

## Good Architecture Takes Care. A Different Approach on Special Needs Education

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### ABSTRACT

*The Good in architecture may reside in the accomplishment of its design, in the lastingness of its constitution or in the ability to fit a certain context, but, besides all these, it has to reside in the regard to the people. Good architecture takes care of the people that benefit both directly and indirectly from it. The paper proposes a different approach on special needs education: one look that explores phenomenology of architecture and environmental psychology in order to seek new and possible answers. Pointing some ongoing dimensions of the subject through the lens of personal experiences in three countries, Italy, France and Germany, the paper suggests that suitably designed learning environments, thoughtful integration of users' needs outlined by inclusive design, responsibility in architecture starting from educational level and finally, the built environment in general, as an influential presence in human life can also provide valuable tools in special needs education.*

**KEYWORDS:** architecture, environmental psychology, inclusive design, phenomenology of architecture, special needs education.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Good in architecture may reside in the accomplishment of its design, in the lastingness of its constitution or in the ability to fit a certain context, but, besides all these, it has to reside in the regard to the people. Good architecture takes care of the people that benefit both directly and indirectly from it. Good or bad, it has a strong influence on human behaviour [1]. More specifically, good architecture understands and copes with disability. For, disability may be perceived in many different ways, as Selwyn Goldsmith observes – medically, financially, socially and even architecturally. In his opinion, the architectural model of disability stands upon the architects' care and anticipation of the needs that potential users may encounter. [2]

Disability may be understood within the context of architecture, but what about education regarding disability? From this perspective, some questions arise. Is there a relation between architecture and special needs education? How hidden or how obvious is it? In which way can architecture influence special needs education?

This paper aims to offer another perspective on special needs education, one that is different from the well developed educational, social and medical approaches. It proposes one look through the eyes of architecture. One look that goes beyond the way it is firstly perceived as architectural recommendations and rules listed in official documents, although, these lead to its concrete, efficient materialization that afterwards enables its implementation. One look that explores phenomenology of architecture and environmental psychology in order to seek new and possible answers.

Pointing some ongoing dimensions of the subject through the lens of personal experiences in three European countries Italy, France and Germany, the paper suggests that wakeful

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consideration in planning, subtle architectural gestures and responsibility, can also provide valuable indirect tools in special needs education. Associating the mentioned aspects with the countries does not imply the fact that the observation is exclusive for that particular country. On the contrary, the discussed dimensions can match all the given examples, it is only the filter of personal tangency that renders it in this way as a mere illustration.

## **2. ONE DIRECTION: PHENOMENOLOGY OF ARCHITECTURE**

An interesting way of dealing with disability is through senses. In many cases impairment may be compensated by a higher receptivity or sensitivity. Architecture, as a support and container of life, communicates and is perceived by means of senses. It has a special impact on life. Before being either a message or a symbol, architecture is an envelope for life in and around it, 'a sensitive container for the rhythm of footsteps on the floor, for the concentration of work, for the silence of sleep' [3, p.13]. That is why an approach of the present subject through architecture's influence on the senses, seems possible.

Generally, phenomenology of architecture shows the invisible side of human interaction with buildings. Particularly, phenomenology of architecture may explain differently the relation between architecture and the senses, and in this case its connection to disability, opening the way for sensory design [4]. There is only one step to be made, the one from disability to special needs education. Fostering special needs education on the students' ability to communicate with the built environment through senses and on the significant influence that architecture, through its components, exerts on the students, this step may be easily made.

Therefore, one side of the issue of special needs education lies in the degree and accessibility to engage a context, physical, sensorial, mental as it may be. The observations regarding Italy made as a student and later as a young researcher come to this point. Built culture both formal (educational institutions, museums, theatres) and informal (buildings, streets, the cityscape itself) is largely reachable and it turns into a great educator whose lessons are seen, touched, smelled, and in one word, felt. What stood before as a background would bring its share of indirect, unspoken education. Even though the human body was from ancient times onwards a source of proportion system and measurable aspects, translated into guidelines or norms, it still has as well a full sensory role in experiencing the built environment [5]. Having in mind and minding the sensorial experience of the disabled and combine it with the architectural project's objectives may lead to a positive result regarding special needs education.

The essence stays on ahead: 'In memorable experiences of architecture, space, matter and time fuse into one singular dimension, into the basic substance of being, that penetrates our consciousness. We identify ourselves with this space, this place, this moment, and these dimensions become ingredients of our very existence. Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses' [6, p.76].

## **3. ANOTHER PATH: ENVIRONMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

In the quest for possible answers regarding the influence of architecture on special needs education another path is to be followed. Environmental psychology explores the context of human behaviour and wellbeing, whether that context is physical (urban, architectural), social or conceptual (design, narrative) [7].

The influence of architecture on special needs behavior is without a doubt obvious. It is its influence on special needs education that seems more unexposed. Well, architecture may bring its share of influence in special needs education, as it follows.

### **3.1. A start point – architectural education**

Directly, through suitably designed learning environments. The scale and proportion of the space, the light, the relation with the exterior, the type of materials of the surfaces, the colours, even the sound, all these are markers of the educational environment that impact behaviour. Design can improve the function, value and appearance of the educational space affecting positively both users and producers, and even becoming a part of the hidden curriculum [8]. The influence of the named factors may be translated into comfort, stimulation, enjoyment, receptivity, or, on the contrary, into disturbance, lack of concentration, tiredness, disconnection.

Indirectly, architecture in general, through every built environment - public or private, open or closed - creates a possible context for special needs education. This brings the discussion to an important observation. It is essential to understand the significance of embodying multiple disciplines into design, and the only recognized academic discipline bridging design and psychology is environmental psychology [9]. And the start point of learning such mastering of multiple disciplines into design is architectural education itself. How architecture students are taught and guided to deal with these external, but complementary disciplines, how are they showed to problematize, to respond to real life situations, these form the core, that later will guarantee a thorough design.

As an illustration, the importance of this dimension, focused on the issue of making architecture students aware and responsible, is also rendered by personal experience as an exchange student at a university in France. Firstly, the accent upon specific normative documents and their prescriptions, displaced architecture from the poetical-conceptual sector to the real-practical one. Secondly, the induced responsibility led to rigour and consciousness, even though the projects were only an exercise. Students were invited to think of the impact of their projects in real life situations and contexts, and not to regard their work as a simple drawing or object, without any implications. They were strongly recommended to follow normative and regulations, particularly when special needs design issues were regarded.

### **3.2. Inclusive design**

Another approach of the relation between architecture and specific human behaviour is to be highlighted. Even though architecture may not have the direct power to cure illnesses, to teach the ignorant, or, generally, to sustain life, it surely affects the quality of life and can give the sustained life meaning [10]. In this light, contribution to sustaining life reaches a superior level through inclusive design. Conceived not only to respond to disability, but also to every particularity ranging from culture, age to physical conditions, inclusive design sets some directions, such as placing people at the heart of the design process, acknowledging diversity and difference, offering choice where a single design solution cannot accommodate all users, providing flexibility in use, providing buildings and environments that are convenient and enjoyable to use for everyone [11].

In supporting this dimension of sustained life through inclusive design, emerges an observation rooted in personal experience as a visiting young researcher in Germany. A general attention and thoughtfulness within the built environment was present not only regarding impairment situations, but also concerning other categories like older people or families with small children. Therefore, user perception should be involved in resolving design issues, in order to improve understanding and uptake of inclusive design by architects [12]. In that way inclusive design may bring its share to inclusive education. Good architecture may teach respect and consideration on one hand, and on the other hand stimulation and confidence. It may show one of its reflections in the liveliness of those being in contact with it.

One final observation puts emphasis on the fact that dealing with impairments doesn't have to be perceived as limiting and hindering within the design process. On the contrary, starting with disability can have a true creative potential in architectural practices, arguing that design can help forgo underlying and overlooked inequalities [13]. Accepting the challenge from the beginning, knowing that the so-called restraints don't narrow the path, but make it visible among the multitude of options, integrating user perception, all these bring their contribution in accomplishing good architecture.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The end should provide answers to the questions in the beginning. The presented arguments tried to show that between architecture and special needs education lays a relevant relation. Even though at first this connection might seem loose, at a closer look through the lens of phenomenology of architecture and environmental psychology, it becomes more and more obvious. Architecture may influence special needs education in many ways: through suitably designed learning environments, through thoughtful integration of users' needs outlined by inclusive design, through making architecture students aware and responsible, and finally, through the built environment in general, as a continuous and influential presence in human life. Good architecture takes care.

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