

Architect and Empathy: The Importance of Human Experience in Architectural design

Arga Patria

Dranie Putra¹ and Yulia Nurliani Lukito²

¹ Postgraduate Student, Departement of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia

² Lecturer, Departement of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering Universitas Indonesia, Indonesia

Email address of corresponding author: argadranie@outlook.com and yulianurliani@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Architecture usually pursued as a response to human needs, a need for shelter, security, fellowship, etc. For the last couple of decades, the criticism of architecture for being emotionally cold starts to emerge, accused of creating distance between human from the life. As Jullio Pallasma said, the emotional coldness might be caused by the adoption of formalist attitude since the industrial revolution. Modernism arguably, have brought an ideology which focused on function and aesthetic into architecture, but the notion also resulting in a far less empathic architectural. The building becomes apathetic, as function and aesthetic pushed aside the liveliness context. Designs are becoming less authentic, as architects prefer to use existing data to save their time. In short, it can be said that the presence of empathy has far been less acknowledged as an essential aspect of architecture. To address the notion of the problems, This paper will examine the terms of empathy, As understanding, the terms would provide more information about how it could relate to architecture. Further extensions of the notion will be explored, based on the existing precedents which already points out the presence of empathy-related topics in architecture. The paper will later examine the relevance of these examples to architecture and claim what defines the scope of “empathy” in this particular context to help understand it’s potential use in architecture.

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1. Introduction

From being a part of Brunelleschi’s Fine Arts in the renaissance era, into a process that incorporates technology such as in Bauhaus Art School’s designs, architecture has gone through a long way of development. Indeed, a ‘form of Arts’ and a ‘works of technology’ seems a little too far from being related, but then it proves that architecture in a broader sense is diverse. Even until these days architecture is still being discussed in many discourses, it is slowly adapting to the latest findings, mention Interactive Architecture [1] or Discussions About Political Architecture [2].

In the late nineteenth century, architecture had its first formal curriculum by the opening of

MIT School Of Architecture. We can say that the opening of the School, can be regarded as a point in the history where architecture starts being acknowledged as a more complex and important field of study. Furthermore, as the development goes, Architecture become more diverse as the architect tried to incorporate more ideas and ideology into it. Say, Structuralism, Deconstruction, and many others, which become good examples of how extensive and diverse architecture can be.

Despite the great diversity in its development, Architecture has Undeniably proven that failures also took part in it. Take a Look at famous architect such Le Corbusier with his ‘Ville Radieuse’ (also known as a radiant city).

Le Corbusier's Radiant city seems great and optimistic on the surface, which explains why it became the model for most of the twentieth-century urban city development. Unfortunately, most of the development such Communal Housing or Projects-which based on Ville Radieuse got the reputation as places of crime and poverty. Mention the infamous Pruitt-Igoe Housing Complex, for example, the housing which based on Ville Radieuse simply prove the notion mentioned was a result of Ville Radieuse misinterpretation. The point is, architects are no more than just mere human being, thus failures undoubtedly also become part of architectural studies.

Most of the time, architecture is something that pursued as a response to a need: a need for shelter, security, fellowship, work, healing, or learning. Architecture also can be regarded as a field that exists to fulfill human needs, so in order to design an architectural objects (landscape, building, interiors) where 'Human' is the center of design thinking in the pursuit to fulfill human needs-, understanding Human emotions, behavior, feelings, and experiences are undeniably necessary. But, that's not always been the case for contemporary architecture, a Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa have Said :

"Contemporary architecture has often been accused of emotional coldness, restrictive aesthetics and a distance from life. This criticism suggests that we architects have adopted formalist attitudes, instead of tuning our buildings with realities of life and the human mind[...]"

The criticism about architecture being emotionally cold can be regarded as the long-lasting adoption of functionalism. As recorded in history, the architect starts to design buildings as practical as possible since the industrial revolution, especially when the phenomenon of 'Mass Production' was taken into account. An architectural building becomes less emotional, as function and

aesthetic become the foremost criteria that were being focused. Designs are becoming less authentic, as architects prefer to use data from books such as Time Saver to save their time. And a more similar case can be found which follows the same pattern and resulting tendency to neglect empathy towards the human who will use the building in the future.

In some way, 'being empathic' seems to be a queasy-necessary, an important yet being taken for granted by a designer. Sure, most of the times a design could functionally work for most basic requirements, but in some other, a design turns out to be nothing but a blunder. A public pathway can exist yet never being used, or an accessible design seems to fulfill the requirement but turns out to be harsh for disables. Neglecting of user experience would end up either being threatened as an unnecessary or even being a burden for users.

This paper aims to examine the terms of empathy thoroughly, As understanding the terms would provide more information about how it could relate to architecture. Further extensions of the notion of empathy will be explored, depending on the status of the persona reached through empathy, and on the perceived representational state of the object. The paper will later examine the relevance of these examples to architecture and claim what defines the scope of "empathy" in this particular context to help understand it's potential use in architecture.

2. Material and Methods

Sympathy and Empathy

The term 'Sympathy' and 'Empathy' were often being confused by its meaning. Sure, most of the people probably can easily recall what the terms mean. Averagely, the confusion about the terms still can be easily found. Defining both of the terms is something important, yet the emphasize on the difference rarely being

pointed out. According to Merriam-webster [3], The word ‘Sympathy’ emerged around 1970’s, and the terms were mean “Affinity between certain things” taken from Middle French Sympathy, and directly from Late Latin Sympathia which means Community of Feelings. On the other hand, ‘Empathy’ modeled on German Einfühlung (from ein “in” + fühlung “feeling”), that was coined 1858 by German philosopher Rudolf Lotze (1817-1881) as a translation of Greek empathia “passion, state of emotion.” It is a term from a theory of art appreciation that maintains appreciation depends on the viewer’s ability to project his personality into the viewed objects.

Regarding sympathy and empathy, Vitoria Gallese explain both of the terms by citing Edith Stein's dissertation. Steins explain both terms by: “One cannot be sympathetic without being empathetic, but one can be empathetic without being sympathetic.” According to the cited words alone, both of the terms should be understood as related regarding its usage, rather than treating both as a separated entity. Stain, also explain that for one to be Sympathetic is means to feel for someone, while being empathic were mean to feel With someone. Edith Stein’s take on both of the terms is the notion that sympathy is experienced through the perception of similarity from another human being, while empathy “[...]is by no means confined to emotion and feelings, but also incorporates action.”

In a broader sense, Sympathy can be understood as a perception of another human being by referring to a similar former relation that some people ever had. Thus, it means that sympathy can be regarded as ‘understanding the feelings of another human being.’ Empathy, on the other hand, can be understood as a similar-yet-different- process that incorporates actions. By actions, it means that in some way one person can feel how another person is feeling, as in if you can feel the itches when you see another person being pinched on the skin.

Take the usage of ‘Condolence’ for examples. Imagine a situation where an acquaintance (A) lost one of his related (C)-which not well known to (B)-, and B would then later offer condolence to A as in “I Offer my condolence for the lost of your brother.” B do felt sorry for A because B know how it feels to lose someone in his life (D). But what happens to A doesn’t necessarily the same to B, he did know how it feels to lose someone, but it is not as the same as what A feels when he lost C. What happens is that B Perceive what happens to A, by referring to the moment when he lost D. But this is not what is called empathic, this is what it means to be sympathetic, perceiving how another human-being felts by recalling to his/her own reference of experience. It is more of a semiotics kind process. Empathic, on the other hand, is somehow more complicated than just that. For B to be empathic, it means that he needs to feel as what A feel, as if B actually experience what A feel, if B has the same connection to C just like A did, etc.

In the context of architecture, the same analogy can be applied. Let's say if A is the client and B is the architect, while C is the house that A wants B to make. B sure know what house is supposed to be, as an architect B could have his own house, or even have the experience of how to build a house. B would later perceive what A want by referring to his personal experience either as an architect, or someone who ever being in a house. He then would proceed to design by using those experience to built a house as requested. Now this is being sympathy, to be empathic, B has to put his own feet on A’s shoes, or in short, tried to experience like how A would, not simply interpret how A would do.

Normally, both of the terms will be regarded as something meta, a process that can not be defined by science, things that cannot be understood as something that is scientific. In fact, the process of empathy alone can be

regarded as a complex process of actions that can be scientifically explained. Although to do so, incorporating more than one fields of study are required. In the next section, the process of empathy will be explored. The scope will revolve around ‘why someone can undergo the process?’ “what perception that cause the actions, and how it could happen to someone?”. In short, understanding the process of empathy.

Human Experiences and Perceptions

In the process of designing physical spaces, we are also doing design or implicitly specifying distinct experiences, emotions, and mental states. In fact, in some way, architects are operating in the human brain and nervous system. Science has established that environments could affect our brain, changing it, and those changes, in turn, alter human behavior [4]. It can be said, that the connection between physical sets and human minds, is playing a more significant role than what we expect it would be. Playing one particular role that created ‘Human Experience’ in built environments.

Architecture, give everyday experiences in the way of being specific about perceptual frames and horizon of understanding. Every space, place, and situation is tuned in a way which can project atmospheres that promote distinct moods and feelings. We live in resonance with the world around us, architecture then manages to mediate and maintains the particular resonance. Architecture qualities are constituted in the act of experiencing the work, which can be related to what philosopher John Dewey argued about works of art in general :

“By common consent, the Parthenon is a great work of art. It has aesthetic standing only as the work becomes an experience for a human being (...) Art is always the product inexperience of interaction of human beings with their environment.”

Artistic works have the value that is experientially, and emotively real. Works of art are not symbols or metaphors of something else. They are authentic experiential reality themselves. In fact, all art exists in two kind of realms, that of physical matters and execution as that of mental imagery.

In the 1960s, psychologists observed that the behavior of an individual varied more in diverse settings than the behavior of other subjects in the exact setting. The notion of “situational personality” was introduced to describe this condition [5]. Environments give rise to permanent structural changes in our brain and neural systems. In his book *Survival Through Design*, Richard Neutra already professed.

The experience of architecture, from the contemplative observation of decoration on a Greek temple to the physical experience of living and working within a specific architectonic space, can be unpacked or deconstructed into its bodily-grounded elements. As Pallasma [6] Said in *Empathy and Architecture* seminar: “The constant weighing of architectonic and peripersonal space is mainly processed by premotor neurons which map visual space on potential action or motor schemata. Cognitive neuroscience can investigate what the sense of the presence of a building is made of. This approach can also contribute a fresher empirical take on the evolution of architectonic style and its cultural diversity, viewing it as a particular case of symbolic expression.

Adolf von Hildebrand, a sculptor yet also a Theoretician, proposed that human is having responses to art which directly relates space to move. Furthermore, to understand an artistic image means to grasp its creative process within. As Kant suggested, prior experiences did not consist of space, but itself is a product from that experience. Images are effectual, which means they are the outcome of both the

artist's creative production and the effects that images produce.

Through movement, elements in space can be connected. Objects were carved out from the background and perceived as what it is. Through the movement, representations and meaning are formed and articulated. So theoretically, for an architect to fully understand how a person experiences built environment, he/she need to simulate as if they are the client. Thus, to fulfill the outcomes that were required, one's have to reverse the process of these experiences, so that the user would understand the intended purpose of the design.

3. Results and Discussions

Although the phenomenon of modernism occurred around nineteenth and twentieth century, the ideology to focus on function and aesthetics seems to last even until these days. It can be implied that modernism has brought ideologies which focused on function and aesthetic into architecture. Pallasma said that this may simply because it is easier to imagine geometric shapes rather than to capture the shapeless and dynamic act of life and the ephemeral feelings evoked by architecture. To be fair, most of us (architects) choose to rely upon our self to 'data' in a design process, rather than to gather specific information regarding the particular human who will use the building.

Sure, it comes in handy to design a house by using standards that are available, But it becomes a matter when architects rely upon themselves only to the data, and neglect what human actually needs in the process of design. Let us say that a 3x3 meters space are the standard for a waiting room to accommodate five average people. But imagine, if the most use of the room is twice as big as the average person? The room probably can still accommodate its requirement, but can the user feel as comfortable as what the room was meant

to be? This kind of problem, in many cases, can be regarded as "lacks of empathy,"

It is usually understood, that a sensitive designer imagines the acts, experiences, and feelings of the user of the space. But to say that it is the way to be empathic in the process of designs, are most likely improper. According to Pallasma, the designer usually places him/herself in the role of the future dweller and tests the validity of the ideas through this imaginative exchange of roles and personalities. Thus, the architect is bound to conceive the design essentially for him/herself as the momentary surrogate of the actual occupant. Without usually being aware of it, the designer turns into a silent actor on the imaginary stage of each project.

In the field of design studies, empathy actually has ever been used as the foremost matter. Mention empathic design by Rayport and Alain De Botton [7]. The foundation of the empathic design was mainly to identify latent customer needs to create products that the customer most likely even know they desire. In some case, the empathic design was also being used to look for a solution that the customers have difficulty envisioning due to the lack of familiarity the possibilities offered by the new technology because they are locked in an old mindset. While in architecture, the usage of empathic design such as 21 house in Osaka, were rarely can be found.

Discussions that can be related to the presence of empathy-yet not being referred as empathy-actually can be found in some architectural studies. The studies or notion where human experience being put as the main concern, how people interprets and perceive were actually being discussed over and over again in architecture. Mention 'Architecture of Happiness' by Alain de Botton, or 'Atmosphere' by Peter Zumthor [8].

Philosopher Alain de Botton tells a story in *The Architecture of Happiness*, about how we tend to perceive buildings and people in similar terms, empathy into parallel concepts with the specific vocabulary. He explores how humans tend to experience architecture regarding individual selves; using his words, refers to what we call things “happy” that make us happy. In addition to architecture, the idea is equally applicable to landscapes and cityscapes and to everyday objects which given personalized names – such as dorms or cars. The point is not, of course, that the physical places or things themselves have human feelings or qualities. What’s happening is that we explore, interpret, and come to understand them with the same sensory systems, brain structures, experience, memories, and reasoning that can be used to detect the qualities and inner thoughts of humans. Encounters we experience might be far less intense, but we respond to them with similar structures of mind, body, and language.

On the other hand, Peter Zumorth refers to atmosphere as the sensorial qualities that space emits. The atmosphere is the form of physical perception, which is recognized through emotional sensibility. The notion of the atmosphere was being used to argue that architecture and space are built for people to use and experience. Furthermore, Zumorth constitutes architectural atmosphere as “Singular density and mood, this feeling of presence, well-being, harmony, beauty[...] under whose spell I experience what I otherwise would not experience in precisely this way.”

In one way or another, both of the books point out the importance of human experience, and how it applied to human interpretation. Both of the authors indeed know the reason that moves their pen to write, but it is a rare case where someone else ever pointed out the reason of why the discussions in such are even started. Despite that, instead than looking for the problems, what this paper will point out is that the

presence of human experience is an essential part of the architecture. Arguably, if one wants to design a built environment which gave the sense of happiness as what Botton tells, or having the excellent atmosphere as Zumorth refers to, human experience is one that needs to be put on the foremost, while to achieve that empathy is one parameter that can be used to identify the requirements.

4. Conclusion

The concept of empathy itself sure seems a little too abstract to be used as a method in architectural design. But as what has been elaborated in this paper, empathy is actually always been somewhere in architecture. The problem is that in some cases, architect tends to take empathy aspect for granted. It can not be said that architecture fully neglects the importance of empathy in the process of design. Referring to Edith Stein that one cannot be sympathetic without being empathic, and as elaborated that most of the architectural design methods are sympathetic enough, so where the problem lies?

True, to be sympathetic, empathy necessarily needs to exist altogether. The notion then raised another question, about ‘why such problem as emotional coldness in architecture still exist?’ The conundrum of why ‘architecture’ became emotionally cold, probably caused by the presence of its empathy that is less than its sympathy counterpart. At the end of empathy process, sympathy must have taken the part where architect starts to interpret what is needed. Thus, if the process which incorporates empathy is far less than the time where an architect starts to rely upon their sympathy, then the problems might occur.

As far as the concern goes, to go as far to interpret empathy as a design method are unnecessarily needed-even though in some cases, emphatic design method probably the one that needs to be used at the foremost-. But what we need to be pointed is that, no matter what

kind of a design, when the context is about built environment for human meant we are dealing with human experience, thus empathy aspects is a must. In short, empathy is a parameter that needs to be included in the chase to pursue a better-built environment, and it is a must that needs to be considered even before the architect starts to design.

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