

A Sense of Space

Describing an Experience with Architecture

This exercise is a perfect introduction to Fallingwater, or to any architectural discussion. It focuses attention on sensory experience and helps students observe and document their observations. It is a quiet, contemplative activity; it is also a powerful and memorable exercise. Note: it is important to explain all of the assignment before starting.

Materials:

- Something to write or draw on that also has a hard surface; a sketchbook or journal is perfect
- Something to write or draw with
- The assignment sheet (optional)

Time:

30 minutes, discussion time later

Where:

It is best to do this exercise before your Fallingwater visit. Choose a building that you can enter, preferably one with a dramatic space – a beautiful auditorium or lobby, etc. While it is interesting for the students to describe their experience in their own school, it is sometimes easier for them to focus on the experience of a building by using one that is less familiar to them.

Explain to the students that they will be soon taking a silent walk to the building you have chosen. Tell them to pay attention to what their senses tell them as they walk: try to focus on what you see, hear, smell, feel, even taste! Tell them to forget anything they may already know about the building and to focus instead on only what their senses tell them.

When they arrive at the building, have them spend a few minutes to explore it, and then find a place that they like, and

remain there for 20 minutes. (If you're lucky enough to have an entire building to use, have them find spaces where others can't see them). As they stay in their place, have them write down what their senses tell them. That is all, only what their senses tell them. They should describe the experience of being in that place.

Gather the students again and have them share their experiences. If they were hidden from one another, have the other students guess where they were. Reinforce writings that describe experiences.

An excerpt from [The Experience of Place](#) is a good example of this exercise:

I came out of the...subway...and immediately found myself part of a stream of people, 4 and 5 abreast, all of them looking straight ahead and moving at a fast New York clip toward the concourse along the right-hand side of a tunnel only twice the width of the stream itself. Toward me along the left-hand side of the corridor – which is well lighted, has a low white ceiling and a beige marble floor, and is lined with convenience stores – came a second stream of people, just as wide, and moving at the same speed and with the same look. Though I could hear my own footsteps, nearby footfalls and normal tones of voice registered as loud but blurred, indeterminate noises, and although no one was touching me, or even brushing past, I kept feeling that I was about to be bumped into. People sounded closer than they looked, and they seemed closer still, because my eyes and ears couldn't determine whether the people I was looking at were the people making the sounds I could hear.

I felt hurried along. My breathing was shallow and slightly constricted; my neck and shoulders were tight. I could smell cookies and pizza baking in the shops around me, but it seemed difficult to look to either side...

Activity Sheet

A Sense of Space

Find a space in this building that you like. Remain here for at least 20 minutes. Pay attention to what your senses tell you about this space: what do you see, hear, feel, smell, and perhaps taste? Describe what your senses tell you about this space. Write down your description of this experience here.