Narrative Design: Meaningful Places for People

A Study on the relevance of Narrative in Spatial Design Education

Stephanie Brandt Dipl.Ing. MArch ARB ⊿

SPACEPILOTS [www.spacepilots.net], London, GB, info@spacepilots.net

Abstract

'Users' ability to create meanings for their surroundings and act on them is not radically different from designers' ability to develop a design and encourage its implementation by others.' Krippendorf, K., *The Semantic Turn. A new foundation for design,* 2006, p. 145

One of the greatest challenges for spatial designers, today possibly more than ever, seems the creation of meaningful places and gratifying user experiences. [x] And it is in this context that I would like to introduce some ideas suggesting that, although not commonly recognized in spatial design education, one relevant design tool engaging with user experience and the creation of meaningful places is 'narrative'.

During the last 6 Years I have been exploring narrative within my own practice, and through working with architecture and interior design students at different levels and Universities. All projects and experiments are set with the intension to pervade and redefine each individual's daily routines and common perceptions. They are aiming towards both, an emotional and explanatory experience of our environment.1

In this paper I would like to present some of the student projects while discussing narrative as a tool designing meaningful relationships between a physical fabric and its occupants. My primary focus will be on the students respond to the incorporation of narrative as a design element and instrument. The paper will discuss a series of common findings as direct results of our studio projects.

Even though most students initially respond to the idea of narrative on an intuitive level, it seems throughout almost all projects something intriguing takes place when narrative starts to be adapted as a design tool, an exploration and tactic. - The resulting outcomes are not only emphasizing the affective aspects of built design, but also permeated the designers' personal realities, thinking and ambitions.

Key words: Design Education, Experience-Driven and Narrative Design, Place-Making

---

[x] The understanding of the word **experience**, in this paper is taken as a result of all interaction between an individual and her/his immediate surroundings; it must be able to affect the feelings of the person that is occupying or inhabiting space positively, consequently raising her/his acceptance towards it.

Introduction

 "It is evident that 'life-enhancing'[1] architecture has to address all the senses simultaneously and fuse our image of self with our experience of the world. The essential mental task of architecture is accommodation and integration. Architecture articulates the experience of being-in-the-world and strengthens our sense of reality and self; it does not make us inhabit worlds of mere fabrication and fantasy.

[..] Instead of creating mere objects of visual seduction, architecture relates, mediates and projects meanings. The ultimate meaning of any building is beyond architecture; it directs our consciousness back to the world and towards our sense of self and being." [Pallasmaa, Juhani, The Eyes of the Skin, p.11]

The affective impact architecture[2] has is a universal experience, which is heightened through the relationship our bodies have with their surrounding spaces. We know that the choice and combination of materials, colors and shapes impact on the inhabitant's bodily and sensual feeling. Our need and desire to be provided with spaces for our daily activities of life ensures the universality of architecture's language and aesthetic codes that, even though culturally and socially specific, are commonly experienced and understood in a variety of ways. The multiple approaches on architecture's function and meaning allude to the fact that architecture can fulfill a variety of requirements of and for the human being.

While some regard architecture predominantly as the art or practice of designing and constructing buildings, there is a growing acknowledgment that there are less pragmatic reasons at cause behind the human desire to create places.

As a discipline of design, architecture is concerned with the art or practice of developing and constructing spaces as much as the creation of meaning of places within the design process. In this paper I will focus on the latter, foregrounding the role human experiences can play in design for architecture. I will concentrate in particular on the way architecture students react to the incorporation of *experience* as a design criteria within various given studio briefs while introducing the tactics and common themes and results that have been achieved through these experience-driven design approaches. I will use examples of student's work in order to discuss those points, illustrating that the resulting outcomes are not only emphasizing the affective aspects of built design, but are also closely interwoven with the designers' personal realities, thinking and ambitions.

Architecture and Meaning

Unlike other art forms, architecture provides spaces for the daily activities of life; when more than simply utilitarian, it also appeals to our aesthetic sensibilities. By choosing and combining materials, colours, and shapes, architects embed their respective artistic messages in structures that we see, hear, and feel. [Blesser/Salter, spaces speak, p1,xi]

Further, architectural design is incorporating not only the artistic, but the political and historic as well as the social and the emotional context of space, and in this respect is intrinsically linked to the dwelling experience of

---

[1] A notion of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, as referred to in ibid, p. 308
[2] The term **architecture** in this paper is taken to include all aspects of the built design from interior to architectural and urban design.

humans. Consequentially, only 'a really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home' [Bachelard, Gaston, 1958].

Inhabiting space is a sensory experience and an active engagement with space that goes far beyond a purely bodily interaction between a person and his/her surrounding.

'Following Kant, Heidegger recognizes the human character of space and its role as a condition of experiences. But unlike Kant, who defines space as an *a priori* feature of our *mind*, Heidegger attributes it to our active being and our practical involvements in the world. [..] The sort of space we deal with in our daily activity is "functional"' [Yoko Arisaka, On Heidegger's Theory of Space, p.4] and so the sort of space we dwell within can be understood not only as an abstract concept as found in mathematics or physics, but as the nature of building and the human interaction [experience] within it - "a place", or a " being-in-the-world" as Heidegger refers to it.

Places and Spatial Experience

For this paper it seems important to state the difference between the notion of "space" and "place". My use of the term place refers to Heidegger's definition as a "functional" sort of space taking into account human interaction in and with space as well as the historical and social meaning of each site. The term space on the other hand is taken as the more abstract concept of a 3 dimensional construction.

The term space has broader implications as 'a system of change' that relies on the period and its spirit to determine its shape and development. As a term and a wider concept space is not only applicable to place or place-making, but also to other fields and disciplines such as mathematics, geography, cosmonautics, graphic design etc.

While this paper centres on the design developments of students studying spatial design, it is crucial to note that in actual fact they deal more with the design of places.

Current curricula for architectural design, especially in undergraduate level, focusing on the establishment of basics design terms, methods and tools during studies, are often rather simplistic in their introduction and approach towards the various design steps in this field. In many cases the students are introduced to design by means of some form of thematic source, which is meant to form the drive and which is mostly influenced and inspired by current trends and information available on materials, structures, etc. The development of design ideas are depended on the linking of these trends to a theme body, also taking into account the historic styles of architecture that may be relevant to the chosen subject. Often the subject itself is derived from a particular architectural style or era of the past, which helps to determine the design. Parallel, or consequentially to this process is the sourcing of materials and shapes that inform the design beyond. These elements are then developed through sketches and models into a final scheme design and proposal.

Although this is with no doubt an over-simplified description on my behalf in an attempt to curtail this text, the lack of focus on the affective aspects of design, its meaning for the people ultimately occupying these designs, is an apparent one to anyone who may want to engage with the subject. - For example - one of the key themes throughout the built environment in recent years is "sustainability" [and academia is intensely picking up on this trend], stressing the need for greener architecture, long-lasting homes, the reduction of emission and the development of new, sustainable systems and alternative energy systems, and so on. However, with some

exceptions, little or no consideration is given to social sustainability – i.e. the direct impact these designs will have on the occupants and what role this impact and the spatial experience of each of us could play within the actual design process and on its outcome.

The complexity of the built design and its dependency on time and change with no doubt is a major factor within this debate that can lead to limitations of in-depth and critical practices within the design process.

Another difficulty within this discussion and of our particular time seems the position of the designer her-/himself as the author and creator of "fashionable design". Tom Dyckhoff [2008] points out that although for centuries fashion was thought beneath architecture, these days, the market's desire for architectural flamboyance, the speed of computer design and advances in construction technology [such as façades that "clip on" like clothes] mean architects simply must keep up with the latest trends.

Parallel to this trend though, for many designers the aim nowadays is to test new ways on how to create personal environments and places that are directly sourced from the peoples needs and desires. It is this development in architecture that the here discussed student briefs are based on. In studio, we have taken *place-making* as a key aspect of architecture as, by essence, 'there is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self. Our bodies and movements are in constant interaction with the environment'. [Pallasmaa, Juhani, The Eyes of the Skin, p.40].

The approach refers back to the kind of participatory methods explored in the 60's and 70's. – Nowadays, designer[s] and/or client teaming up to develop their know-how through "active listening" and engagement with each-others experiences and visions [in which case the client brings the "know-what-to-do" and the designer(s) the "know-how-to-do-it" to the table] are becoming more and more popular in architecture, making the architectural design highly suited to investigations into experience-driven design approaches and the use of narrative as a tool in design.

Narrative Design: Meaningful Places for People - Narrative in Spatial Design Education

It is in correlation to the aforementioned aspects of architecture and architectural design that by definition already exist only in relationship to people's lives and their past and present and future life-"stories", or, "experiences" [memories, facts and desires], which made me consider the inclusion of "narrative" as a design criteria and a potential tool for architectural design. The diverse and sometimes ambiguous nature of academic literature on architecture combined with the absence of debate or consideration of a more reflective approach in architectural design was another pointing factor driving these investigations.

The initial aim has been to introduce and allow students a different focus and/or approach in their architecture studies - one where the people or occupants needs and habits were in the foreground to develop the design outcome. It was meant to encourage them to search new means of research and design methods as well as to question and utilize their own experiences and relationships to place as part of this approach.

In the last 6 years or so a series of "experience-driven design" briefs have been explored together with students at different levels and Universities in and around London. Initial attempts have been made with 1st Year Interior

Architecture & Design students at Nottingham Trent University, GB [2003]. The distributed brief highlighted the ability of architecture to infiltrate on the dweller's experience and to [trans]form her/his daily life-stories and asked the students to build out some of these narratives in their design. They were asked to focus on one key narrative or experience of their personal life in order to come up with ideas and a quick solution of how to translate those stories into communicative architectural designs. The students were not bound to ideas related to positive experiences, but could also explore and transform aspects of negative experiences they encountered or stories they wanted to tell. In this manner I was hoping, right from the beginning of their academic career, to set up an awareness in each student regarding the direct relationship that exists between people and the places we live in and through, trying to shift away from the purely thematic/trend based approaches in architectural design education.

As part of the design approach each designer automatically tends to reflect on their personal relationship with their surroundings, even if on a subconscious level. As it seems natural to bring our aesthetic perceptions and experiences into the design task it brings up the question whether a more conscious and focused application then might enable a better and more affective use of the intrinsic ability of architecture - ultimately leading to stronger designs?

In regards to the above, it is important to bear in mind that the student briefs were not set up as to conclude into a quantitative research project. In presenting the outcomes of the student works I am trying to point out some common approaches and working methods that arose out of this work.

Beyond the sourcing of stimuli and borrowing of aesthetic codes from their immediate contexts for each brief, it seemed the majority of students explored the positive and enriching nature of architecture – probably a reflection of their personal ambition and idea[l]s of the profession of architecture. Notions of comfort, "play" and repose were amongst the favorite themes addressed.

Another central factor in the student's approach has been the questioning and critical application of our bodily relationship with space, referring to phenomenological and/or cultural specifics of architectural designs. This factor turned out to be particularly useful as it opened up to more objective, or general reference points for the design of commonly understood places and experiences rather than the purely personal motives of each student.

Body and Space

The perception of architecture [its color, shape, texture, smell..] form a crucial part of an architecture student's vocabulary and tool box. It is often through manipulating the aesthetics and formal keys that intangible narratives are made tangible.

Being aware of the affect material and ephemeral attributes of space have had on people [personal and collective] in the past is providing useful resources of narrative, experiential stimuli applicable to current design. It can be applied and transformed into a useful tool to create a relationship between people and their surroundings – and to [in]form a place.

While exploring the notion of narrative experienced through architecture, the challenge was whether the every-day engagement and relationship between each individual and architecture could be pervaded and redefined by such means. Could narrative be used as a tool in architectural design to foster an emotional and/or explanatory experience of our environment?

Research into past approaches and experiments in relation to these questions have been the common starting point of approach for most students. While doing so, one student investigated the urban socio-cultural context of a chosen site completing an analysis of the constraints and opportunities of this place in order to mark out existing and potential links between inherent narrative and physical environment.

She then investigated the 5 basic human senses as a means to experience our surroundings, applying them in a practical and creative way to build a positive and stimulating environment. In tandem, she looked at the basic elements that defined the space and how function and narrative could co-exist in one place, or more to say how narrative can shape and determine function. Structural elements such as columns, walls, staircases as well as smaller details such as the main door handle were taken and utilized as experiential markers of [spatial] narratives and used strategically to create zones and moments that would heighten the dweller's experience of the place [Fig.1-4].
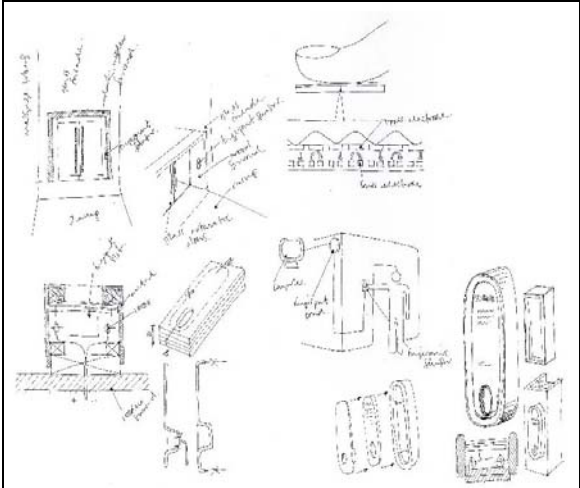

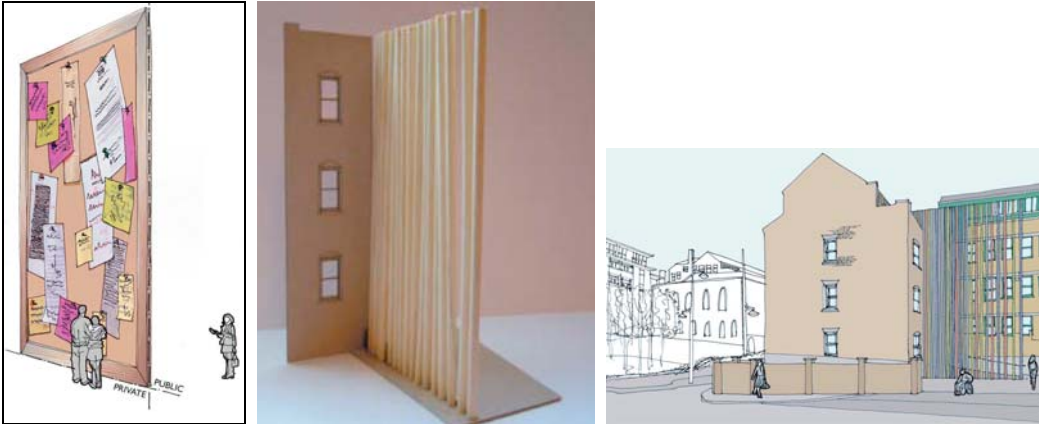Figure. 1 Jane Haslam, *Sense Lab – Spaces in Detail*

Figure. 2-4 Jane Haslam, *Sense Lab – Spaces in Detail*

In general, the physical relationship of the body with its surrounding and the material structure of a place has been an important factors of the students' work. In comparison to common design briefs and/or curricula, it seemed the first time the students were ask to foremost consider and explore the human body *within* a place in order to design a place. Tactile qualities of all sorts, including touch, taste, sound etc. played an important role for the students' attempts to trigger multiple narrative experiences. While now considering the actual experiences people potentially have within an architectural setting, the protective, liberating, secretive and also the restrictive narratives of architecture have been recognized and worked through. The human body, the actual inhabitant of space, has been turned into the primary drive of the design development and has been the site for multiple explorations.

Exploring narrative design for the construction of places, another student at 2nd Year level, Department of Architecture and Landscape, Kingston University, London investigated everyday *Sound* within an urban area as a *positive* and informative matter in the configuration of the individual's experience as opposing to the negative noise it is commonly regarded [and targeted] as. Hyoung Seung Shin: 'The calm water stream sound of the River Thames and the strange, rhythmic sound of the barges right next to our site encouraged me to foreground sound in my design in order to play on peoples emotions and memories. Tired from the walk along Southbank, London, during the day, the rhythms of sounds received and projected from my building will invite visitors to rest and recover; they will work as a kind of cradle song.'

During evening time, the main inner space would turn into a concert hall with performances and musicians. A huge movable top door would then open, now sending the sounds of music out into the cityscape. [Fig. 5 & 6]

- Through a designed day cycle the building functions as a catalyst and mediator for the residence and visitors of this area; it is receiving and sending sounds, a mediator, communicating the events and the tides of activities of and within this neighbourhood through sound. Further, Hyoung's work exemplifies another critical point the students started understanding and engaging with, which is the purpose of architectural design to protect the body, to offer shelter, not only physically but also psychologically. Within the projects, the physical presence of architecture surrounding the human body has been expanded upon by means of taking it as a mediator, something one could have a personal conversation with, simply through the inclusion of ephemeral matters aside the physical ones.
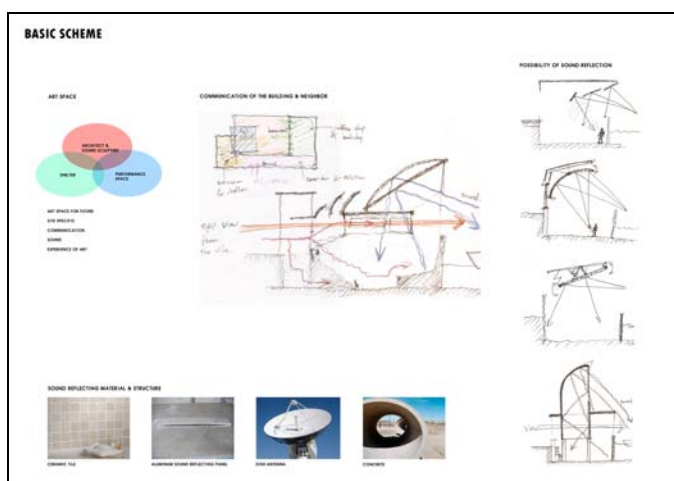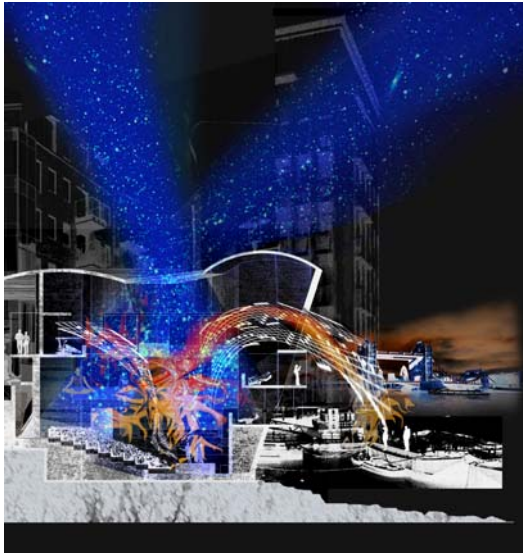

Figure. 5 Hyoung Seung Shin, Sound Space
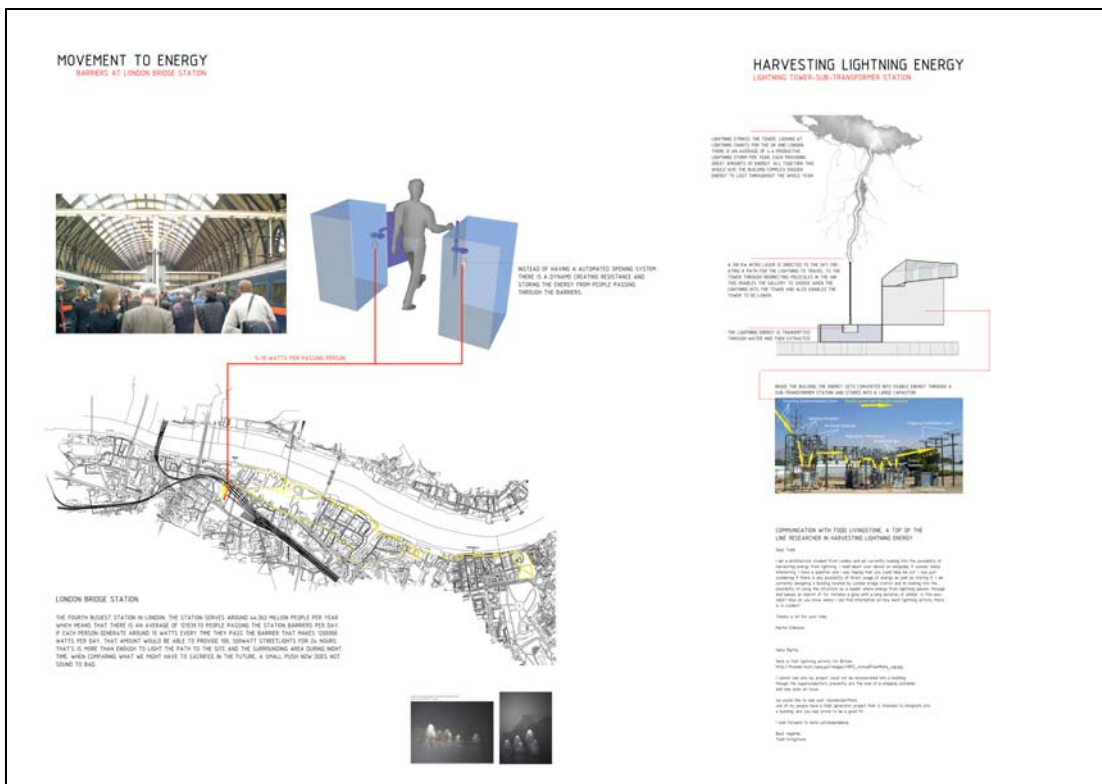
Figure. 6 Hyoung Seung Shin, Sound Space

Figure. 7 Martin Erikson, *Movement-Energy-Place*

Active movement through space and reflections on ideas of urban wandering have also been taken into account - in one case combined with approaches into lighting design of urban space. This particular student work questioned how places could help individuals to re-connect to their environments by introducing and utilising a series of physical devices such as dynamo-controlled-tube-barriers, footpath-absorbers and lightening-energy-towers a] to harvest energy by daily movements, interactions and natural events [lightening stroke] and b] to

foster and visualize the dialog between body and space. The collected energy has been calculated and designed to provide light for a communal workshop and exhibition space at London, Southbank and the developed path towards it along the Riverside [Fig.7 & 8].

Figure. 8 Martin Erikson, *Movement-Energy-Place*

Negative experiences or counterproductive narrative designs have also been popular themes among the students. The well-known experience of being in an environment that is either too suppressive, too dominant, too anonymous, or, too intimate helped the students to develop methods and therefore learn to understand the mechanisms in design that would encourage even more intense negative experiences. – While those kinds of designs are not necessarily considered useful in the common sense, they do nevertheless seem to help in the process of distinguishing and understanding the affects a design can have even in the smallest detail – as well as the real danger of such design becoming acceptable and integral in architectural design.

Conclusion

While the students' projects mostly have been specific to their immediate subjects [as explained in the beginning, some of them have been interior students, other came from the architecture department..] and stimuli, the approaches of each of the briefs have been fairly similar when compared among each other. Independent of their specialism in architecture, the students responded with themes and ideas that have been intrinsically connected to their own life experiences, social believes and insecurities. As the projects have been set within an academic [time]frame they have been design explorations in form of 2-dimensional sketches, drawings and, sometimes, 3-dimensional models; yet, untested in the real world. More time and further investigations into 1:1 scale devices and/or interventions would have allowed for much deeper reflections on the interconnectivity of body and space, narrative design and experience. However, the *conscious* application of narrative for place-making, along with first explorations of the relationship places have with the human body as part of the design process have been encouraging and exciting stepping points that have triggered an awareness and ongoing debates among the students about the role and importance of people in architectural design. Reflecting on the occupants experiences within the built environment allowed these students to take a different stance and approach of design that, I believe, resulted in more in-depth design investigations on their behalf.

References

[1]Arisaka, Yoko, *On Heidegger's Theory of Space, 1995*

[2]Bachelard, Gaston*, The Poetics of Space, 1994*

[3]Blesser, Berry & S.R., Salter, *spaces speak – are you listening, 2007*

[4]Bruno, Giuliana, *Atlas of Emotions*, 2002

[5]Butt, Gavin, Editor, *After Criticism*, 2005

[6]Dyckhoff, Tom, *The Times, 2008*

[7]Forty, Adrian, *Words and buildings, 2004*

[8]Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*

[9]Kester, Grant H., *Conversation Pieces – Community and Communication in Modern Art,* 2004

[10]Krippendorf, K., *The Semantic Turn. A new foundation for design, 2006*

[11]Pallasmaa, Juhani, *The Eyes of the Skin, 2005*

[12]Perec, George, *Species of Spaces and other Pieces, 1997*

[13]Rendell, Jane, *Art and Architecture – A Place between, 2006*

[14]Sennett, Richard, *the Corrosion of Character, 1976*

[15]Scarry, Elaine, *Dreaming by the Book*, 1999

[16]Strangely Familiar – narratives of architecture in the city, 1996

[17]Zumthor, Peter, *Atmospheres, 2006*