

Mental Narratives in Architecture

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Abstract— G.K.Chesterton¹, an illustrated English fiction writer, once quoted- “There are no rules of architecture for a castle in the clouds”. (The Everlasting Man, 1925) Fiction is a narrative that follows a certain structure, but, is underpinned with imagination and curiosity. It helps to produce narratives that are inspired by, or imposed upon, buildings and the built environment which may or may not exist. These buildings are an amalgamation of various spaces, each of these spaces are a product of the architects imagination and produce mental images that constitute to form a mental narrative. These mental narratives are subjective and shaped out of the relation, an individual forms with a space or a building. Every space is interpreted by the user in a different way; therefore it is important for an architect to inculcate spatial organization in a way such that mental narratives are user-defined. These mental narratives can be formed by reading a fictional narrative or even visualizing architectural drawings. Examples for the same can be the architecture fictions of Bruce Sterling which create mental narratives of an alternate and technological future. Considering Arch gram as a historic reference and Hypothetical Developmental Organization as a contemporary reference, rendered drawings and schematic drawings were made which point towards the alternate futures of a building or society. These works of architecture fiction develop mental narratives that are not in a single well defined direction. But these mental narratives are full with imagination with ever changing spaces and events. Architecture recently has become clearly based on form and function, the emotional and personal connection has created a void in this field. The mental narratives chip off the gap created between the functional and emotional aspects of architecture as it creates a relation between a building and its users.

Key words: Architecture, Emotions, Fiction, Functional, Narrative

I. INTRODUCTION

Quoting Dr. Walter Fischer, “We experience life as a series of ongoing narratives, as conflicts, characters, beginnings, middles and ends.” Narrative is a form of storytelling, an art of weaving characters in particular settings subjective to different events that in the end develops into narrative. Each Work of art articulates a story that is of cultural significance and adds to the knowledge repository of future generations. Narratives have been around since monolithic ages in various forms of expressions like paintings, literature, music and architecture. Architecture is a representation of our lives. The building and the built-up environment is the context of our narrative as humans. Terry Tempest Williams once said that, “Storytelling is the oldest form of education” and nearly 3 million years ago, during the Stone Age, prehistoric structures like cave dwellings had used representations of pictorial art to depict the story of their inventions and advancements to help the upcoming generations grow on that.

Following that, in the Cave Temples of India or the Egyptian pyramids, importance had been given to the narrative content of the monuments either through construction techniques or sculptural adornments making these monuments repositories of cultural stories and knowledge. Physical arrangement of spaces in these monuments, through principles of geometry resulted in meaningful designs that also become expression of narratives.

Space in architecture is seen sequentially as images or frames. Man, as a social animal, establishes spatial relationships with the characters or objects placed in these images and try to mark his presence stating that he exists and operates in this space. Mental narratives is one of the methods that can be employed which attaches significance to the built up environment for its user that formulates meaning and order in a space. These mental narratives are stimulated by the imagination of both the creator or architect or narrator and the user or the listener and create a unique mental space that is subjective to everyone and has its own realities and fiction. Taking Frank Gehry’s example of The Dancing House, Prague, Czech Republic (Fig. 1), it is an illustration of a narration packed with imagination where the user or the viewer meditates between the fictional curves of the curved glass tower and the static part of the house.

As the famous adage by George Bernard Shaw goes, “Imagination is the beginning of the creation.” it indeed acts as an underpinning for both the narratives and architecture as well. Earlier in time, before the famous Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, took the center stage, people were so empowered by the idea of imagination that they had self-developed places like “theaters” also known as amphitheaters in the Greek and Roman Empires, where they used to gather to practice the art of imagination and enact plays, comedies and tragedies in their own untraditional way. Since then, imagination is the keystone for all art forms especially architecture, where the architects of every era of the timeline used imagination and their cultural know how to narrate a story and encrypt it in the minds of the young people through their buildings or schematic drawings and sketches. Architects by selecting and combining materials, playing with light and shadow, acoustics and sound, emboss their messages in the structures so that we may see, hear and feel the patterns of design and create mental narratives individually.



Fig. 1: The Dancing House, Prague, Czech Republic

The problem arises when the architects are desensitized towards the humanistic approach of design, taking a toll on the mental narratives that are formed by the users of the space. This results in functional and form oriented buildings devoid of emotional and romantic bonds, separating art and imagination from architecture. The claim of the paper is that “The transition from “functional architecture” to “emotional architecture” can occur by bringing forth mental narratives, which can be produced in the form of writings or schematic drawings, and are consequences of the imagination of an architect and details, but are user-defined and create a subjective relationship between a user and a building.”

II. NARRATIVES

A. Defining Narratives

Owen Flanagan of Duke University writes, “Evidence strongly suggests that humans on all cultures come to cast their own identity in some sort of narrative form. We are inveterate storytellers”. A story or a narrative is an integral part of a culture and humanity; it creates incentives for holistic development of the society. It can be understood through various forms of expression like music, paintings, literature, entertainment and architecture.

Fiction and Non-Fiction are the two major types of narratives. A fictional narrative deals with telling a story that is a product of an author’s imagination and is not based on facts and truth. Fictitious and unreal characters are used to narrate the tale. A non-fictional narrative deals with the facts and truth about life. Real people and real events advocate the narrative. It is an informative form of a narrative as it informs people of the truth and ensures them of the reality.

The difference between fiction and non-fiction narratives can be explicated in different genres of art. Music is stated as an effective way to narrate the truth and reality of life. Music and narrative share common aspects. The structure of a narrative is often similar to the structure of a musical composition. A musical composition has events like a narrative that tell a story whether fictional or non-fictional.

Narratives in form of paintings existed much before the Ancient Egyptians. Mona Lisa by Leonardo Da Vinci is an example of non-fictional narrative. The lady in the painting is not fictitious, and this painting looks like an autobiography of a person, though her half smile is very ambiguous. Storytelling was traditionally done in a more literal way, where thoughts and imagination were put to words. Narratives in literature voice their opinions in the form of writings which can be fictional and non-fictional both. Some major types of expression in literature are the novels, autobiographies, poems and enactments.

B. Architecture as a Narrative

Architecture even in its tiniest form has a story to tell. Every building speaks for itself, so it will narrate its story of coming into existence. These narratives can be represented in various forms like writings, schematic drawings or renderings. Now, a work of architecture can have a non-fictional narrative which is based on the functionality and the physical context of the building. These are true to its function and have a didactic approach. Daniel Libeskind’s design of a Jewish Museum (Fig. 2) by using a pentacle in the form of the

building has created literary effect to the concept of the building thus classifying it into non-fiction.



Fig. 1 : Jewish Museum, Berlin

Take for example The Lighthouse in Mount Macedon, Victoria (Fig 3) which is a perfect example of fictional architecture. The illustrations show that The Lighthouse is a residential space and looks like a lighthouse situated on a hill, which stands like an island resting on the sea. People are forced to contemplate the function and future of the building as the mental narratives formed are not clear and straightforward, but are misleading for the viewer.



Fig. 2 : The Lighthouse, Mount Macedon, Victoria

III. ANALOGY BETWEEN ELEMENTS OF NARRATIVES & ARCHITECTURE

A. Characters

In a narrative, characters play a pivotal role in the development of a plot. They are often fictitious and form signifying structures that motivate the communication in a narrative. Philip Margolin, an author of legal thrillers, has conceptualized “characters as a general semiotic element, independent of any particular verbal expression and ontologically different from it,” (1983) a character can be expressed in a variety of forms such as factual, counterfactual, hypothetical or subjective. They are placed in an event in the narration and give life and adapt to the environment of the event. Now, buildings created in a built-up environment act as characters of the narratives in architecture. The buildings are conceptualized and created out of sheer imagination of the author just like a character evolves. A building is formulated in many forms that is, it has many types to it. For example, a building can be as primary as residential buildings, commercial buildings and public

buildings and as secondary as entertainment buildings and utility buildings. Thus the buildings in the built-up environment are the pedestal for a mental narrative.

B. Setting

A setting in a narrative can be defined as a detailed environment in which the events take place. The setting of a plot will always require detailing as without them one cannot tell a story with conviction. The imagination of the author needs to be transformed into reality for the readers which can be acquired only by adding complete details. An example for setting in a narrative can be Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, here the setting for Buck's adventures changes frequently, moving from a civilized environment to a wild and dangerous environment. These changes of setting are crucial to Buck's development as a character and to the events in the tale. Similarly in architectural narratives, a setting can be the details that are added to the space which aid in the construction of effective mental narratives. These details can create mental narratives that are user defined and segregated for a typical space.

C. Event

In narrative events are the constituents of a story. The changes in these events take the narrative ahead. According to Rimmon-Kenen, an event occurs whenever there is a transition from one state of a narrative to another. These events will constitute into a plot and are most often happen due to an alteration in the lives of characters. These changes in the life and personalities of the character can be trivial, like, a person is sitting inside a room is one state, he goes to fetch a glass of water through the door is another state, thus, an event is created. Also this change can be an important one, like, she crossed the road is one state, a car hits her is another state; this is another type of event. The issue is that events are incidental in the formation of a narrative. Now, likewise in architecture imagination is incidental in developing successful mental narratives. Imagination creates spaces in architecture which can be primary, secondary and tertiary. These spaces act as events in architecture, because, of the transition between them, which addresses the mental narratives. Imagination for an architect is like food for the soul. For example, in the Fig.4 below, the space is a hall and has waiting at the top and a reception at the bottom. This space imagined by an architect is an event in which activities like waiting, circulation, interaction etc. are carried out by the user. Whereas, in Fig. 5 there is an addition details like green spaces and a space for an elevator, existing in correlation with the already existing spaces. Thus, the inclusion of these spatial details alters the course of mental narratives of the user from dull and mundane to directional and romantic for the user's mind. These modifications are born out of the architect's imagination and create an indispensable relationship between the space and the user.

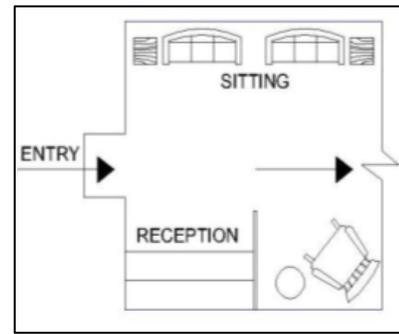


Fig. 4: Space before Adding Setting to the Character of the Space

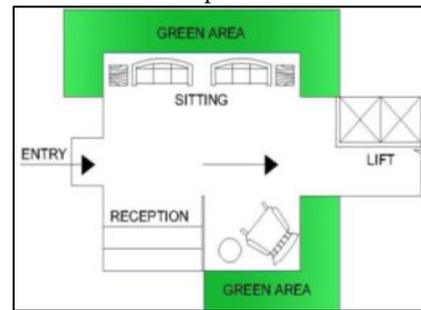


Fig. 5: Same Space after Necessary Alterations

IV. MENTAL NARRATIVES IN ARCHITECTURE

A. Understanding the Concept of Mental Narratives

A mental narrative is formed whenever we read a story, the characters the events and the setting of the events creates mental images in the mind of the reader. These images are a product of the mental simulations that take place because of the setting of events in a space and portrayal of characters in the same. This space created in a narrative is not constant and changes with the change of event. The boundaries of it may not be clearly defined but they do fade away as the plot alters. These spaces created for the setting of the event are blown out of the imagination of the author and detailed so much so that the reader can feel the authenticity of the space. Say for example, this is an excerpt from the book *The Old Folks At Home: Warehouse them or Leave them on the Ice Floe* by Barry Friedman (August 2010):-“The elevator finally came. The apartments she showed us were vacant and undergoing renovation. I assumed the previous occupants were EN route to their Maker. You don't leave one these places upright. You have too much invested in it. We stepped around paint cans and rolls of carpeting as we toured through the rooms. The freshly painted walls were tastefully decorated with pull cords attached to small red alarms. Betty explained. “If a person falls, he or she just has to pull the cord and someone will come to help.” Provided they were conscious and could crawl to the wall.” This excerpt from the book clearly indicates the mental narratives that a reader can formulate by reading it. The image formed is of an apartment that has just been renovated and the character in the excerpt is new to the surroundings and trying to grasp and form a mental narrative herself/himself.

B. How does Architecture Create Mental Narratives?

Juhani Pallasmaa once quoted, “There is no space unrelated to the unconscious image of the perceiving self. Our bodies

and movements are in constant interaction with the environment". Architecture is about creating spaces as huge as an airport or as small as a single room. These spaces are designed for the users and for the daily activities. They define the functionality and context of the built-up environment not only physically but emotionally as well. The space in architecture encompasses the human body; therefore it should be in correlation with all the senses of a human body. This gives character to the space as well as to the building. The spaces in a building will outline mental narratives and influence the design memory. The job of an architect is to create spaces that help create effective mental narratives, leaving doors for imagination as well. A space is not just the area between two walls or an area that is accessed by a door. On the contrary, a space is an area which relates with human body and also depends on the memory of a person. For example, staying in a house for a long time creates mental narratives that have become permanent in the human memory, if standing in the kitchen; one can clearly make out that what lies behind the wall of the kitchen. Therefore, standing in a single place the entire mental map of the house can be formed in the mind, these are known as mental narratives. This is because the user of the space has a permanent impression of the plan of the spaces in his or her memory. Whereas, a small child will take time to develop these narratives as his temporal experience and his emotional connect with the spaces can help him create these mental maps.

C. Organization of Spaces for Comprehensible Mental Narratives

The spaces need to be planned in a way such that they don't affect the design memory, that is, there is no loss of design memory. The organization of spaces is very important as the occupants after seeing the images of a building register them in their memory hence affecting their mental narratives of a built-up environment. Therefore it is very important for an architect to plan that what areas will the user see and visualize first as it will affect the stimuli of a person. For example, considering the theories of Professor Gabriel Radvansky, he has said that more number of thresholds effect the mental map or memory of the user. He has said if a user goes to fetch a thing from one corner of the house to another corner, he or she tends to forget the errand when he reaches that space. This is because mental narratives are punctured every time he/she crosses a threshold and the events that were in the foreground take a back seat and a new event in the new space comes in the foreground. But this does not mean that thresholds should not be provided in a plan, rather in places like offices or public buildings open plans should be designed so that the frequency of the movements is optimum, maintaining the mental maps in architecture. Besides that segregation of spaces can be done, so that a typical types of spaces are attributed to specific uses, this allows the user to have better access to his or her mental narratives. Also an architect can direct the mental narrative of the users or occupants of the building.

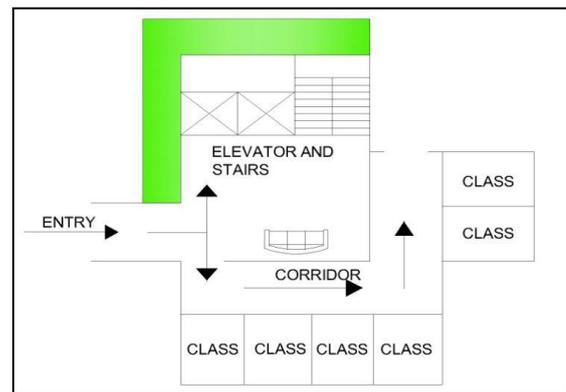


Fig. 6: Example of a Space Showing How Design Can Control Mental Narratives

Fig. 6 explains that how design of spaces can guide mental narratives. A person who enters the building is given two options, either, take the stairs or an elevator to vertically circulate or take the corridor on the right to reach the classes or maybe even exit. These spaces create simple and direct mental narratives that are organized and will not lead to memory loss.

D. User-Defined Mental Narratives

Every building will create different mental narratives. Each building has a user defined mental narratives. Each building has a set of visitors that visit the building on daily basis. Mental narratives for people like these are defined and are emotionally close to the spaces. They will not have a change in narrative whenever they enter the building. But for people who come quite often to visit the building may have different mental narratives and thus can relate less with the space and the events happening around these spaces.

V. MENTAL NARRATIVES IN FORM OF WRITINGS AND SCHEMATIC DRAWINGS

Bruce Sterling², an architecture fiction author, has written fiction novels considering architecture as a background. Some of them are *The Grow Thing*, *White Fungus* etc. He has the credit of founding the term architecture fiction by reading the fiction written by J.G. Ballard, *The Handful of Dust*. His fictions are based on futuristic architecture and create mental narratives for the reader. A mental simulation about a future where technology in architecture is at its level best is formed. Every event in his narrative fiction is defined by imagination and takes the reader into a world of mental and imaginary narratives. In his architecture fiction, *The Grow Thing*, the innocence of the relation between father and daughter is draped with complexity of new architectural horizons.

Mental narratives can be formulated by visualizations as well. *Archigram*, a magazine founded by Peter Cook and his four colleagues developed rendered and schematic drawings of future cities. Their drawings also created mental narratives that are purely an outcome of imagination. One example from the works of *Archigram*, is the *Walking City* or the *Moving City* (Fig. 8). This city was the idea of architect Ron Herron, in this he created massive spaceship like structures that used to move around and settle down wherever there was a lack of resources.

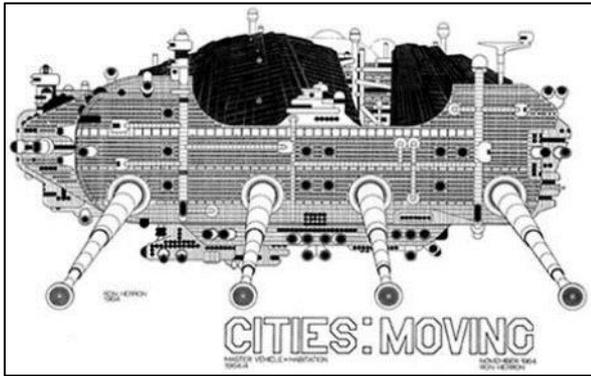


Fig. 3 : Archigram- The Walking City

These drawings created bundles of mental narratives overflowing with imagination, and helping us contemplate a future that alternates the green movement and is very cool.

Now, taking a contemporary reference of Hypothetical Developmental Organization, started by Rob Walker, G.K.Darby and Ellen Susan in 2010, they created an urban form of creating mental narratives. This organization developed alternate fictional future solutions for vacant and dead buildings on 3x5 foot poster, thus radically changing the mental narrative of the respective building. An example for the same can be the Loitering Centre (Fig. 9) they created for a vacant building in New Orleans where people could come and loiter as much as they feel. It is a very interesting concept of mental narrative as it challenges the authenticity of situations to an infinite level. But still it creates an image of a centre where people could throw litter anywhere they want to. When this rendered drawing is placed on a vacant building it changes the whole space and thus the mental narrative, from a dead space to a space springing with possibilities.

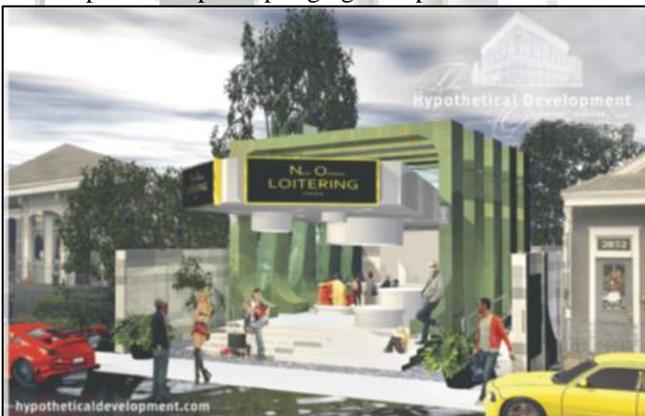


Fig. 9: Fictional Representation of the Loitering Center, New Orleans

VI. CONCLUSION

The transition from functional architecture to emotional architecture is dependent on creating effective mental narratives that define a space and the events happening in that space accordingly. In lieu of the argument, the relation between architecture and narratives becomes very clear. The principal elements of narrative are correlated with the major characters of architecture. Imagination is what sets fiction apart from non-fiction and also develops a space in architecture that plays with mental narratives. Proper organization of spaces that are personal and in an emotional

relation with human beings creates subjective mental narratives. The difference cited between fiction and non-fiction narratives develops the fact that fiction which is underpinned by imagination clearly plays a pivotal role in architectural narratives or even mental narratives. Thus the gap between functional and emotional aspects can be bridged by creating mental narratives that are subjective to users or occupants of a building.

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