Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

PLACE MAKING: On the poetics of interior spaces

Maurice Amiel · Wednesday, March 23rd, 2016

Preliminary note

In the feature image I wish to show how the experience of interior spaces can be perceptually enhanced by meaningful visual access to the outside. I use the term "enhanced" precisely because it qualifies the use of windows in interior spaces beyond the well understood need for air and sunlight.

The arresting view through the window of this church social hall, particularly the way if was framed and fit with other works of the artwork on exhibition, ***was for me THE moment of pause to take "it" all in, experientially speaking, and to record its poetics in that image.***

One can explain this in terms of the mutually defining relation of "inside" and "outside"and what it involves in terms of spatial orientation, social interaction, esthetics … in terms of poetics and spirit of place.

Within the scope of this post I wish to illustrate how this relation is developped in particular situations, together with a few comments of the poetic dimensions implied.

The poetics of interior spaces lie precisely in the awareness of **certain features that may cause one to pause and take "it" all in, it being the spirit of the place … what one's awareness saw as arresting and meaningful.**

For example, I can remember to this day:

The ***quieting and mesmerizing effect of the central granit rock*** *in the multi-faith chapel at the United Nation with its* ***peripheral water trough mysteriously lit from the outside.***

or

The ***organizing power of the underground cross campus circulation axis*** *across the two city blocs of my downtown located university.*

or

The ***pulling power of a window at the end of a circulation axis, or over a central place****, often found in places of worship … and curiously kept when these buildings are assigned a*

different occupancy … such as the Grande Place made out of a hollowed out church nave, located along the above mentioned cross campus circulation axis.

or

*The **stimulating tension** between the **unifying shape of an empty space** such as an atrium, a concourse, or a circulation axis and the **material layers of walls in all fashion of shapes defining them** … **and the openings in these layers framing visual and physical access to lateral spaces.***

Some interior spaces across a variety of situations:

The case of an interior circulation space in the commercial ground level of our convention hall.

While sitting at a coffee and donut counter, that acts as the limit between corridor and shop, I enjoy the relative social, if not physical, distance to people walking across the field of vision of my camera discritely placed on the counter.

I am reminded of the evolution of these “open shops” interrupting the standard glazed wall defining the edges of the corridor and, at the opposite pole, of the means by which some occupants have obscured them to preserve the privacy of their clients, as in a walk-in clinic. Some have not done so, allowing their store room stacked boxes to lean on the glazed wall unabashedly (se image below)

Finally the tension between the bland uniform corridor curtain walled edges and timid hung signage, and the near free-for-all signage of each venue **probably resulting from agreements reached in a lawyer’s office rather than in a designer studio** where that tension could have been resolved through well conceived furnishing, lighting, information systems in and along the circulation space.

So, while seated at the counter what is the “it” that moved me to record the scene?

Trusting in the reader’s sense of humour, one word: “OUCH” *, for all the missed opportunities to turn the sterile circulation space into an inviting interior pedestrian street experience.

ouch !

The case of a hospital medical specialty waiting room

I know where the test registration is located … to the first timer it is the brightest lit corner of the room

I know where to sit and wait to be called … to the fist timer it is rather obvious that the arrangement of seats facing that counter is where to sit and wait

I know that I will be called by medical technicians coming out the corridors branching off the room … to the fist timer is required little more than putting two and two together after hearing names called by people coming out of these subtly lit corridors.

For a room with little natural light it is remarkable how the lighting modulation of the three steps of waiting for a medical test can help answer tne need for orientation.

While I sit behind this couple to be able to photograph them I am struck by the lighting scheme and by the not less important discussion going on between them.

Rarely is a space empty but that day we were only three of us and that was all we needed to wait, guided by the lights so to speak.

The spirit of the waiting room? Accompany the patient, not only with written posters but also with spatial clues, respecting the environmental intelligence of the patient and inviting his/her reading of those clues.

We were alone for a little while but never to the point of feeling neglected, ignored or abandonned…(see image below).

the waiting room

The case of a village curiosity shop

A space for rumaging is a curiosity shop whereby furnishing and merchandise take over the space in apparent but probably willfull disorder.

A place one visit as interested collector or just on a whim, open to the adventure of meeting a world of goods salvaged from the rubish bin.

This particular place is one deep large room but for a pseudo archway between two sub spaces with the cash register, and the owner, strategically located near it. The place is so crowded as to put most visitors in near intimate proximity when crossing path, but mostly in same such proximity with the objects creating a time saturated place that is the essence of is experience.

As people and objects come together, squeezed under a low ceiling and the subtle play of light on the various display cases, some fully transparent and other of the traditional wood frame with glazed doors, I became aware of another “interior” of sort: the one we enter everytime we open a drawer, or a cupboard door, or reach for a glass or a knick knack on a shelf … something like our “body space” reaching to “take in” something from another, be it drawer or closet.

Could this be the essence of the experience of this place … of its poetics: a russian-puppet like spatial sequence going from room to cupboard to drawer, and vice versa?

(see image below)

The curio shop

The case of an urban coffee shop

We enter this coffee shop at the corner of a city bloc and the owner is at the cash register,

at the well lit front of the shop.

The place is empty and we sit at a table near the front and engage in discussion about the age of the place, its vintage neon sign outside and the painting on the rear wall showing a tramway that used to run on the street in front of the shop.

There is only one other window at the very rear, right under the wall hung tv set and shedding some light on the painting.

Not quite a movie set out of the fifties but almost, as I frame that view of the rear with the capped head of the helper, bent over her mop, sneaking behind the main post holding the floor above.

These visual and social elements in place, one can appreciate the indirect lighting of the long blind wall with its exhibition of historical photographs, the long air conditioning duct exposed below the ceiling, the parallel service counter to the left … and the lone table behind the post.

Not quite a Hopper scene … I would even venture to say its symetrical opposite, given the absence of the wrap around windows typical of a N.Y. street corner coffee shop as the nearest visual counterpoint reference to “get” at the spirit of this lonesome place.

The coffee shop

Discussion

Given that most of our daily activity is done indoor, interior spaces appreciation is usually directed to their instrumental value: do they help support our activities?

As true as this can be, it is just as true that there is no perception of interior space, particularly of mood setting details, proportions and organization, without light and its modulation: natural and artificial.

These ambiance setting elements, as we have seen applied to our small sample of places, bear of course on our emotional response to places, as conditionned by what we have termed their character giving spatial poetics.

Particular to this is the treatment of opennings in the outer limit of any place as shown in our feature image, and as I wish to show in my last image.

I have often mentioned the orientation helping role of a window, allowing one to retrieve a sense of where one is in relation to the outside world after entering a building, walking its corridors or climbing it many floors.

However different these views may be in terms of scale and nature, they do bring a touch of comforting familiarity in the case of the feature image, and a moment of comforting reorientation to the patient arriving for or leaving a medical consultation or treatment.

Comfort can be physical of course, and from a seat shape and dimensions to the space needed to accommodate a person on wheelchair, etc. and we are grateful when this

comfort is provided.

We may be less articulate with situations of emotional comfort that do make for much of our sense of enjoyment of interior spaces … specially at their limits with the exterior world, as in this astonishing view from an elevator landing on the ninth floor of a hospital building.

The view at the landing

Credit all images Maurice Amiel

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