

Lived Space is Poetic Space

A Study of the Home as an Aesthetic Enterprise

By Robert Watkins

A home is much like a work of art in the respect that it represents an expression which evolves from our experience with it. When we endeavor to transform our home, like the painter who approaches a blank canvas or the sculptor who stands before a block of marble, we do so by reacting to what is before us. It may seem that our intentions toward this space are guided more by utility than by beauty but both play large roles in the space's transformation. We have an emotional investment in the way we decorate our homes. Our designs constitute an expression of our desire to transform our physical environment to meet certain psychological needs. When does interior design transcend mere decoration and at what point does a lived space become a poetic space? Poetic space is that space where an aesthetic experience occurs, when perception combines with memory to create an individualized experience. In this crucial moment our physical interaction with the world is no longer guided by necessity but by immaterial objectives. A study of the connection between mind and body will help to explain how and why we alter spaces to suit our personal tastes and describe when these spaces become aesthetic.

Visual perception is vital to an understanding of aesthetic experience because it is the instrument by which we gauge our environment and determine how we will transform it. The philosopher Henri Bergson (1859-1941) believed that perception begins with sight and ends in movement. He stated that matter is “the aggregate of images” and that the perception of matter is “these same images referred to the eventual action of one particular image, my body”(Bergson, 8). In other words, an image has the potential to provoke a physical response, just as an obstacle in our path requires that we move around it. Whether or not we actually act in response to an image is irrelevant. For example, a distant tree seen while walking does not require that I move to avoid it, yet my body recognizes it because it shares my space, it exists in the world of images of which I myself am one. One can conclude that the world we perceive elicits either a real or virtual physical response. A space by extension requires a physical response albeit not an immediately necessary one.

Immediacy is another way of saying utility; usefulness dictates whether something demands action now or later. The philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) distinguishes between “aesthetic” and “anaesthetic” experience by the amount of relevance one has on the present in the same way we deem a tool useful or not when judging it against the task at hand. He explains that, “in much of our experience we are

not concerned with the connection of one incident with what went before and what comes after . There is experience, but so slack and discursive that it is not *an* experience. Needless to say, such experiences are anesthetic”(Dewey, 40). On the contrary, aesthetic or “artistic” experience occurs “when the perceived result is of such a nature that its qualities as perceived have controlled the question of production” (Dewey, 48). Dewey believes that a work of art has aesthetic quality when an artist uses their skills to guide the work toward a conclusion based upon their experiences with the materials. In other words, artists are sensitive to their experiences with a medium (paint, clay, etc.) and thus able to manipulate materials according to the dictates of their perception. Technical proficiency alone does not make one an artist. Someone with the ability to create by responding to the immaterial qualities of perception and the material qualities of matter is perhaps one definition of “artist.” Facility with memory is of paramount importance in order for artists to cultivate sensitivity to their experiences and maneuver between the real and virtual actions of the creative process.

Memory is the faculty by which our bodies recall real and virtual actions in order to help us navigate the world. Without memory we would constantly be colliding with objects yet never learning from our experiences. We can make the distinction between memories that are useful, those that prevent us from harming ourselves, and

those that are not useful, memories that have no immediate bearing on our physical well-being. Memory differs from one person to the next, therefore it is an ideal place to search for an understanding of subjectivity. Bergson believed that memory “constitutes the principle share of consciousness in perception, the subjective side of the knowledge of things”(25). Memory is intimately tied to our experience of space but it is also, perhaps more importantly, one of the primary things which make us unique.

The uniqueness of memory is one component of subjectivity, the other is memory’s fallibility. Henri Bergson explains,

In fact, there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience. In most cases these memories supplant our actual perceptions, of which we then retain only a few hints, thus using them merely as “signs” that recall to us former images. The convenience and rapidity of perception are bought at this price; but hence also springs every kind of illusion (24).

In the space between perception and action, between seeing and physically responding to what we see, memory intervenes for better or worse. Bergson’s quote explains that illusions develop within the space between perception and memory. These illusions not only cast our perceptions in doubt but throw light on an alternative reality, namely the imagination.

Many theorists have speculated about the resonating influence of particular

spaces upon the imagination. Perhaps foremost among these is philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) whose book, The Poetics of Space, takes a phenomenological approach toward understanding the profound psychological impact of the home. He succinctly states that “A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard, 47). The memories of experiences in our childhood home take a particularly profound place in our imagination. The childhood home is where most of us matured physically and psychologically and as this maturation period grows distant with time the very image of that home grows in significance and poignancy. “If we return to the old home as to a nest, it is because memories are dreams, because the home of other days has become a great image of lost intimacy”(Bachelard, 100). Bachelard’s comparison of the home to a nest is particularly salient because it illustrates the connection between the way an interior space is formed physically with the way its form affects us psychologically.

Bachelard reveals that the physical nature of our homes is in fact an expression of our inner selves. He explains that a house which we invest ourselves in psychologically is “a house built by and for the body, taking form from the inside, like a shell, in an intimacy that works physically” (101). Like the bird which beats its breast against the inner walls of the nest in creating its home we too transform our

surroundings to comply with our bodies and our ideas of comfort but, unlike the bird, our intentions have an added emotional aspect. Author Alain de Botton (b. 1969) claims that a home stands for those values we subconsciously feel lacking in our lives. He states in The Architecture of Happiness, that “what we call a home is merely anyplace that succeeds in making available to us the important truths which the wider world ignores, or which our distracted irresolute selves have trouble holding on to” (Botton, 123). The idea of the home as a place where we can grow closer to truth is not unlike the popular notion of art as a gateway to aesthetic experience.

Both a home and a work of art document the occupant and artist’s responses to experiences which begin with perception, our internal response to the physical world. These experiences are the result of unique memories which inform our individuality. Gaston Bachelard’s aim in writing The Poetics of Space was “to show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind.” (6) When our efforts to create a comfortable space in which to dream guide our actions the result is aesthetic. Like art, the home facilitates our search for truth by granting us access to an imaginative space. The home is unique in that it accommodates individual memories which are universally experienced. A lived space which reflects our physical experience within it is a poetic space because it externalizes a mutually

shared and personally internalized longing for truth.

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