

## Exploration 20

### A Sense of Space: Describing an Experience with Architecture

This exercise is a perfect introduction to the State Theater, Fallingwater, a building in Brownsville or on the National Road, 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

#### *Objective:*

After reflecting on the sensory experience of a space, students will describe the experience of the place, and will compare it and its functions to analogous spaces where they live.

#### *Standards:*

- Arts: NA-VA 3, 4, 6
- English: NL-ENG 6, 7, 12
- Mathematics: NM-PROB.CONN 3
- Science: NS 2, 3, 4, 6, 7
- Social Studies: NSS-G 5

#### *Procedures:*

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, and 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. I could see maybe twelve feet ahead of me - a view consisting entirely of backs of heads and oncoming faces.*

### **How Does This Space Make You Feel? Analyzing Architectural Space**

This second step is critical to move students' understanding from what they have experienced to how that experience was shaped. It is sometimes easier for the students to understand this assignment by first practicing it as a group. Have the students think of their favorite

place in which to read. Have them think of 5 characteristics of that place and name them. Eliminate all that are not architectural. (Furniture, or objects in the space do not qualify; color, texture, lighting do. For example, if students think the space makes them feel cozy because of the rugs and soft sofas in it, they are focusing on objects rather than the space. A better response is that the room is small, with warm deep colors and low light). Identify those that are architectural.

*Materials:*

- Something to write on
- Something to write or draw with
- The activity sheet

Distribute the activity sheet and make sure that students understand the terms. Students must identify **elements of the architectural space** for their responses. Then, have the students return to their individual spaces and write down their responses.

Discuss their answers in a group, and help them understand how their responses describe basic design elements that architects employ to shape spaces. Some elements are listed here, with suggested State Theater spaces in italics.

**Function:**

What is the building/space supposed to do?  
*Stage, auditorium, entry, lobby*

**Size:**

For how many people?  
*Dressing room, auditorium*

**Form:**

What is its shape? Why?  
*Balcony, entry, ticket booth*

**Scale:**

How do people fit into this space?  
*Ticket booth, auditorium, dressing room, lobby*

**Structure:**

How is it built?  
*Marquee; stage; balcony*

**Materials:**

What is it made of?  
*Anywhere*

**Textures:**

What do the materials feel like?  
*Anywhere*

**Colors:**

What do the colors look like—warm, shiny, etc.  
*Anywhere*

**Light:**

How bright? Where is it? Is it direct or indirect?

*Lobby, flying balcony, stage;  
auditorium*

Can you see beyond this space?  
*Balcony, entry, lobby*

**Circulation:**

How do you move through this space?

*Balcony, lobby, auditorium*

**Sound:**

What can you hear? Is it loud or soft?

*Bathroom, stage, auditorium,  
balcony*

**Plan:**

Is it open, or are spaces separate from one another?

*Stage, dressing room*

**Climate, temperature:**

How cold, hot, dry, damp is it?

*Entry, lobby, auditorium, stage,  
balcony, dressing room*

**Vista:**

**Making Connections**

Before your visit, have students contemplate an assigned room where they live (living room, bedroom, study, dining room). As you tour the building that you choose, have students compare and contrast between spaces with similar functions (where one is meant to eat, sleep, relax, cook, etc.)

Ask: What is someone meant to do in each space and how does it compare to the same functions where you live. What is the same and different? Are there clear boundaries for each space? How do you know when you are inside or outside of each space? When you are entering or leaving? How does the building give you clues as to what to do in each space? How to travel through it? Are doors and walls necessary to indicate special enclosure? Can changes in the floors, ceilings, and other materials, indicate this, too? How? Where do you see this at Fallingwater?

An interesting variation on this is to pick a space in nature (an open field, an arbor of trees, in high grasses, along a stream) and conduct the same exercise. Ask students to find and occupy a space in nature. Ask them to stand in it, and outside of it, describing the differences in experience and what indicates the boundary between the spaces. Ask them to experience the space while standing, sitting, reclining, etc., using all of their senses to "observe." This will heighten students' sensory awareness, and help them make connections between the building and its setting. You may use the meadow area at Fallingwater, any of the trails at Bear Run Nature Reserve, Ohio State Park,

open areas at Ft. Necessity, the park next to the State Theater, either before or after your visit.