Affordances and the Potential for Architecture

A symposium debating the significance of affordances, atmosphere and primed behaviors within the design and sensory appreciation of measured spaces, i.e. architecture.

“An important fact about the affordances of the environment is that they are in a sense objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental... It is equally a fact of the environment and a fact of behavior. It is both physical and psychical, yet neither. An affordance points both ways, to the objective, real, and physical, unlike values and meanings, which are often supposed to be subjective, phenomenal, and mental... It is equally a fact of the environment and the observer.”
(J.J. Gibson, 1979/86, p. 129)

Fallen Angel, Igor Mitoraj, while on exhibition at the Opera Del Duomo, Pisa, February 26, 2015
(Photograph, Bob Condia)

“Affordances and the Potential for Architecture,” 8:30 – 12:30, 28 March 2019 Regnier Hall, APDesign, Kansas State University: An INTERFACE event of the Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture, Advisory Council. Organized by APDesign’s PLab2035. Generously sponsored by HOK Architects and the Regnier Chair for Research. AIA professional Learning Units (3) are in application and expected.

Agenda:
8:19 Coffee and networking in the Regnier Hall lobby.
8:45 Introduction to Affordances in Architecture and the order of things.
Bob Condia, AIA, APDesign, Kansas State University.
9:00 “Articulating Affordances: Towards a New Theory of Design.”
Sarah Robinson, Architect & Philosopher, owner Sarah Robinson Architects, San Francisco and Pavia, Italy.
9:45 “Just What Can Architects Afford,”
Dr. Harry Mallgrave, Architect & Historian, Illinois Institute of Technology (Emeritus)
10:30 Coffee Break

10:50 “How Do Designers and Appreciators Discover Affordances?”
Dr. James Hamilton, Philosopher, Kansas State University.
11:40 Panel Discussion: Sarah Robinson, Harry Mallgrave and James Hamilton.
Bob Condia in moderation.
12:30 Closing remarks and adjournment.

Architecture is Something We Do: A Postscript
Bob Condia

As we are arranging this concise manuscript for publication, I sense, or better realize that it will be an important contribution to our thinking about architecture, space, and perception. Quite simply, Affordances and the Potential for Architecture discloses that our engagement with architecture or the built environment is a deeply rooted experience operating on many levels. In a biological and philosophical sense, it reveals that the mind is inseparable from the body, just as the body is inseparable from its environment. It displays the world before us as rife with potential movements, activities, engagements, for which we continuously rehearse the myriad possibilities and choose the best course of action. It defines our phenomenological natures through our readiness-for-action, and it thereby suggests that we can improve the spaces, buildings, and landscapes that we inhabit by mastering how we enact and understand them.

We are grateful to Andrea Jelić for her contribution, “Introduction: Designing Affordances for the Living-Lived Body?” She begins with the tender probe of “How architecture affords being-in-the-world?” And, as she suggests, its value lies in the pervasiveness of the question. Recognizing the general conceit of humans historically toward abstraction, toward separating the mind from the body and the body from its situation—she frames our scaffold for experience as one of environmental mutual dependence rather than of detachment. The primacy of our sensory perception nesting in the body is the story unfolding in the discoveries of the newer models of cognition, much along the ecological lines of James Gibson’s thesis of affordances. Can the idea of affordances contribute to the decisions that architects make? It will certainly add new dimensions to thought processes.

Sarah Robinson, in “Articulating Affordances: Towards a New Theory of Design,” makes the same case. Beginning as she does with the rocking chair’s animation of the porch, she demonstrates that one size doesn’t fit all. Even as our bodies are similarly constituted and share much in common, it is the specificity of differences between us that should instruct designers. There is no “average” body size or standard fighter
pilot. Instead, there is a poetic double entendre which asks professionals to understand perception as the active confluence of varying influences (from personal to bounded), all the while considering the particularities of the individual person. A theory of affordances recognizes that while the rocking chair will always provide an affordance of rocking, its activity depends on its location and the frame of mind of the person so engaged. Such real participation in life, like rocking in a chair, is the real beauty of an architectural moment.

In his essay “Just What Can Architects Afford?” Harry Mallgrave advocates that, after decades of reducing form to conceptual gamesmanship and usurping models with little kinship to design, one must raise the question of where this has left the practice of design? Has it improved our cities or our houses? In the face of the mounting evidence to a contrary, and in view of the complexity of human life, wants, and desires, shall we mindlessly follow the same track? The newer biological models disclose in no uncertain terms that our engagement with buildings and landscapes is “a whole-body experience,” one grounded not only in our multisensory, emotional, and visceral responses to the world but also in the phenomenal or “lived” nature of our being. Standing against the hollowing of human nature in contemporary digital practice—and with it our existential desire for seduction—Mallgrave offers the lesson that we are indeed active agents in the culture that we create, and this built world can indeed be attuned to our biological and social natures. Thinking of beauty, he suggests, is also something we do; it is yet another expression of the vital paradisiacal instinct grounded in human nature.

James Hamilton, isn’t concerned with beauty, but with, “How do Appreciators and Designers Discover Affordances?” He assigns to himself the difficult task of arbitrating for the ‘user,’ who might appreciate a building, while at the same time distrusting the designer to grasp the real intention of the things they make. In a scholarly way, he does so by examining Gibson’s claims for affordances, and questioning the basis for understanding how objects appear to us or are useful within a specific environment. It seems that affordances have much to do with the experience or understanding you bring to the artifact. You have to see a chair as a chair in order to sit in a chair. A secondary and more difficult notion here is that even if a designer designs a chair, it may still be at odds with the peculiarities of the individual. As he himself concludes, “There is no shortcut to understanding on the part of appreciators, and none on the part of designers who design things for them.”

I often hear architects say they must educate their clients, yet in order to make this strategy work, designers must be better educated in the needs, wants, and desires of their clients. Affordances are a way to understand the environmental actions and behaviors of our species, while recognizing that which makes us human with individual needs. One size never fits all, although it begins in a common humanity. Taken in sum, these essays consider the model of affordances within the context of architecture and provide a valuable contribution to this discussion of how to conceive, think, and better attune the human organism with the environment in which we dwell.

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