the vulnerability felt by its occupants because of its failure to provide this type of defensible space<sup>2</sup>.

Symbols of status and methods of gaining control over the environment are, then, both essential to our sense of well being and personal security and used to



*the complicated system of public and private surveillance that takes you from the street, through the garden gate, to the front door overlooked by net-curtained windows where, standing at the bottom of the step, you glimpse only a hallway before, perhaps, being invited into where the intimate activity of the home takes place*

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<sup>2</sup> Oscar Newman's book *Defensible Space* published in 1973 investigates how building design can engender a sense of security. The problem it seeks to address is implicit in its sub-title 'people and design in the violent city'.



*social rules have been replaced by the physical barriers of locked gates and 'skate blockers'*

perpetuate existing systems and hierarchies. However as Sommer observed in the late 1960s the weakening of a previously accepted dominance system within the society leads to a greater reliance on territorial rights. Society 'compensates for blurred social distinctions with clear spatial ones' (Sommer p23) and we see an increase in physical barriers and keep-out signs, leylandi hedges and nuisance neighbours. Our culture does not exist in our minds or independently in the world around us but as an 'emergent property of the relationship between persons and things' (Graves-Brown p4). As the understanding of one becomes more blurred the other becomes more emphatic.

## 3.1 Space

Our concept of personal space is developed from our interactions with others and Lawson suggests a 'taxonomy of human distances' (p115) with intimate love/hate relationships within 0.5m, personal interactions within 1.2m into which strangers cannot enter and a desire to keep people one wishes to ignore at 4m. But one can tolerate a stranger much closer at the side than face to face and as Sommer (p26-28) points out this space does not extend equally on all sides, depends on the context (a crowded bus or an empty park) and on culture (people live and interact much closer in Hong Kong than in the UK). Such behaviour can be studied by psychology and related to animal behaviour; the distance of fight or flight, the distance at which one can see, hear, smell and finally touch and upon body language and social relationships (Morris). In the complexity of the built environment, however, observations are possibly the best way to understand the relationships between design and behaviour<sup>3</sup>.

### *conclusion*

We are familiar with the way people defend their space on a train sitting in the aisle seat, using baggage to occupy the adjacent seat, engaged in a book so that they don't have to make eye contact until the carriage becomes so crowded that there is no acceptable alternative but to give up the extra seat. We can observe friendly circular groupings, the football huddle or the dining table, and the linear impersonality of queues. We know places and times and types of people that are friendly and those that are not. We can encourage certain types of behaviour simply by rearranging the furniture; pulling rows of chairs into a circle or designing the height of a reception desk to allow level eye contact. Jacobs observed that a safe and functioning neighbourhood arises 'only when the concrete, tangible facilities it requires are present' (p81)

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<sup>3</sup> In the late 1960s Sommer conducted extensive research into behaviour in public spaces to help inform design observing, for instance, how sitters would leave a park bench if someone sat besides them and how students occupy and defend personal space at library tables.

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acknowledging the link between the physical and cultural. 'Behaviour in space... is part of a vital human language' and consequently we must 'not only look at our relationship with architecture but at the way architecture mediates our relationship with each other' (Lawson p5). What I have also shown is that successful public space is not designed for a specific purpose but accommodates a diversity of uses and users and adapts within the ongoing discourse of the production of space. In chapter 3.3 I will look at how we might go about trying to create such space.