Introduction: Exploring Architecture and Emotions through Space and Place

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Abstract

This special forum section of Emotions: History, Culture, Society moves forward scholarship on the history of the relationship between architecture and emotions. It specifically shows that while, on the face of it, talking about architecture and emotions appears anything but new, we still have a long way to go. In this introduction, I shall first provide a brief overview and critique of works such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, Juhani Pallasmaa’s Eyes of the Skin, and Henri Lefebvre’s Production of Space, as well as literature on sites of massacres and commemoration, architecture and fear, and women and the city, to argue for an adequate and systematic engagement with the history of emotions and thus orient the reader and set the scene for what follows. I shall then outline this special forum’s contribution.

Keywords

architecture – emotions – embodiment – space – time

In 2011, I visited the Morsalin hospital in Kerman (southern Persia) for the first time. I intended to work on the revitalisation plan of a historic hospital, and I was advised to focus on this particular hospital. I was born, grew up, and studied architecture in Kerman, yet I was not aware of this hospital, and my advisor had failed to mention that it was established and built by British missionaries. On my first visit, the hospital did not appear to be British at all, or ‘foreign’ for that matter; I felt that I was in a familiar place.¹ I only learned that

¹ ‘Foreign’ (in Farsi ‘khariji’ or ‘farangi’) is commonly used in Iran.
the hospital was built by British missionaries after my third visit; approaching
the hospital's main entrance (which is now closed), I noticed a sign at the top
of the entrance which reads ‘CMS Hospitals’. Upon further reading, I realised
that the CMS stands for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which built
more than seventy hospitals in Asia and Africa between 1865 and 1939. My first
perception of the buildings of the Kerman hospital did not diminish over time,
and it informed the direction of my project. I constantly asked myself, was the
hospital designed to evoke specific feelings? How did patients feel when visit-
ing the hospital?

Thinking about patients’ perceptions and feelings without having access to
their voices and trying to make sense of the relationship between architec-
ture and emotions proved to be both challenging and refreshing at the same
time. It was challenging because, on the face of it, talking about architecture
and emotions was anything but new; I had access to a mountain of scholar-
ship, including Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception, Juhani
Pallasmaa’s Eyes of the Skin, Henri Lefebvre’s Production of Space, as well as
literature on aesthetics of ruins, architecture and the sublime, sites of massa-
cres and commemoration, architecture and fear, and women and the city. But,
taken together, they offered a messy picture, which was refreshing because it
set me on a path towards the field of the history of emotions, along which
I would develop new projects, meet new colleagues, make new friends and
organise a conference, resulting in this special forum. In the remainder of this
introduction, I shall first provide a brief overview and critique of some of the
aforementioned literature with reference to my own research and journey (the
length of this introduction precludes a detailed review of these works), orient-
ing the reader and setting the scene for what follows. I shall then outline this
special forum’s contribution.

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How did my personal background as an architectural student colour my experience? I asked this question after reading Merleau-Ponty, whose main preoccupation was the nature of perception. He saw perception as ‘an embodied experience of being in the world’, irreducible neither to sensations or qualia or impression nor to thought or judgement. Sensations and judgements are ‘components of perceptual experience’ insofar as our ‘bodily capacities and dispositions have established a normative domain’. In this way, he argued that perception is intentional, calling it the ‘motor intentionality’. My perception of non-Englishness, and my feeling of being in a familiar place, was then intentional because of my personal background as an architectural student. My body had ‘a grip on the world’ against which sensory particulars, impressions (emotions), and judgements then emerged. Does this mean that I would not have perceived the hospital differently if I had known prior to my first visit it was built by British missionaries? How about the photographer and painter, who accompanied me on one of my visits? The photographer had photographed the hospital over the years, and the painter remembered being in the hospital as a patient. Unlike me, they had previous and personal memories of the hospital, and their purpose and expectations were different. Did they perceive the hospital as English? Perhaps more broader questions were: when do bodily capacities and dispositions become normative? Can our encounter with a building make us question our bodily capacities and dispositions?

With these questions in mind, I turned to other items of literature; these offered competing answers. Several studies argue for ‘moving [and unmoving] by architecture’ and a timeless experience. According to Jenefer Robinson, while ‘our experience of a work of architecture is in part determined by the category we perceive it as belonging to, ... there are certain features of architecture that appeal to universal features of human existence’. Robinson draws on Juhani Pallasmaa, who, although influenced by Merleau-Ponty, states, ‘I am not experiencing something distant in space and time; I am listening to myself confronted with the timeless experience of being human.’ Based on

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Pallasmaa’s reasoning, the hospital buildings invited certain timeless actions and movements, meaning that the photographer, the painter and I were not only able to share the physical experience of the hospital with one another, but also with a thirteen-year-old patient called Mariam, who visited the hospital from a far-off hill village in the early twentieth century. Another study by Xanthi Tsiftsi suggests that we could also relive ‘the architecture of lived lives’ of patients if the hospital were adapted as a museum.\textsuperscript{8} According to Tsiftsi, ‘when a narrative is transmediated from discourse to architecture, the past is not simply unfolded in front of the “reader”: it is there to be lived directly and viscerally’.\textsuperscript{9} She recognises evoking ‘empathy’ through ‘small narratives’ as a factor that ‘fills the gap’ by affirming difference and connectedness and thus ‘re-enacting’ the experience of the past.

However, Robinson, and in fact Pallasmaa, also argue that ‘good architecture invites and compels multisensory experiences and ways of moving and acting that can be felt in a bodily way by the appreciator’.\textsuperscript{10} I was reluctant to refer to a hospital built during the era of British high imperialism as being good architecture for obvious reasons. Moreover, Mariam, according to missionary records, was a ‘crippled carpet weaver’ and travelled to the hospital on a donkey, a journey that took her at least a few weeks if not a month.\textsuperscript{11} Could a twenty-first-century visitor, who would most likely travel to the hospital by car, be transported to the past through small narratives? We might think the answer is with Merleau-Ponty, as he recognised that senses are not something given, fully determinative in advance, but his emphasis on ‘normativity’ leaves out Mariam, who had most likely never met an English doctor let alone an English hospital, and still could have perceived the buildings as familiar.\textsuperscript{12} Put differently, her ‘best grip’ on things could lead to a ‘wrong perceptual attitude’.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, Merleau-Ponty’s complete rejection of ‘free-floating cognition of a disembodied subject’ does not consider that Mariam could have been compelled by a former patient (or someone who opposed missionaries) to perceive the hospital as ‘English’ (in which case, Mariam was neither in-space or inhabiting-a-space). Moreover, even if Mariam and I touched, smelled or heard the same things, would what we heard, smelled or touched have felt the same? Would her feeling of being in a familiar place be similar to me?

\begin{footnotes}
\item[8] Tsiftsi, ‘Libeskind and Holocaust Metanarrative.’
\item[9] Tsiftsi, ‘Libeskind and Holocaust Metanarrative,’ 300.
\item[10] Robinson, ‘On Being Moved by Architecture.’
\item[11] ‘Kerman Hospital,’ CMS/H/H5/E2 (Box 6), Cadbury Research Library, Special Collection, University of Birmingham.
\item[12] Carman, ‘Sensation, Judgment, and the Phenomenal Field,’ 69.
\end{footnotes}
We might turn to Henri Lefebvre and his *Production of Space* to include Mariam. Like Merleau-Ponty, Lefebvre put a specific stress on embodiment – body as the first point of analysis – and saw space and time as ‘interrelated and dependent on each other’. If Merleau-Ponty underlined normativity, Lefebvre’s focus was on everyday and rhythm analysis. Their analysis ‘means that the active body, using its acquired schemas and habits, positions its world around itself and constitutes that world as “ready-to-hand”’, writes Kirsten Simonsen. But Lefebvre also emphasised the historicality of the experience of time and space. As Stuart Elden writes, ‘no longer *conditions* of experience, time and space could be experienced *as such*, and their experience was directly related to the historical conditions they were experienced within’. Meanwhile, Lefebvre’s focus on everyday life and rhythm analysis had me thinking whether there is no rhythm (normativity) as such in specific contexts, or if rhythm is condemned in certain contexts. According to Elden, Lefebvre’s work is useful for ‘gaining insight into the double sense of the notions of the everyday – a dual meaning found in the English and the French’. Mariam was not English or French; ‘har rūz’, the Farsi equivalent of ‘everyday’, does not have a double meaning. How can his analysis yield insights into Mariam’s experience?

In her analysis of emotions and objects, Sara Ahmed does not make analytical distinctions between bodily sensations, emotions and thought. Her analysis, thus, recognises that Mariam’s perception and feeling was not just dependent on past experiences – a first-time encounter – she could have an image of the hospital as familiar or unfamiliar. But Ahmed also argues for emotions as being intentional, involving ‘a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world’, which does not explain if buildings could make Mariam confront her image. Moreover, I accepted the photographer’s and painter’s company due to being anxious to visit parts of the hospital that have been left abandoned. The 2003 Bam earthquake had destroyed parts of the buildings, and the walls were filled with nude graffiti (Figure 1). My bodily capacities and dispositions helped me to determine the abandoned part of the

14 Stuart Elden, ‘There is a Politics of Space Because Space is Political: Henri Lefebvre and the Production of Space,’ *Radical Philosophy Review* 10, no. 2 (2007): 101–16 (115).
16 Elden, ‘There is a Politics of Space,’ 108.
hospital as dangerous, but my ‘best grip’ on the hospital could easily have gone wrong, as works by feminist critics and geographers have shown (I might even argue that this is actually the everyday experience of women – their best grip on the world often goes wrong). Simonsen argues that ‘Lefebvre’s approach to the body is definitely in need of juxtaposition with some of the extensive

feminist literature on the body’, but I considered Merleau-Ponty, Lefebvre, Ahmed and others’ works in retrospect. They left me with several keywords – embodiment, bodily movement, mind and material, universal features, expectations, memory, space and time, perception, experience – and a messy, but eye-opening, picture. It was this very messy picture that led me to the field of the history of emotions.

The field of the history of emotions smashes the nature/culture binary model that this literature is preoccupied with in one way or another, and offers ‘an integrated, biocultural whole’. This model acknowledges that emotional experience, for better or worse, is embodied in physical space, while resisting the temptation to project such categories as body and mind, head and heart, emotion and reason, and instead trying to understand how they were built in context. It thus stresses that architecture can invite certain movements or practices that induce emotions (feelings, passions, sensations) – architecture as a kind of emotional practice or an emotional set-up – but this relationship is not ‘given once and for all: the connection between an emotion and a particular space can change over time, and the same space can trigger off vastly divergent emotions in various people’. People can also ‘shift their allegiances, values, and modes of expressions according to expectations they associate with a given spatial arena’ (assuming they have access to these expectations) or confront these expectations. In other words, the body is a general medium for perceiving the physical environment, but not as ‘the universal body of life sciences’. Not only do people’s diverse intentions, expectations and experiences have a role to play, but also the temporal and cultural variety of emotions. The key is to recognise not only the relationship between architecture

24 Pernau, ‘Space and Emotion,’ 541.
and emotions as biocultural and thus unstable, but also to acknowledge that emotions themselves have a history as complex as the history of the buildings in which they are felt and expressed. Therefore, Xanthi Tsiftsi’s argument that discourse can operate through architecture to evoke empathy might (and only might) speak for a very specific group of people at a specific time.25

I (and the contributors to this special forum to some extent), however, would like to go further and suggest that the body can be-in-space, inhabit-the-space but also be without space (or out of place) (and even on-space, before-space, after-space, between-space and catch-in-space).26 In other words, we suggest that being-in-space or inhabiting-the-space should not be taken as given. I suggest that it is even worth going so far as to examine why these terms have surfaced as central categories – why Merleau-Ponty, Pallasmaa and others focused on them.27 Pallasmaa starts his book with the term ‘Western culture’ while discussing how modern technology has flattened our sensory capabilities. I might ask instead whose sensory experience has modern technology flattened?28

And, I might read Lefebvre – along with Nietzsche, Heidegger and Marx – to discuss not the relationship between architecture and emotions across times and spaces, but how this relationship was understood in specific times and spaces (be they modern or postmodern). The fact that Lefebvre developed his ideas to understand his time is highly suggestive.29 Instead of taking at face value his concern ‘with correcting what he saw as Marxism’s over-emphasis of the temporal dimension – and concomitant under-emphasis of the spatial’, I could try to explore how they were understood in each specific context.30 Can Lefebvre’s work be applied to every time and place, at least in discussing

26 I am not completely in agreement with Andreas Reckwitz that affections are ‘much more likely to emerge within comprehensive three-dimensional settings comprising extensive arrangements of artefacts within which human bodies move.’ I argue that ‘much more’ requires historicisation. Andreas Reckwitz, ‘Affective Spaces: A Praxeological Outlook,’ *Rethinking History* 16, no. 2 (2012): 241–58 (253).
27 It is worth referring to the following collection which argues that ‘the user is not a universal, but a historically constructed category of twentieth-century modernity’: *Use Matters: An Alternative History of Architecture*, ed. Kenny Cupers (London: Routledge, 2013).
28 Sensory historians have challenged the extent to which sight triumphed and other senses degraded in the Enlightenment. For example, see Mark Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
30 Elden, ‘Rhythmanalysis,’ ix.
architecture and emotions? I am not convinced. Perhaps we need to argue for
a biocultural understanding of embodiment.

It might seem pointless then to talk about the relationship between archi-
tecture and emotions, let alone to examine it, but it is, in fact, in the context
of this changing and complex relationship that the concept of the ‘lived space’
of architecture acquires meaning. An awareness of the complexity of the rela-
tionship between architecture and emotions made me take note of mountains:
the city of Kerman is surrounded by mountains; to the east are the Kūh Payeh
Mountains, and on the north are the Darmānū Mountains (Figure 2). These
peaks formed the broader landscape of the hospital and could provoke unan-
ticipated reactions. We need to learn about cultural histories and memories
of mountains in Iran – to study, for example, the story of Farhād, in Nizami
Ganjavi, who carved inside a mountain – to understand what image of moun-
tains Mariam had. But we also need to consider that she could only see the
mountains; she could not smell or touch them, although the smell and touch

FIGURE 2 The CMS hospital for men in Kerman (it is now a school). Mountains can be seen behind
the hospital.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR
could have been ‘imagined’.

31 In any case, Pallasmaa’s criticism of ocularcentrism does not work here. Moreover, the mountains could make Mariam confront her best grip on the hospital. The missionaries may not have read much into the mountains other than that they were an essential source of water.

32 At the very least, however, the Kūh Payeh and Darmānū mountains may have helped the patients find their way to the hospital. It is also possible that the name of the hospital and the mountains became interchangeable.

The history of emotions is now one of the main preoccupations of the humanities. Its influence has cut across disciplinary boundaries, but architectural historians have been slow to appreciate the significance of its claims and promises. It says enough that a recently edited collection by a group of architectural historians on Experiencing Architecture in the Nineteenth Century does little in the way of going beyond Henri Lefebvre.

33 There are some signs that this is changing, however. Besides Pernau, several other historians of emotions have discussed architecture.

34 Till Großmann and Phillip Nielsen’s edited collection is the only book-length study that specifically focuses on architecture and the history of emotions, but the scope of this book is limited to democracy.

35 Contributors to this special forum contribute to this scholarship,


Also, some inroads have been made in the form of two conference panels: Greg Castillo organised the panel ‘Emotional Histories of Architecture’ at the Society of Architectural Historians (SAH) conference in 2015; and Keith Bresnahan and Cigdem Talu organised the panel ‘Emotions in Nineteenth-century Architecture’ at the SAH conference in 2021.

Architecture, Democracy, and Emotions: The Politics of Feeling since 1945, ed. Till Großmann and Phillip Nielsen (New York: Routledge, 2019). There is a growing number of literatures on urban emotions. For example, see Urban Emotions and the Making of the City:
hoping to take a further step towards what Großmann and Nielsen have termed ‘architectural history of emotions’. They examine various sources, including novels, prose poems, photographs, paintings and cinema to capture not only vision of previously neglected actors, but also previously unexplored artistic (or architectural) representation of emotions, common emotional practices, and cultural ideals and modes.36

In the first article Fama discusses Jane Addams’s and Anzia Yezierska’s accounts of institutional domestic space. One a settlement activist and social worker, and the other a Jewish immigrant, Addams and Yezierska challenged constraints placed on women’s emotional expression during the American Progressive Era. Victorian middle-class women acted as regulators of Victorian domestic ideals, but could also, Addams argues, modify such ideals through local, residential experience of working-class emotional resources and needs.37 Complicating this observation further, Fama turns to an immigrant resident of institutional housing to show how Yezierska used fiction to challenge white middle-class domestic and professional ideals. Fama’s article contributes to works on the Progressive Era’s emotional style and gendering emotions, while highlighting the interrelation of class, race, and gender.38

Continuing the topic of women, architecture and emotions but moving the focus to the other side of the Atlantic, Talu examines Alice Meynell’s writings, or rather ‘prose poems’, and discusses how they portray liminal spaces ‘between emotional experience and seemingly “non-pathological” expressions’. Talu refers to these liminal spaces as atmospheres. Experimental and scholarly, her article argues for atmosphere as a productive analytical category for understanding the history of the relationship between architecture and emotions through visual and textual sources, highlighting, in turn, the inadequacy of such categories as impressions, sensations and perceptions. Going


a step beyond Andreas Reckwitz’s assertion that ‘atmospheres are always connected to a specific cultural sensitivity and attentiveness on the part of the carriers of practices, a specific sensitivity for perceptions, impressions and affections’, Talu argues for the very possibility of a ‘history of atmospheres’, where instead of replacing impressions, perception and affection with atmospheres or arguing for atmospheres as requisite for affections or components of affective mood, the key is to try to search for their context-specific role, relationship and meaning.  

Remaining in Britain, in the third article, Hammond turns to the architectural and religious revivals that took place during the mid-nineteenth century. Drawing on Monique Scheer’s concept of emotional practices, Hammond argues that architecture was a kind of practice necessary for cultivating new emotional regimes. She specifically analyses the Gothic rood screen as ‘a material religious symbol, a mediator of vision, and a divisor of physical space’. Several studies have highlighted the affective power of religious symbols. Engaging with these studies, Hammond argues for the importance of analysing small-scale ecclesiastical furnishings, rather than just building forms, by showing how the Gothic rood screens were designed to facilitate certain bodily interactions and thus feelings.

Alice Meynell wrote her prose poems, and the Gothic revival took place, just after years of social turmoil and economic and political crises in England and Continental Europe. How these crises and the resulting architectural changes led to emotional changes is a topic worthy of consideration. It is equally important to consider emotional reactions to these changes through architecture, which is the focus of the fourth article, in which Parreno explores joie de vivre as a semantic reaction to these crises. Parreno follows the trajectory of the concept of joie de vivre from its appearance in 1857 to other variations, namely élan vital and jouissance, not only showing how the built environment serves as a medium to manifest emotional experience, but also suggesting that those emotional states inform the ideation of new architecture.

Moving the discussion concerning the relation between social and architectural changes and emotional changes to post-war Turkey, Gönlügür’s article explores the interplay of cinema, emotions and urban change. Rural–urban migration and industrialisation have been major themes in the historiography

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40 As Reckwitz has argued, ‘changing assemblages of artefacts in space provide impulses for shifting the forms of sensual perception and of affective structuration.’ According to him, ‘new technological and architectural constellations’ can provide ‘quite incalculable incentives for building novel atmospheres, which in the long run might help to develop new affective cultures and a different affective habitus.’ Reckwitz, ‘Affective Spaces,’ 256.
of post-war urbanism. Less examined within this extensive literature is the connection between these social and technological changes and emotional changes. Gönlügür is interested in understanding how people navigate emotional strains brought about by social, technological and architectural changes. If the answer in nineteenth century France was *joie de vivre*, it was ‘sticking together’ in post-war Turkey.

As the two commentaries show, we still have a long way to go. Reflecting on his own research on religious architecture during the Victorian period, Bremner discusses how his analysis would have been strengthened through a focus on emotions, thus encouraging other architectural historians to do the same. Boddice stresses how built space is, in fact, an ‘emotional frontier’, thus highlighting what this introduction, and special forum, tries to bring to the fore: variations in the relationship between the management of space and the management of emotions.

Acknowledgements

The idea for this special forum grew out of a conference I organised at University College Dublin in January 2020. I would like to thank the Irish Research Council for funding this conference through a New Foundations Award (2019–20). I also would like to thank my colleagues at the UCD School of English, Film and Drama, the UCD Centre for the History of Medicine in Ireland, and UCD Humanities Institute for their support, especially Katherine Fama, Catherine Cox and Ricki Schoen. Engaging with the contributors to this forum over the last two years has been rewarding and I am thankful to them. Finally, I thank Alex Bremner and Rob Boddice for their immense support, Katie Barclay for her support and editorial expertise and many anonymous reviewers of this special forum for their helpful and attentive comments.
