

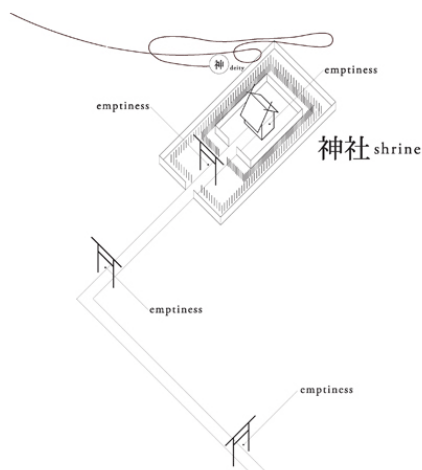
# spatial silence

## Introduction

Looking at what books inspire me greatly, I recognized a common thread of *emptiness* or *silence*.

In his book *White*<sup>1</sup>, Kenya Hara attempts to explain a particular notion of *emptiness* that is strongly embedded in Japanese culture. He understands *whiteness* as a characteristic that can be recognized in everything from architecture and design to language and paper. Hara describes the typical Shinto shrine of which the basic principle is to embrace emptiness. Because the shrine is empty, it creates limitless potential and allows the possibility that something may enter it, like a deity or people's thoughts and wishes. It is an inherently receptive space to be occupied spiritually.

In *Silencios Eloquentes (Eloquent Silences)* Carlos Martí describes Jorge Oteiza's sculptures as explorations into creating a void. Oteiza tried to create an *active vacuum* through the emptying of space, seeking "(...) for the statue an empty solitude, an open spatial silence, that man can occupy spiritually."<sup>2</sup> "The construction of the void is, in Oteiza, an action aimed at dissolving everything that tends to occupy the interior of the work (...) thus guaranteeing its condition of an available (...) place."<sup>3</sup> This active vacuum is therefore similar to a white space in that it is inherently receptive to anything man projects onto it.



*Shinto shrine* - Kenya Hara  
(Hara, 2010a)



*Caja Vacia* - Jorge Oteiza  
Caja Vacia. (n.d.)

<sup>1</sup> (Hara, 2010b)

<sup>2</sup> (Martí, 1999, p. 57)

<sup>3</sup> (Martí, 1999, p. 61)

I'm very fond of the term *spatial silence*. It is both literal and figurative. Literal in that it talks of space, to which we can attribute dimensions and other physical properties. Silence on the other hand is a much more elusive figure. Like emptiness, silence can only be circumscribed. As soon as we give it a color, dimension, name, as soon as we attribute anything to emptiness, it has started accumulating being and is no longer empty.

This elusive emptiness or silence to me seems like an elemental force that is also present in architecture. Personally, I feel like I lack knowledge of a lot of elemental aspects of architecture. In order to be able to position myself as an independent professional, I need to better understand these elemental forces and be able to operate with them.

On our trip to Belgrade I found the city to be incredibly dense with information. A hundred little advertisements in a single kiosk, three layers of graffiti on a single wall or five adjacent structures from five different time periods fighting for attention. Because of this incredible noise, the places in the city that struck me the most were places of great silence. In these places the pressure to keep up with the city's rhythm left me and my shoulders lowered.

I do not think that noise is a bad thing. It is indicative of the multiplicity of any city and to negate it would be to negate the city itself. However, I do think that there is an argument to be made for creating moments of silence in a city. With my project, I want to make that argument.

In order to make this argument I want to ask the following research questions:

1. What is silence?
2. How does one make silence spatial?

By answering these questions I hope to gain operative knowledge that can help me develop a graduation project that revolves around the subject of silence. The leading question of the project will be:

3. How can one create spatial silence in the city of Belgrade?

In essence, my questions concern the heuristics of *form* and our *perception* of the built environment.

## Theory

In order to figure out how silence can be created in architecture I need to first establish what silence means. To do this I have delved deeper into theories about the concept. The aforementioned works of Jorge Oteiza and Kenya Hara have played key roles in my theorizing of *silence* and *emptiness* and in finding terms that can become operational.

*Silence* - To be very clear, I do not mean to investigate auditory silence. It may play a role in my project, but is not the focus. I am mostly interested in a *spatial* silence, as described by Jorge Oteiza. It is similar to Kenya Hara's *white* in that Oteiza's silence is a hollow that allows man to occupy it spiritually.<sup>4</sup> But unlike white, which is a sensibility, Oteiza's silence is more tied down in the realm of physical artifice. The silence is a void which exists between physical boundaries. And if we look at the larger sculptural works of Oteiza, one cannot only inhabit the space spiritually but also physically. The fact that Oteiza's notion of silence can be manifested and inhabited physically makes it a good reference for architectural operations.

*Emptiness* - Kenya Hara is a leading figure in the world of design. In this role he has extensively studied Japanese characteristics of design and communication and recognized a sensibility that he calls *white*, about which he wrote two books. As explained in the introduction, *white* is a notion of *emptiness*. It is an emptiness that is charged with potential to become, and is therefore inherently receptive to being occupied spiritually.

In *100 Whites*, Hara shares his thoughts on 100 objects and ideas that to him carry some whiteness. He does this through 100 two-page essays. In essay 91, *emptiness*, Hara says that "*Plainness and brevity in design allows people to invest their feelings far more freely than elaborate, delicate carvings and ornamentation.*", adding that "*Silence stirs up the imagination far better than aesthetic prolixity. A hollow holds the possibility of being filled.*"<sup>5</sup> Here Hara's notion of emptiness starts to land in the realm of physical substance. The terms by which Hara describes emptiness; *plainness*, *brevity*, *hollow*, can quite easily be translated to formal aspects of architecture and as such can be used to design with.

I have tried to visualize my relationship with these and similar terms in figure 1. *Silence*, *emptiness*, *white*, all these terms are very elusive. The more I try to hone in on what they mean, the less I seem to understand them. Conversely, the more I zoom out, the clearer my point of argument becomes and the stronger my sensitivity to the silence I am looking for.

<sup>4</sup> (Martí, 1999, p. 57)

<sup>5</sup> (Hara, 2019, p. 185)

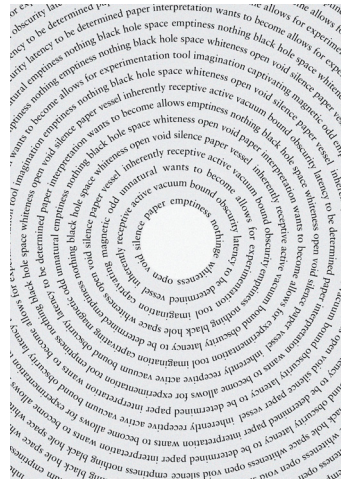
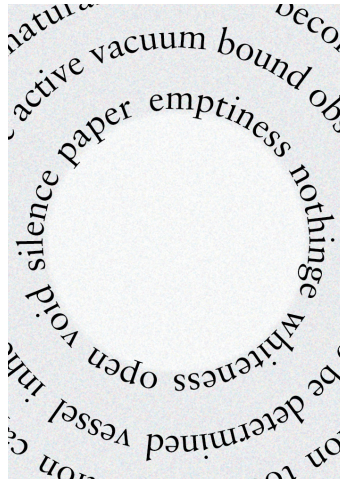
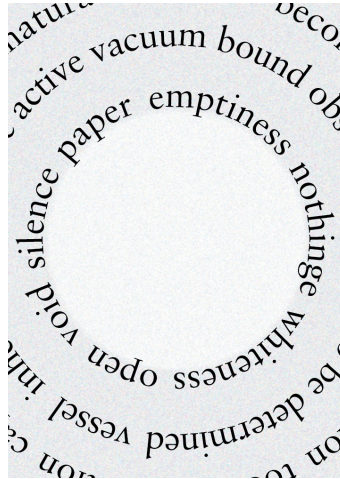
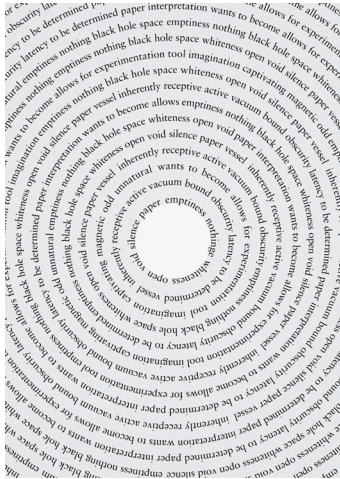


figure 1 image by author

## Analysis

*Moat* - In the group analysis leading up to P1 my colleagues and I studied the moat of Belgrade's Kalemegdan fortress. We found the moat very captivating and tried to establish why this was the case. Through a variety of methods ranging from physical modeling to speculative projections to technical drawings we found that the moat was captivating because of its distinct form, its surprising use and its curious experience. We then made a manual that can help architects to either recognize or design places that are captivating. There are some aspects of the moat's distinct form that are relevant for my future project.

We found that part of the reason this moat was so captivating to us was because of the vast scale of some parts. This, in combination with its rather impressive boundaries (massive brick walls) led us to formulate a captivating space as having, among other things, a scale that is multiple times the size of a person and having walls that are quite homogenous in material. The space that exists between these massive opaque walls is one we continued to call a *void*, although we never actually managed to define that particular term. I think that these voids are charged spaces not unlike those Oteiza tried to create in his sculptures. By our being able to define what formal aspects of the moat made it captivating I think we already skirted on what gives the moat some degree of spatial silence.

*Hall 1* - With Bram van de Water I am going to study Hall 1 of the Belgrade Fair complex. Apart from the obvious feat of engineering that it is, there is great relevance for studying this architecture in relation to my spatial silence. The hall is essentially one massive empty space surrounded by some auxiliary structures. We do not yet know where our investigations will lead us but there are obvious formal parallels to my work on emptiness. I think that from the investigation I will be able to draw an understanding of the technical challenges of creating a vast roof span, which may very well become part of my design. I expect that studying Hall 1 will further my understanding of the formal aspects of spatial silence.

Studying Hall 1 could also provide me with some insights into the perception of a void. As my research questions imply emphasis on formal and perceptual aspects of the built environment, parallel to form I should study perception. How to study this in Hall 1 I am not yet sure of.





Kalemegdan moat (Panti, 2021)



Belgrade fair Hall 1 (Beogradski Sajam DAA, n.d.)

*Spatial silence* - In addition to the studies of the moat and Hall 1 I want to study the places in Belgrade that gave me a sense of tranquil solitude, to which I alluded in the introduction. Absolute silence does not exist. We only experience silence in a context, in relation to noise. By studying the places in Belgrade that I experienced as silent, I should be able to understand what silence can be within Belgrade's noise.

To study these places I want to compare photographs of places that I found to be silent to photographs of places that I found overwhelmingly noisy. The silent places in question were the north side of the Kalemegdan fortress (figure 2.1) and a passageway at the Children's Cultural Center (figure 2.2). The noisy places were the Design District (figure 2.3) and the crossroads of Brankova and Pop-Lukina (figure 2.4).

Preliminarily I would argue that silence is to a great degree about homogeneity of structure. This is in line with the arguments described in Hara's essay on emptiness. The crossroads and the Design District are visually very diverse in their shapes and dimensions. Especially the crossroads bombards us with different structures; the shapes of buildings and different infrastructures, superimposed by graffiti, air conditioners and vast advertisements of equally varying shapes and sizes. The Children's Cultural Center passageway shows a few different structures too, but by far not as many as the crossroads. Again, silence is only experienced in contrast to noise.

I would also argue that silence can benefit from a view of the great expanse of the world, as was the case at Kalemegdan. An infinite landscape and an infinite sky silence us, it overwhelms us greatly and renders any internal noise insignificant. But even in this vast expanse, we could give ourselves a place by occupying a single concrete slab at the top of the hill. I think that inhabiting this minute detail in the landscape exaggerated our own insignificance in the world and in doing so briefly alleviated the soul, freeing the mind for whatever thought happened to pop up.

This leaves me with the hunch that the project I intend to work on this year may revolve around allowing urbanites to feel their place in the world. I can imagine that the physical structures that make up the city are all made to more or less fit the size of humans. As such, the urban landscape is a landscape of human-focused architecture. All points of reference are within our grasp. If city-dwellers would want to feel not their place in the city but their place in the world, they could go to one of my projects.





figure 2.1



figure 2.2



figure 2.3



figure 2.4

figure 2 photographs by author

## Conclusions

In summary, there are three research questions I am trying to answer:

In summary, there are three questions I am trying to answer:

1. What is silence?
2. How does one make silence spatial?
3. How can one create spatial silence in the city of Belgrade?

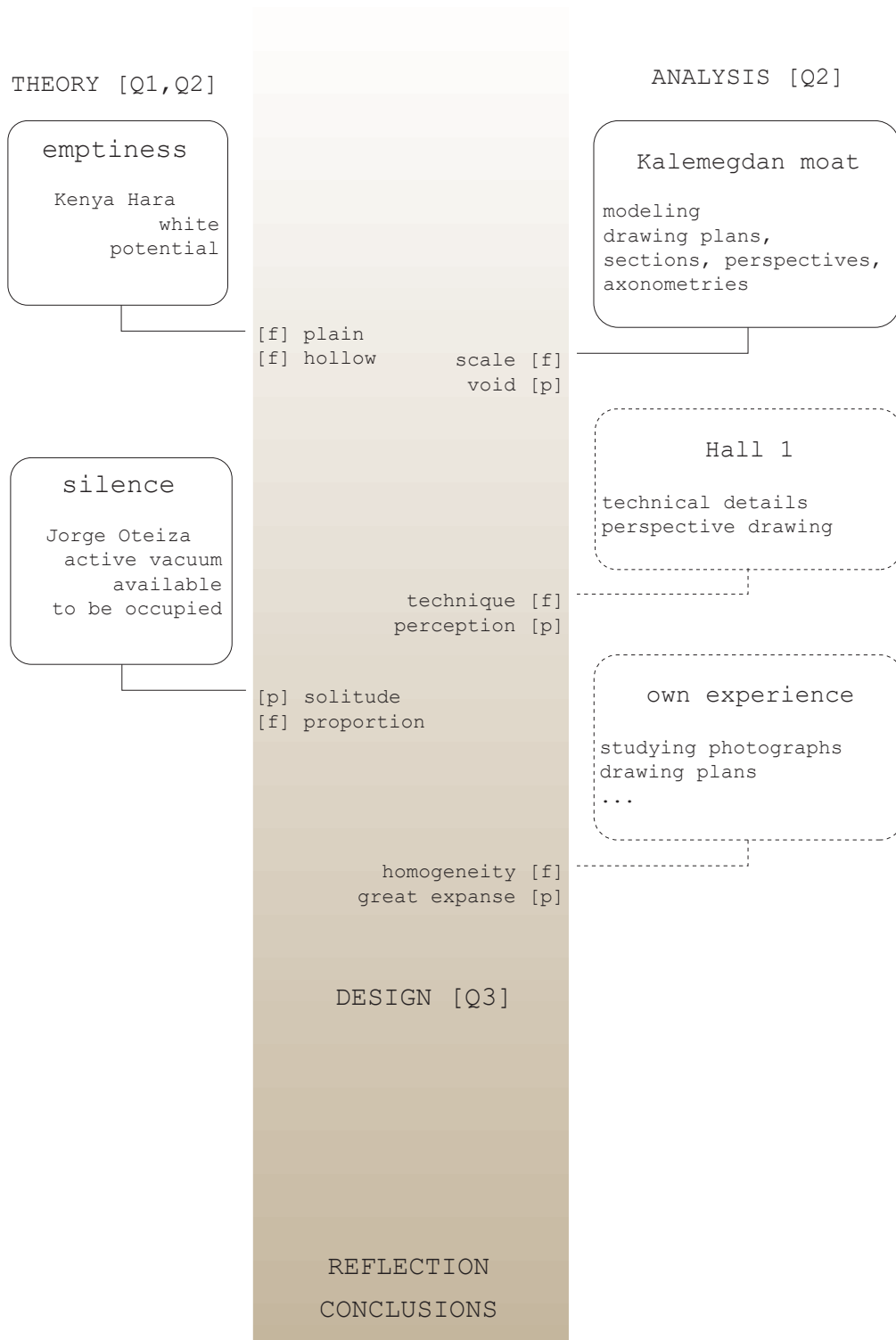
By studying the theories of Jorge Oteiza and Kenya Hara I have been able to theorize silence and emptiness, answering question 1. I have found that the terms to describe silence can only circumscribe silence as it is quite ungraspable. However, I feel I have developed a strong sensibility for the silence I am looking for.

Additionally, with the help of these theories I have also made first steps toward answering question 2, by drawing the theories into the physical realm. Formal qualities such as *plainness* and *hollow* can be used as operative terms. Even though the concept was never used in our work, the study of the Kalemegdan moat has also skirted the spatial silence I am looking for. From this investigation too have I drawn knowledge on how a silent space can be designed. What is yet to be discovered in our study of Belgrade fair Hall 1 is of course impossible to accurately portray, but I think that the technique with which it was built and the perception people have of such a grand empty space will yield knowledge that can help to answer question 2. The evaluation of personal experiences in Belgrade should also yield information on how to design spatial silence.

These personal experiences also help to start answering question number 3, as they are specifically related to the city of Belgrade and its particular noise. The full answer to question number 3 is of course my project that is yet to be designed.

All questions, heuristics, theory, analysis and experiences are summarized in the research diagram on the opposite page.

knowledge on  
SPATIAL SILENCE



[f] form  
[p] perception

[Q1] What is silence?  
[Q2] How does one make silence spatial?  
[Q3] How can one create spatial silence in the city of Belgrade?



## Sources

### Literature:

Hara, K. (2010a). *White*. Lars Müller Publishers.

Hara, K. (2019). *100 Whites*. Lars Müller Publishers.

Martí, C. (1999). *Silencios Eloquentes*. Edicions UPC.

### Images:

Beogradski Sajam, DAA. (n.d.). *Belgrade fair* [photograph]. [http://architectuul.com/architecture/view\\_image/belgrade-fair/22042](http://architectuul.com/architecture/view_image/belgrade-fair/22042)

*Caja Vacía*. (n.d.). [photograph]. <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/eb/36/94/eb3694e43d91a0b35555ad4033a12966.jpg>

Hara, K. (2010b). *Shinto shrine* [illustration]. In *White* (p. 40).

Panti, Z. (2021, May). *Teniski tereni Partizan* [Photograph]. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Teniski+tereni+Partizan/@44.8215823,20.451945,3a,75y,90t/data=!3m8!1e2!3m6!1sAF1QipO560xuSTb9C6YThKFoPYbfPT7Xr4VHMBacWUL6!2e10!3e12!6shhttps:%2F%2Flh5.googleusercontent.com%2Fp%2FAF1QipO560xuSTb9C6YThKFoPYbfPT7Xr4VHMBacWUL6%3Dw86-h152-k-no!7i1080!8i1920!4m8!1m2!2m1!1skalemegdan+belgrade!3m4!1s0x475a65fdabec9bd:0-x85bcd0f792db2864!8m2!3d44.8215823!4d20.451945>