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SENSING WITH THE MIND

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It is commonly understood that we relate to the world through our five senses, which were defined by Aristotle: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. This view is supported by the simple fact that we have a specific organ for each one of these five sensory capacities. The ancient Greek philosopher also established the hierarchy of the human senses, from the privileged sense of sight down to touch, and we continue to regard vision as our most important sense. 'Clear vision' is also a strong metaphor in language, and is regarded as equivalent to truth. As a consequence of this tradition, architecture, design and the visual arts are understood as predominantly visual. Yet all our senses are functional specializations of skin tissue and, consequently, are all modes of touch. In fact, touch could well be considered our most important sense, due to its directly protective function.

Recent writings suggest that we interact with the world through twenty to thirty-three sensory systems. In addition to the five senses, others have been suggested such as balance, gravity, proprioception, duration, continuity, scale, sense of effort, and sense of agency. To further complicate the definition of a sense, even our endocrine glands, which are regarded as a closed system sealed inside the body and only indirectly linked with the outside world, have been found to influence virtually everything the body does. Experiments show that these chemical regulators, which include odoriferous glands, scattered about animal bodies, work directly on the body chemistry of other organisms. Even more recent research has revealed the significance of the bacterial universe in our intestines, which has been called our 'second brain'. We are beginning to understand that our sensory systems are far more complicated than we believed, and as a consequence, the qualitative requirements for humanistic design also go far beyond vision.

Flesh of the World

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, we live in 'the flesh of the world',¹ and the mind, senses and world constitute a continuum. The senses expand us into the surrounding space through the mind and imagination, and we are even able to project ourselves beyond the earth into outer space: 'Through vision we touch the

¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', *The Visible and the Invisible*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992.

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Maurice Merleau-Ponty



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B



C

sun and the stars,' as philosopher Martin Jay poetically suggests.² Architecture and design continue to be taught and practised primarily as visual arts, and, even more specifically, as arts of the focused eye. Yet all the senses actively survey the world to determine the situations and conditions which are favourable for us. We tend to think of our senses in isolation, but Merleau-Ponty points out their essential collaboration: 'My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens. I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the things, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once,'³ and he writes, adding: 'Sensory experience is unstable, and alien to natural perception, which we achieve with our whole body all at once, and which opens on a world of interacting senses.'⁴

This synthetic and 'symphonic' way of sensing should surely be the architect's, designer's and artist's way of encountering the world and his work. Merleau-Ponty asks: 'How could the artist or the poet express anything else but his encounter with the world?'⁵ And he suggests that Paul Cézanne's paintings 'make visible how the world touches us.'⁶ The philosopher's thinking makes the human body the centre of our experiential and existential world: 'We choose our world through our bodies as living centres of intentionality, and that is how the world chooses us.'⁷ He defines this body-centred view powerfully: 'Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system.'⁸

Sense of Being

I would like to suggest that, in the field of architecture and design, the most important sense is not vision, as the synthesizing sense seems to be our existential sense, the sense of being. The existential sense fuses all the sensations with the sense of being and gives them coherence, continuity and meaning. In my view, this existential sense is close to the notion of the earliest Buddhist 'sense of mind' that Pakhalé refers to. Indeed in all respects, the Eastern traditions of thinking have grasped the complex essence of human experience and consciousness, as well as the interactions of the material and the mental, better than our current scientific view. They avoid the categorical divide between the lived and the scientific worlds.

A Louis Kahn, Architecture IIM-A - Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, IN, built with wisely used basic materials like exposed brick and light. The campus hosts classrooms, hostels, a library, academic facilities and vast corridors that act as a passive cooling system, all gathered around a big courtyard, shaping an area of more than 60 acres. It is a seminal example of Kahn's architecture, 1962-1974. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

B Alvar Aalto, experimental wood relief. Aalto started experimenting with laminated bent wood in 1929. These reliefs were part of an important process of solving the technical challenges related to his furniture developments as well as a method for Aalto to experiment with bent wood in a playful, artistic way. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

C Howz, a symmetrical axis pool in the courtyard of the Sidi Saiyyed Mosque, famed for its Tree of Life latticework, in the World Heritage city of Ahmedabad, IN, 1573. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

2 Martin Jay, as quoted in David Michael Levin, 'Introduction', *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, University of California Press, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 14.

3 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Film and the New Psychology', *Sense and Non-Sense*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, IL, 1964, p. 48.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, UK, 1992, p. 225.

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The task of architecture and design is not only to create visual order and beauty. Design needs to frame the world, provide it with meaning, and to grant us our existential foothold in reality. This foothold has its practical, material and performative, as well as perceptual, sensory and metaphysical dimensions. A significant aspect of this task is the re-mythicization and re-eroticization of our relationship with the world. We cannot mentally survive in a world devoid of historicity, sensuality, and human meaning. Meaningful design places our bodies and minds harmoniously in the flesh of the world.

Satyendra Pakhalé's designs suggest a haptic skin-relationship through their sensorial forms, poetic associations and tactile surfaces; they invite the user and stimulate sensations of intimacy and nearness. The shapes present invitations to our body sense, rather than merely displaying retinal images.

D Fatehpur Sikri, city of victory. The capital of the Mogul empire from 1571 to 1585, built by Akbar the Great, 37 km west of the city of Agra, India. It is believed that the city expresses the personality and principles of Akbar. He had a natural inclination towards industrial crafts and concern for technological innovation. He was so devoted to architecture that he sometimes quarried stones himself along with the workmen. Akbar built a workshop near his palace at Fatehpur Sikri with studios and workrooms for the finer and more reputable arts, such as painting, goldsmith work, tapestry-making, carpet and curtain-making, reports the Jesuit father Francis Henriques, 1580. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

E Aaram Bagh, meaning 'Garden of Rest', Agra, IN, 1528, is one of the early surviving gardens of the Mughal dynasty in India, located on the banks of the Yamuna river in Agra, a few kilometres away from the Taj Mahal, built by Emperor Babur. It is a Persian garden constructed in red stone and constituted by three descending terraces crossed by a network of canals, fountains, cascades and pools. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

F The Alhambra is an Arabic fortress located on Sabika Hill in Granada, ES. The first palace of the walled city of Alhambra was named after Muhammad ibn Nasr and built in red brick. In 1492, after the Catholic monarchs' reconquest of Granada, the Alhambra became the royal palace of the kings of Spain and was completed with Renaissance architecture. Courtesy: Satyendra Pakhalé Archives, Amsterdam, NL.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty as quoted in Richard Kearney, 'Maurice Merleau-Ponty', *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, Manchester-New York: Manchester University Press, USA, 1994, p. 82.
 6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', *Sense and Non-Sense*, op. cit., p. 19.
 7 Quoted in Kearney, op. cit., p. 74.
 8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, op. cit., p. 203.

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