

LIGHTLIFE

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Seeing and Feeling Light
in Architecture and Design featuring projects from
Education and Science, Health and Care and
Art and Culture

Topic:
PERCEPTION



Beginning to see the light – A comment by Riklef Rambow

Photo: Hélène Binet

Good architecture enriches and enhances our lives. Sometimes, good architecture can even make us happy. We know quite a lot about how it does this, but by no means everything. It has to do with the creation of spatial situations which are harmonious in every respect. Situations in which light, colour, materials, proportion and details interact in such a way that they fully satisfy or, better still, surpass our expectations and needs. You can call this atmosphere, or try to express it in other terms. In any case this involves a particular form of integrated perception which is experienced using all the senses and, as well as, permitting effective use, also provides pleasure.

However, thinking about what constitutes good architecture soon leads to an apparent paradox. On the one hand, we believe that truly successful spatial creations act on such a fundamental psychological level that one is inclined to speak of a type of anthropological constant: nobody can remain unmoved by good architecture. On the other hand, empirical observation shows that this is not the case. The perception and evaluation of architecture depends to a great degree on the attitude which a person brings with them into the situation. Even multiple award winning masterpieces of atmospheric architecture like the new “Kolumba” diocesan museum in Cologne designed by Peter Zumthor leave some visitors cold. What one person sees as perfect lighting and an ascetic material aesthetic which presents the works of art to their best advantage, is to someone else a spartan, poorly-illuminated box. Without the readiness to embrace a particular form of perception and without the ability to “read” the space, no effect will be felt and no pleasure derived from the architecture.

Consequently, even something as apparently elementary as perception has to be learnt. The fact that we take for granted the way we are always surrounded by space and architecture does not mean that their perception is not sub-

ject to preconditions. This can be illustrated particularly well with reference to light, as one of the most important design elements in architecture. Of course, anyone who possesses the physiological prerequisites for doing so can perceive light and may sense when it is too bright or too dark for certain activities. Warm and cold are also concepts which can be applied with a very high level of consensus. Beyond these quite fundamental assessments, most of us lack the terms to describe differentiated qualities of the atmosphere created by light. It is therefore difficult to communicate these ideas, not just with others, but also with ourselves.

Why do we need a vocabulary to distinguish and describe lighting situations? Aren't there enough experts who can analyse and explain light from a physiological, technical, ergonomic, architectural, poetic or art-historical perspective and who make sure that we are provided with the conditions which we require? It's not quite that simple. I'm not just talking about perception in a passive sense, the simple response to existing stimuli, I mean an active perception capable of taking in the diversity of natural and artificial lighting situations and deriving pleasure from this diversity and its continuous change. An active perception which has penetrated the interplay of subjective sensation and objectivisable parameters to the extent that we not only comprehend creative decisions, to a certain extent we can make these ourselves. We do this every day in offices, in schools or in our own homes.

The fascinating interdisciplinary subject of light should be taught in schools as part of the interdisciplinary subject of architecture. Not as an ideologically influenced “training in good taste”, but as a knowledge-based development of perceptive ability which “opens the eyes” and generates an enthusiasm for discovering new facets of light and architecture every day.

Riklef Rambow, born in 1964, studied psychology and obtained his doctorate with a thesis on “Communication between Experts and Laypersons in the Field of Architecture”. Having carried out scientific research at the universities of Frankfurt/Main and Münster he has, since 2001, been working at the Brandenburg University of Technology in Cottbus, currently as visiting professor for Architectural Communication. He also runs the architectural and environmental psychology consultancy PSY:PLAN in Berlin.