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EMOTIONAL ACCESSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper argues that, beyond respecting current norms, Accessibility should be seen as an opportunity to establish more pleasant spaces that provide the user with a sense of well-being and affection for the Place. In this sense, the concept of "Emotional Accessibility" is proposed as a fundamental premise to achieve spatial empathy in both Architecture and Urbanism and Ergonomics and Design projects. To illustrate this paper's claims, the article relies on a didactic experience in the Professional postgraduate course at PROARQ / UFRJ that applied the concept of "Emotional Accessibility" in projects on heritage revitalization.

Keywords: *Emotional Accessibility; affection for the place; Experience.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As a result of the struggle of social movements for the rights of people with disabilities, Brazil has developed some achievements in terms of accessibility in our cities. This growth, however, does

not appear at the speed we desire, but the changes that have occurred in the last twenty years are visible.

Despite this small advance, few cities manage to offer real spatial pleasantness, which leads their inhabitants to enjoy sharing their spaces. We realize that planners, urban designers and architects seek to meet current standards, however, we feel that there is no awareness that a project with more generous accessibility could expand the bonds of affection that people develop with the city.

This article seeks to discuss this issue, which will be illustrated with a didactic experience carried out within the scope of the Professional Master's Degree at PROARQ/UFRJ, where we sought to sensitize the experienced professional to new, more holistic views of space.

2. THEORETICAL ARGUMENTATION

The discussions we bring here are based on the capacity of built spaces to generate spatial empathy and a feeling of welcome in their users. In this sense, in order to support these discussions, we believe that a brief explanation of the notion of "Spatial Empathy" and the concept of "Emotional Accessibility" is necessary.

Spatial Empathy

Empathy, as we know, is the ability to put ourselves in the Other's places. "Spatial Empathy" focuses on the capacity of spaces to produce in people a recognition of themselves in environments (DUARTE, 2015). This concept has been explored by authors from different areas of knowledge, from

neurosciences to urban design, including philosophy and psychology.

Since the 1940s, studies linked to phenomenology have understood that our awareness of our body is not restricted to its physical limits. Our senses are capable of expanding our Self beyond what we can touch with our hands and connects to everything we can see, feel, touch, smell. It is with this body expanded by the senses that we develop our understanding not only of the environment that surrounds us but also of our belonging to the world.

Scientifically, the work of neuroscientists (BERTHOZ, 2013) shows that this emotional displacement beyond oneself activates brain areas that are also responsible for spatial displacement. This makes it possible to explain why city spaces can often be understood as parts of ourselves. But for this feeling to exist there must be a tune, a resonance, that connects us with the environment around us. We call this resonance Spatial Empathy¹¹.

We can say that a space often takes a while to “conquer” us and doesn’t always “succeed”. This way of looking at space by personifying it demonstrates the potential for building narratives and dialogue between people and space. It is precisely this potential for dialogue that emerges when the space “demonstrates” to welcome its visitors, when there are signs that its users are welcome, predisposing the subject to establish a

¹ *Spatial empathy should not be confused with “sympathy” for place. This resonance can occur even if we are sad and feel that the environment around us follows our feelings; we can, in the same way, be elated and feel as if the whole city is vibrating with us.*

“pact” between themselves and the world, as said Merleau-Ponty.²

The conviction of the importance of this theme for the basis of projects for architectural and urban spaces made us take the issue of Spatial Empathy to studies on accessibility. Effectively, we know there is an adherence to the principles of Universal Design with the issue of the welcome that a space can offer to all people. It was in this context that we developed the concept of “Emotional Accessibility”.

Emotional Accessibility

We maintain that a space is only fully accessible when it is capable of transmitting to the user a feeling of welcome; when the emotional, affective and intellectual aspects, essential for establishing connections between the user and the Place, are respected. It was in this sense that we developed the concept of “Emotional Accessibility” (DUARTE and COHEN, 2012), which assumes that just good physical accessibility to space is not enough to generate spatial empathy and promote pleasant conditions for experiencing the Place³.

“Emotional Accessibility” therefore means the Place’s ability to welcome its visitors, to generate affection, to awaken the feeling of being part of the environment and to recognize oneself as a welcome person. This concept dismisses the idea that accessibility only happens with the removal of physical barriers.

² *We refer to the experience in space, which produces the perception of harmony from the establishment of relationships with the Place, when there appears to be a “pact, established [...] between our body and the world, between ourselves and our body” (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1945, p.293).*

³ *The concept of Emotional Accessibility developed by Duarte and Cohen (2012) was initially called “Full Accessibility”, a term that was later replaced by the allusion to the subjective component of the relationship with space.*

Thus, “Emotional Accessibility” encompasses the entire ambience that surrounds the user of the place, treating them as a total being, capable of activating complex systems of relationships with the space and with the Other.

Because it is concerned with the feeling of affection that environments can provide in people, “Emotional Accessibility” also covers sensoriality, physical differences and subjective aspects. The importance of understanding sensoriality sheds light on the recognition of the body as a bulwark of emotion (LE BRETON, 2009). Through the senses, the body establishes the relationship between the Self and the world and becomes the symbolic communicator of the emotion experienced. Therefore, to stimulate the construction of affection for the Place, the body must be considered in its physical, social, political, cultural and environmental diversity.

We have found in our research that these ideas are still little explored by designers in the areas of architecture and urban design⁴. Even though these professionals declare that they understand that designing for everyone also means promoting everyone's welcome and affection, broad accessibility is not always chosen as the premise of their projects.

But, in practice, what would a project based on “Emotional Accessibility” look like? We would be running the risk of remaining solely in the domain of utopian ideas if we did not test a direct application of these concepts in real projects.

⁴ *Professionals interviewed as part of the research carried out by the Pró-acesso Center.*

3. TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Usually, professionals in the areas of applied social sciences, especially in the specialties of architecture, urban design and ergonomics, are receptive towards the user of their projects. He is a professional who works empathetically: he usually imagines himself penetrating architectural spaces, admiring a created object; They generally have the ability to abstract themselves from themselves and place themselves in a strange situation as if it were the first time they were seeing an object, or receiving the impact of a new web page, for example.

However, it seems to us that, when it comes to accessibility, empathy ceases to exist and the project shows signs of meeting standards as if they were a mere bureaucratic obligation. In our search for accessible spaces we have come across mostly with uninviting locations. If this is so, why is the issue of accessibility not treated equally empathetically by professionals in the areas of architecture, urbanism and ergonomics?

One of the possible answers could be in the training of these planners. We know that the ability to design empathetically is taught to these professionals from the beginning of their undergraduate course, mainly through practical and simulation subjects. In our teaching experience with the discipline on accessibility we have obtained good results⁵, proven not only by the reports of students but also verified by the monitoring of graduates who, in a significant number, produce pleasant and accessible spaces.

⁵ *The teaching methodology on accessibility taught at FAU/UFRJ was awarded by the European Association for Architectural Education 2003-2004 (see DUARTE and COHEN, 2003).*

However, if the awakening of this commitment to more affective accessibility depended solely on non-mandatory subjects in the architectural training curriculum, we could hardly expect a more egalitarian future in our spaces. In this sense, we asked ourselves whether an already trained professional, “hardened” in the job market and accustomed to complying with the norms and limitations of current codes could be sensitized – even if belatedly – to this new vision.

The experience was then carried out within the scope of the PROARQ⁶ professional master's degree course. As we know, the Professional Master's course is aimed at planners who do not have as many ties to theory, having a much more practical profile. They are architects, urban planners and planners who are already in the job market, in public or private companies, who return to academia to recycle and improve their knowledge in a given sector.

In the aforementioned course, the subject “Inclusive Architecture”, taught by the authors of this text, was established based on the concept of “Emotional Accessibility” and promoted debates, experience workshops and lectures with people with disabilities, who reported much more about their affective experiences in urban and architectural space than its difficulties with barriers or obstacles. Despite being practical and pragmatic, the debates were based on the trinomial Experience-Welcome-Emotion, seeking to review the notion of Heritage (focus of the course) within a new plan of sentimental needs for intervention / readjustment projects. The concept of “Emotional Accessibility”

⁶ *Professional Master's Course in Design and Heritage of the Postgraduate Program in Architecture, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro*

was discussed through empathic simulation exercises of the disabled body in the designed space, seeking a greater range of forms of perception and spatial experience. Then, the professionals enrolled in the class were asked to develop projects for the requalification of existing heritage assets, in order to promote "Emotional Accessibility".

The results went beyond expectations⁷. The proposed projects, far beyond accessibility measures, brought reflections on the subjective and cultural dimensions of the built environment and on the insertion of the body in stimulating and welcoming spaces. Creative and critical ways were proposed for transforming heritage assets into spaces of experience and implementing the exercise of building affection for each user.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

We are led to believe that perhaps there is a gap in the way design disciplines are taught in the training of architects, urban planners and designers. When the undergraduate is presented with the possibility of "adapting" something, it means that, a priori, that something was no longer suitable for everyone. This creates a distance, an objectification of accessibility, which makes empathetic projection actions difficult. After graduating, many planners in Brazil continue to carry this distance with them and still have difficulty dealing with people with disabilities. The spectrum of users remains limited and accessibility is only an afterthought.

⁷ *Due to the short space imposed by this text, it will not be possible to describe the works that will, however, be exposed during the presentation at the congress*

Thus, as Scott Rains (2011) says, accessibility goes half way towards achieving artificial norms and out of context of who is "normal". According to the author, accessibility constantly becomes a mere obligation. Through checklists, people with disabilities are considered as "problems" to be solved and "ticked" when standards are met. In this way, performance according to the "least worst" standard is accepted, seeking only the minimum that can be codified after the political commitment of legislation and obligation. A floor is thus established, but it is generally assumed that the ceiling is out of reach. This logic is materialized in spaces and products that do not welcome or awaken positive affects in their users.

However, our experience with architects working in the job market within the scope of the Professional Master's course showed us that it is possible to change this perspective by considering the importance of "Emotional Accessibility", sensitive and generous. We saw that, when the users' point of view is respected in an empathetic way, the experience takes center stage in relation to the disability.

We do not deny that the Technical Accessibility standards represent precious achievements that must be respected, but we understand that it is possible to go beyond these references and, by rethinking accessibility as a bridge to affection for places, it will be possible to build truly inclusive spaces and products.

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