

## Practicing Conscious Architectural Experience

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The procedural exercise of practicing Conscious Architectural Experience (CAE) was first authored by Julio Bermudez, Professor of Architecture at Catholic University of America, as a means of engaging an architectural work that requires the suspension of the critical mind and preferences the embodied experience. The premise is that through slowness and openness one might more fully understand and comprehend a work of architecture. While the practice of CAE was originally intended to be building focused, this paper expands this practice to engage places and project sites.

Traditional site analysis requires (in fact, demands) the critical mind to document, dissect and evaluate the realities and particularities of a locale, district or region. We are familiar with Edward T. White's 1983 book on the subject that outlines procedures and practices for analyzing sites and (to a certain extent) institutionalized certain graphic standards used in documenting our observations. In many ways, White codified what should be valued about a site or place. Site Analysis produced by our students and in the profession still cling to the vestiges of White's procedural and operational tactics for understanding place – with the intent to utilize this information in directing their efforts – whether for architectural or planning purposes.

Architectural drawings and models are certainly artifacts that privilege this type of analysis. These means of representation provide the support for contextual reference in the work - demonstrating boundaries, adjacencies, restrictive criteria, etc. They may also include various forms of speculative projection; wherein, the designer anticipates what is to come by introducing a schematic into the documentation to analyze the implications of such a decision. Artifacts of this type may also consider effectual performance by anticipating levels of exposure, immediacy, the changing of the seasons, operational demands and occupational flows.

Site Analysis seeks for dimensional accuracy. It is important to know sizes, square footages, thicknesses and heights, thus providing the constraints needed to proceed. The practice of site analysis may be expanded into the realm of engaging expert witnesses, clients and user groups who have a unique perspective and knowledge base. Site analysis requires an understanding of place through time – not just what the site is today, but its developmental pattern throughout history. Lastly, site analysis provides opportunity for tacit sensitivities and embodied engagement to occur, although not high on the priority list and even more easily dismissed.

Peter Zumthor (2006) in his book *Thinking Architecture* enlightens us with the following observation. "The clear, logical development of a work of architecture depends on rational and objective criteria. When I permit subjective and unconsidered ideas to intervene in the objective course of the design process, I acknowledge the significance of personal feelings in my work. When architects talk about their buildings, what they say is often at odds with the statements of the buildings themselves. This is probably connected with the fact that they tend to talk a good deal about the rational, thought-out aspects of their work and less about the secret passion that inspires it. The design process is based on a constant interplay of feeling and reason. The feelings, preferences, longings and desires that emerge and demand to be given a form must be controlled by critical powers of reasoning, but it is our feelings that tell us whether abstract considerations really ring true. Precious moments of intuition result from patient work" (p.21).

Conscious Architectural Experience is employed as a tactic to suspend the rational mind (if only for a time) so as to provide understanding that moves beyond quantifiable data, with the intent to develop deeper, more meaningful and lasting relationships with place.

The legend is told of the Japanese carpenter, *daiku*, or great craftsman residing in a particular place—the building site—for extended periods of time before any thought toward the architecture of that place would be permitted. The length of days and changing of the seasons were felt and lived. It is in this spirit that CAE aspires.

Requisite for anyone who desires to engage in the act of CAE one must accept certain conditions. First, Conscious Architectural Experience requires its participants to disconnect, figuratively and literally, from their digitized and fragmented world in order to engage in the real. Second, CAE emphatically denounces the notion of effective multi-tasking and professes that overstimulation and excessive distraction, particularly of the digital kind, dislocate us from our work. Multi-tasking prohibits developing deeper levels of understanding and our ability to articulate a particular subject matter. Third, CAE demands that no analysis is to be conducted during the experience. The only thing that matters is the experience itself. In the process of removing all the analytics, the place reveals itself to the participant. CAE refocuses the participant on the presence of the real, the tangible, the felt and the unseen.

### The Imperative – from the assignment brief

Conscious Architectural Experience (CAE) requires its participants to step-up and develop a high level of sensitivity and attention towards the presence of architecture and/or place. Fully engaging this opportunity will require a spirit of openness and experimentation. You have been given a particular place or building where to practice CAE. Please, don't get into an argument regarding whether or not you like what I have assigned you. Just do it!

Practicing Conscious Architectural Experience is also responsive to the 2018 National Conference on the Beginning Design Student imperative to 'Take Time' to 'Focus on the Present' through the removal of increasing interruptions – intentional, habitual or unexpected.

### The Practice



Figure 1 Architecture students from Mississippi State University practicing Conscious Architectural Experience.

Below is a set of *strict guidelines* with procedures and attitudes that you will need to follow.

**01** Assume that you will waste two precious hours of your life in this assignment. In other words, drop all expectations of getting anything out of it. At the same time, since you have accepted this loss, don't get

upset about it or intend to change or improve anything that has not been given or asked from you. If you get bored, anxious, angry or begin thinking about anything, just stop and return to your initial resolution; you'll just do this because you promised it and/or it is required from you, period. Surrender yourself to this process.

**02** You will visit the site once as a class and twice on your own. Select a special time of the day for your second and third visits. I suggest you do it at dawn or dusk when the light conditions and changes are most dramatic. However, if you feel your site would be best experienced at another time, please do it at that moment. Plan:

To arrive to your site at least a full hour before sunset or sunrise.

To stay at least 30-45 minutes after the sun has come up or gone down.

To spend a total of 2 hours at your site.

**03** Go alone without anything on you except comfortable clothing. This means NO cell phones. Don't go hungry, don't go thirsty, but don't go after dinner either. You will take no notes or do anything except experiencing the place with your body and mind. You will remain alone through the whole 2 hours. Avoid talking to anybody. Remain silent. Never, absolutely never hurry. Take your time. Remember your promise. There is nothing more important to do right now. Just this.

**04** Use whatever means of transportation to get to the vicinity of your place. However, make sure you are on your feet at least 100 yards away from your place (depending on the scale of the building, it may be more). Once there, stop and become as conscious of yourself walking towards the building/site as possible. Slow down your pace to about 1/3 your normal speed. As you slowly walk, begin to open up to the experience surrounding you. Notice your body, your breathing and your sensations. Notice the sky, the vegetation, the sounds of cars or people, the wind, the temperature, the aromas, your weight shifting from one leg to the other leg, how things move in your vision. Try to remain highly attentive of what is happening. If thoughts, memories or worries come to your mind, don't engage them. Instead, just return to your awareness of slow walking and experiencing.

**05** Proceed to walk around the spaces comprising your building/site (inside and outside) at the same slow motion pace. Reduce your speed even more if you find anything that captures your attention, calls your senses, moves your feelings or excites you in any way. Stop if necessary and take in as much as you can. As you continue your journey, do what is both necessary and natural (trust your body). Feel the freedom of CAE. If for some reason, you have a very powerful reaction right away while visiting a particular area, just stay there (and move to #6).

**06** After a half hour or so of free exploration, go to the area, place or spot that attracted you the most. This attraction should be visceral, intuitive, natural, spontaneous and NOT intellectual. Then, find a location that is inviting, and offers you the best experiential opportunities as well as a place to sit comfortably. It may be on the floor or ground. Don't have preferences; just do what comes instinctively. Be aware that you will be sitting there for quite some time.

**07** So sit down. Take a few breaths, move your back, neck, legs, arms and hands until you find a peaceful corporal sensation. As you do this, remind yourself that you are right here at this particular (unique) moment in time. Close your eyes and count following each breath exhaling until 10. Then, slowly, open your eyes. Try to relax while remaining highly alert. Be open to all the sensations and emotions that come your way. Again, if ideas, memories, judgments, analysis or worries come to your mind and distract you, don't get upset about it. Otherwise you will remove yourself from the experience. Instead, keep going back to your experience. And, keep doing this no matter how many times things inside or outside your head take you away from the experience.

**08** So, just sit there, alone, still, relaxed and in total silence for at least 30 minutes. Ideally you should try to stay for 45 minutes. Don't lose your concentration. Observe deeply. Perceive the passage of time, the movement of light, the patterns of activity, the void of space but without:

Analyzing anything.

Trying to make sense or understand anything.

Generating new ideas for this place.

Just be open to whatever is happening. Be there, that is enough. It's plenty.

**09** Once the time is up, stand up and do a slow 10-minute walk around the same area where you were sitting. Walk even slower than before; at about 10-20% your normal speed. Remain alert, silent, open and relaxed.

**10** After finishing your slow walking, close your eyes again and take a few last breaths. Then leave the place at your leisure. Remain silent for at least the next 10 minutes. Don't listen to the radio or engage in conversation during this time.

**11** Immediately after returning back, write, type or audio-record your impressions of the experience you just had. Do this without trying to judge it, but only report your sensations, feelings and thoughts as you had them. Whatever comes up is just fine. Record your impressions in a stream of consciousness type or writing. You may edit it once you are fully done with it. This will be the product of this assignment and due for presentation – 1 page typewritten. You will perform this step at the end of each visit for a total of 3 written experiences.

## **Observations**

Admittedly, the recording of the experiences while engaging a given site can surely be viewed as a type of site analysis – although not of the typical kind. What differs in these descriptions are the exaggerated, visceral and sometimes poetic descriptions of place. Students are not just describing the physical realities of a place – dimensions, placement, orientation, etc – but they are tapping into something deeper and more present about the places they engage. Upon the completion of this assignment, I met with small groups of students (8-10) to discuss their experiences and observations. This was now the time to be critical and reflective on what had taken place. The observations of the students are highlighted below.

*Time:* Several students recalled that while engaged in the exercise they experienced a loss of their sense of time and many remained longer at the place than was prescribed. This resulted in their experiences being internal versus a purely external experience. Many remarked that they “felt the site” more deeply than other experiences they have had with traditional site analysis.

*Senses:* The deliberate practice of CAE resulted in students experiencing an elevation of their senses. Colors were more vivid, sounds were more pronounced, smells were more pungent and their tacit sense of touch became more defined. Regrettably, there were no records of students tasting the places they visited.

*Nostalgia:* For many, the time spent in isolation and silence brought back remembrances of former times – of which they looked back upon with nostalgic eyes. Although the students were instructed to cast these types of images out of their mind immediately, several students found that hard to do. The emotion brought back to them in the form of a memory were often palpable, poignant and peace-filled.

*Observation vs. Judgement:* Exercising powers of observation over those of judgement was difficult for the student to be consistent with. Almost all commented on how difficult it was to cast out the analytical mind. They have been trained to view the world and situations through certain critical lenses. Suspending those conditioned abilities proved challenging but valuable.

*Familiar vs. Unfamiliarity:* Students were attracted to the conditions of a place that were automatically familiar to them and initially stayed away from those of difference or unfamiliarity. Often this meant that they initially rested in locations that were more exposed and visible. However, during later visits to the site students were more exploratory and ventured into new territories.

*Proximation:* The selection of resting sites seemed to almost always have a certain characteristic in common – they were places in which the body was always positioned in close proximity to another object or thing. Students rested near a tree, on the bank of a stream, on top of platforms, on swings, within tall vegetation, next to a corner, leaned up against a wall, at the edge of an ecosystem or at the intersection of paths. Rarely, were resting sites chosen that were fully exposed and open.

*Disconnection:* The collective voice is expressed in the words of one student, “I’ve never been without my phone for so long. It was nice and kind of therapeutic.” Disconnecting from the digital world to then be present in the real world was valued by nearly all participants. Although many admittedly didn’t understand the need to disconnect initially, they unanimously agreed on its significance after practicing CAE.

*Isolation:* It is no surprise that students preferred experiencing the site on their own and at a time of their choosing. In the larger group visit, students were constantly reminded of the others engaged in the same practice. This provided a distraction for some and made the collective visit to the site seem somewhat less than that of the later individual experience. The visits to the site without a larger group present resulted in more exploration and exhibited more curiosity by the participant.



Figure 2 Architecture students from Mississippi State University practicing Conscious Architectural Experience.

## Conclusions

Julio Bermudez (2011) in *Profound Experience in Architecture: The Role of Distancing in the Ineffable* states that, “Practicing Conscious Architectural Experience provides encounters with a building or place that fundamentally alters one’s normal state of being. By fundamental alteration it is meant a powerful

and lasting shift in one's physical, perceptual, emotional, intellectual, and/or spiritual appreciation of architecture" (p.22).

The profound collection of embodied knowledge gained by practicing Conscious Architectural Experience further equips architecture students with sensibilities of place that are beyond the quantifiable and analytical. This practice empowers students to value the easily overlooked, acknowledge the mundane, admit to the ignored obvious, and celebrate the given. In a way, practicing CAE is in itself a critique on what we value and how we assign value to a given place. The majority of the places where my students practice CAE are not inherently sacred or particularly special, but somehow, CAE changes them and their way of looking at and valuing a place. With practice and patience, the place has become theirs. It has changed them – ironically, in preparation for the student to change the place.

## References

1. Bermudez, J. (2011). *Profound Experience in Architecture: The Role of Distancing in the Ineffable*. 2A Architecture + Art, Quarterly, Issue No. 17, p.22.
2. Zumthor, P. (2006). *Thinking Architecture*. Basil: Birkhäuser, p.21.