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The Ecoanalysis workshop - rehabilitating the alienated architectural imagination

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Abstract
An awareness and design workshop for students of architecture and town planning and of landscape architecture is described. The workshop is based on the assumption that the alienation that we often experience in our encounter with the spatial presence of places is due to an alienation of the architectural imagination – the architect’s inability to base his/her design on his/her own direct, naive, pre-reflective experience of the spatial presence of places. The workshop strives to increase the participants’ awareness of this layer of their experience and to train them in letting their imagination relate to it in their design of places.

The workshop draws on humanist psychology, in assuming that when an architect becomes aware of and accepts his/her direct, naive, pre-reflective experience, his/her ability to design a place in which he/she might experience a sense of well-being and enrichment will increase. So, also will increase his/her ability to accept and identify with the existential relationships that clients experience in the spatial presence of a place and to design it accordingly. This paper describes the ecoanalysis process the participants go through in order to make them more aware. Following this awareness process, the participants were required:

a. to design their own home;
b. to design a home for one of the other participants;
c. to design a condominium that would accommodate all the participants in the workshop.

This is illustrated by the process undergone by one of the participants and the homes he designed, along with the feedback responses provided by participants in the workshop.

Keywords: design psychology, design pedagogy, design sensibility, design theory

A The Goals of the Workshop
A common, though at times hidden, assumption of the architectural world of discourse, is that in order to properly do his/her job, the architect, the interior designer or the landscape architect, must be aware of a client’s needs and wishes – whether the client is an individual, a family or a corporation, and shape his/her design accordingly. Ecoanalysis, however, assumes that the dialogue between designer and client is a somewhat more complex one:

1. It assumes that at the immediate, naive, pre-reflective level of experience, the client attempts to realize certain [I-World] existential relationships with the place of residence, work, leisure, etc. The client is not always aware of this level of experience and ecoanalysis offers a process whereby in the context of personal consultations or workshops, it becomes possible to heighten his/her awareness.

2. Ecoanalysis assumes that the alienated imagination of the architect who designs a place, is less a product of any absence of designer awareness of client needs, and more a consequence of the designer’s alienation from his/her own immediate, naive, pre-reflective encounter with the spatial presence of places. Designers are unable in these cases to design places in which they would themselves be able to experience a sense of well-being and enrichment.

3. In order to establish a fruitful and realistic dialogue with his/her client, a designer must first achieve insight regarding the existential [I-World] relationships that he/
she himself/herself wishes to realize in a place - a residence, a place of work, a place of leisure, etc.

4 Ecoanalysis provides a process that makes one aware of the immediate, naive, pre-reflective encounter with the spatial presence of places, then indicates the design implications of this level of experience.

In order to illustrate the process and its application to architectural education, this paper describes an Ecoanalysis workshop that was conducted at the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion - Israel Institute of Technology, during the Spring semester of 2000. Fourteen students participated in the workshop, 11 undergraduates and 3 graduates. Two of the students were non-architects. There were thirteen workshop meetings conducted once a week in four-hour sessions.

As part of this process of self awareness, the students were led to expose their inner personal home and design it accordingly.

The workshop is based on the assumption derived from humanist psychology whereby self-acceptance and self-awareness are a condition for the ability to maintain an open dialogue with others which is based on identification and empathy (Rogers, 1961). On the basis of this rationale, the workshop was structured as a consciousness-raising process aimed at expanding the participant’s awareness of his/her inner home and becoming exposed to the inner homes of other workshop participants. The challenge which faced the workshop participants was that of applying their newly found awareness to the design of residences both for themselves and for the other participants in the workshop.

The principles of ecoanalysis are based on humanistic psychology and phenomenological-existential philosophy (Peled, 1976, 1988a). The humanistic element is part of the definition of an architect’s goals in designing an environment that provides support for the personal growth process of its user. (Peled et al, 1988).

The phenomenological-existential element is mainly expressed in the investigation process that focuses on explicating the experience of “Being-in-a-place”. The basic assumption is that the encounter [I-Place] is a dialogue in which a person attempts to actualize existential meaning. (Peled, 1988a). Such actualization takes place in the relationship created with the entities that populate a place - humans, animals and objects, the latter also including the space and boundaries, whose design is the subject of the architect’s work.

The ecoanalytic process deals with two central issues:

a. Defining the existential [I-World] relationships which an individual, a couple, a group or a corporation attempt to enact in the place and the spatial relationships involved in this enactment.

b. Defining the relevant spatial components required to create such relationships.

The research methodology is based on a number of techniques adapted from psychotherapy, such as the Location Task, some of which are unique to ecoanalysis.

It is possible to summarize the goals of the workshop as follows:

1 Raising participant awareness of the meanings they ascribe to places, at the immediate, naive, pre-reflective emotional level of their experience.

2 Developing the skills required to maintain an empathic and fruitful dialogue about their inner home with other participants. Such a dialogue is based on an encounter with the subjective-emotional world of each individual, accepting it and recognizing its uniqueness.

3 Promoting the ability of participants to design spatial conditions that allow personal growth and actualization, both for themselves and others.

4 Becoming acquainted with the tools of ecoanalysis, particularly the Location Task, used to identify, characterize and decipher the emotional needs of people in the
context of the space and the boundaries of places.

B The Structure of the Workshop

The workshop comprises nine discrete stages:

Stage 1: Each participant examines the home he would have liked to actualize, utilizing various projective tasks, the central one being the Location Task, which allows participants to design their own homes.

Stage 2: With the help of the instructor, each participant analyzes the meanings he/she wishes to actualize in his/her home and the elements which are relevant to the creation of such relationships. Once the participant’s inner home becomes clear, he/she provides each of the workshop participants with a transcript of the analysis of his/her personal home.

Stage 3: Participants work in two smaller groups, and on the basis of the transcripts they received of each other’s homes, they now attempt to create a group picture, including such parameters as the location of each home, the patterns of meaning revealed, the kinds of places that participants desired within their home and its environment, the location of various elements in the center, periphery, etc. Once participants have analyzed these parameters, further meetings of this stage take place in the absence of the instructor.

Stage 4: Each of the participants presents a 1:50 model of the home he/she designed for herself/himself, to the rest of the group.

Stage 5: A group discussion is held with the aim of ascertaining the extent to which the home designed by each participant indeed corresponds to his/her inner home.

Stage 6: Based on the insights achieved in Stage 5, each participant makes whatever changes are necessary in the plans of his/her personal home.

Stage 7: The instructor now selects one participant to play the role of “client” and all participants are asked to design a residence for the client.

Stage 8: Each participant presents a 1:50 scale model of the “client’s” home. The group now discusses the extent to which each of the models corresponds to the “client’s” inner home.

Stage 9: Each participant designs a condominium for the group with an apartment for each of the participants, including the instructor (who provides them with a description of his/her own inner home). The group subsequently discusses the various residences suggested and takes a vote on the most appropriate condominium.

C The work of one of the participants

Ecoanalysis assumes that at the emotional, immediate, naive, pre-reflective level of experience the plan of a place is construed as that of a body. Both have a boundary/skin that differentiates between the inner region and the external environment. In both, one experiences directions of front and back, left and right, forward and backward, centre and periphery, up and down.

Figure 1

On the basis of this similarity, the Location Task was developed for the ecoanalytic process: a 50cm. by 50cm. board on which a squared circle represents the layout of both a human body and a place (Figure 2).

The Task allows the design of a desired place – a desired work environment, the home in which one wishes to live, the school building in which one wishes to study or teach. The Location Task helps experience the internal
divisions of a place and its links with the surrounding world, in a way similar to one's experience of the limbs and members of one's own body.

A thick line delineates the boundaries of the entity and differentiates between the inner region and the external environment. The entity is divided (by means of a dashed line) into six areas/directions: front, back, left, right, center periphery. Each participant is asked to make a list of the places that he or she desires in their home and its immediate environment. Each place in the list is then written on a small round sticker and located by the participant on the board, so as to create the best possible place. If several levels are desired, the desired level is written on the respective sticker: +1, +2, −1, etc. The participant is then asked to describe in writing the place he/she has created the spatial qualities of the most important places in the home and its surroundings, a place he/she lived in for a while and found spatially pleasant and his/her childhood home.

Ran, a 4th year student of architecture, generated in the Location Task the home configuration shown in Figure 3.

Analysis of Ran’s graphic and written material revealed a balance between his desire for immersion in the home – an elaborated togetherness, characterized by feelings of affiliation and responsibility that he felt towards his young family, and his desire for possibilities of disengaging and being able to be alone with himself.

When asked to provide examples of places that he would have been happy to make his home, he chose places such as the one depicted in this picture:

A small place overlooking nearby trees. The intimacy of the place, its warm coloured floor and the dense, rich vegetation provide support and immersion. The large floor-to-ceiling windows enable him to detach himself from the inside place: they enable disengagement.
Ran presented the following model of his home.

In this home, Ran creates a spatial arrangement in which a large raised central block is intended as the family and guest area, while surrounding smaller blocks are intended for children, parents and Ran himself. This arrangement provides symbolic expression of the balance that he seeks to create in his home. However, when the actual situation is examined, it becomes clear that this arrangement emphasizes the control of the system as a whole, over its constituent parts, thus intensifying the sense of affiliation and obligation to the system. When Ran became aware of the discrepancy between his inner home and the home he designed, he created an alternative layout. (See Figure 6).

The area intended for family togetherness is emphasized in this version as well - it is a large area situated at the front of the place and the configuration is centripetal, thus reinforcing the immersion potential of the system. However, at the centre of the new design we find an open garden that reduces the control of the system. Moreover, each one of the rooms in the house has its own garden. The resulting spatial balance between immersion and disengagement is thus closer to what Ran attempted to enact in his home.

D The rationale for the workshop

The workshop is designed as an explorative process directed at investigating the inner world of the participants and examining various alternatives for representing that inner world through the medium of architecture. The investigation is based on a fixed sequence of tasks and the construction of varied channels for managing the dialogue between participants.

D.1 Planning the sequence of events in the workshop

The workshop structure is based on two mutually intertwined central axes:

- **A horizontal axis** – from the inside out: The workshop starts by having each participant design his/her own home, then the home of another participant, and eventually a complex for all participants. The focus of design thus shifts from the personal context to the communal context. This sequence corresponds to the basic assumption of ecoanalysis that an architect incapable of designing a home that suits his/her own needs, will find it hard to do so for his/her clients.

- **A vertical axis** – from simplicity to complexity: Seemingly, the sequence of tasks in the course sets up a process wherein the...
participant moves gradually away from his/her own emotional world towards the worlds of the other participants, but this is not the case. In fact, at each and every stage, the participants bring their own selves to the design, as their awareness develops dialectically in their encounter with others. From this perspective, the sequence of tasks in the workshop may be seen as a single task, the complexity of which increases as the design context expands.

The combined horizontal and vertical axes, lead to a spiral sequence based on recurrence of thoughts and feelings, arising in a different context at each point in time, thus adding complexity and significance. Bruner (1960; 1986), who formulated the principles of the spiral curriculum, claims that this type of course helps establish coherent, well based and significant knowledge, which is vital for any transformational learning process.

D.2 Dialogue as a basic format of planning and action

The planning and operation of the workshop focus on the shaping of behaviour patterns intended to develop and ensure continued dialogue between participants. Dialogue is defined as an event wherein participants invite each other to give and receive conversation (Halliday, 1994). The dialogue event is characterized by true questions that are provided with true answers in the aim of creating a significant text for all parties (Searl, 1969). Dialogues may focus on any form of text that allows active involvement and self interpretation in the process of endowing the text with meaning (Bakhtin, 1986).

The central means for establishing dialogue in the workshop are based on defining goals and evaluation methods, the regulation of social interactions and the shaping of the workshop as a context for role playing.

D.3 Defining goals and evaluation methods

Once dialogue has been determined as the basic format for workshop planning and activation, all contents raised by participants during the workshop becomes a platform for activity. Another element that helps ensure the productivity of the dialogue in the workshop is the determination of means of evaluation. The instructor clarifies that the grade students will receive for the workshop will relate to their use of ecoanalysis in order to identify “client” needs and actualize them in design.

D.4 Regulating the discussion and social interactions

The workshop includes various social frameworks that direct the dialogue: general discussion in the presence of the instructor, group work in the absence of the instructor, personal conversations between participants and the instructor in the presence of other participants, and presentations and discussions guided by the participants themselves. The discussion itself is based on the principle that “…no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood” (Doll, 1993:168). The instructor guides the participants to patiently strive to reveal the maximum number of alternative textual interpretations.

D.5 Shaping of the workshop as a context for role playing

The workshop tasks are based on role-playing, wherein each participant plays the “architect” and “client” for each of the other participants. According to Mead (1934), role playing is highly important in the development of the social self and the ability to maintain social communications. The action of role-taking in role playing makes it possible for a person to see himself/herself from the outside, in a process whereby the world of another is introverted. The sequence of tasks is structured according to the principles of Mead’s theory of self-development, from the concrete and subjective (designing a house for oneself) to the generalized, abstract and universal (designing a residence for all workshop participants).

D.6 Abundance of Texts

The workshop serves as a kind of laboratory for the production of texts. According to Bruner (1986), the abundance and redundancy of texts create juxtaposing
contents that make it possible to construct a complex network of meanings. The range of interpretations and alternative uses of content materials is produced by the very abundance of texts (Doll, 1993). The Location Task is the core of the workshop around which the interpretative dialogue is developed. The participants who perform the task are invited to write a story about themselves, their childhood experiences and their private fantasies. Participants are asked to assume a “lyrical” mood, to write frankly, freed of any functional or critical thinking. As a consequence, they tend to formulate a projective narrative text, a conversational text that stimulates the reader to investigate, analyze and interpret. This text is interpreted throughout the workshop - first by the instructor, and then by other participants who interpret the text in discussions and design. In this way, the workshop creates “an expanding repertoire of alternative descriptions”, (Rorty, 1989:39) around the Location Task. Apart from the Location Task, participants are required to carry out many additional tasks in the course of the workshop, intended to create a dynamic cognitive “pushing and pulling” (Fosnot, 1996). The tasks directed at “pushing” cognition back, mainly include an analysis of the elements that comprise the Location Task and identifying the relationships between them. The tasks directed at “pulling” cognition forward, include the synthesis of ideas and their application to architectural design.

The workshop applies a systematic arrangement of feedback to every design work presented by participants. The feedback operates as a tool for eliciting cognitive disequilibrium. According to Piaget (1978), it is in this particular state that people tend to reorganize the meaning of their experiences.

E. Feedback provided by workshop participants

The purpose of the feedback pages given to each participant was to examine whether the course possesses the qualities associated with a transformational learning unit, and whether participants describe the course in terms of personal growth. In order to ensure the authenticity of the responses to the course, the feedback sheets included general and open questions. Participants were asked to provide feedback twice: first during the third meeting and a second time during the last encounter. In order to remove any fears relating to the course grades, they were assured that their names would remain confidential in the possession of the second author, herself a graduate student, and not divulged to the first author – the course leader. The analysis presented below is based on feedback provided by 12 participants who filled the two feedback pages. Two additional participants, who had completed the course, failed to fill in the second feedback page so were removed from the analysis.

The purpose of the first course feedback was to discover participant expectations at the beginning stage of the course, after they had absorbed some preliminary information about the course goals and methods.

The results are summarized in Table 1: Participants’ course expectations.

It can be seen that expectations focused on the opportunity provided participants to conduct a dialogue with themselves and develop awareness of their wishes from their own private homes. Moreover, participants expected to improve their ability to understand the emotions of others in relation to their homes and acquire a new approach and tools for design. Some of the students emphasized that the course goals express a unique and highly relevant approach. One student related to the “liberating experience”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Greater awareness of my own desires from my private home.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Greater awareness of the desires of others from their homes.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Curiosity, enjoyment.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Learning a new architectural approach, tools and method of investigation.</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 Participants’ course expectations (N=12)
involved in the opportunity of designing a home for himself. Another student referred to the importance of the course in softening her “thick skin” towards the environment. Yet another student claimed that “it’s important to reinforce the awareness of one’s personal experience of home, rather than only deal with spatial compositions for aesthetic reasons.”

The second feedback sheet, distributed in the last meeting of the course, asked participants to respond to the question: “How do you evaluate the course”.

Table 2 suggests that the course indeed attained the goals set for it (see section B). Participant responses acknowledge the relevance and vitality of the course, and the change that it created in them. “I think this course should be taken by all faculty students”; “The course is important as it develops ways of thought that other courses don’t”; “Other courses address form and space rather than the human being”; “This is the right design method when an architect meets a client”; “A good starting point to begin a project”; “The course made me think of things I had never defined and now I have a clearer picture about them”; “The course teaches you to link emotion to design and gives you a new perspective on design”, and other responses of this type. These responses indicate that the course indeed possesses the qualities of a transformative course, which may lead to new insight and to personal growth.

The balance between the contribution of the course to self-awareness and its contribution to the knowledge of others indicates a balance between the participant’s role as “client” and his/her role as “architect” supposed to study his/her client. To a great extent, this balance was attained through the role-playing applied in the workshop, which besides being effective as a consciousness-raising process, turned out to be a highly important factor in the development of a productive dialogue in a positive ambience with a precise dosage of challenge and humor.

**References**


