The Wall of Happiness

The most important thing in life is to live happily. This is a simple fact that we keep forgetting. We are always too busy to think about this matter. Modern man is a nervous and unhappy creature and this is a result of civilization. Architecture can have a crucial in such self-awareness. The recent so-called “Green” movements in architecture and urban design are attempts towards the same issue but they are mostly focusing on the eco-friendly features of space rather than the matter of “well-being”. My research question was formulated as: How can an architectural space have a positive influence on the well-being and happiness of its inhabitants?

Research

The research started with the intention of seeking for unexpected spaces in the city of Istanbul where people transformed them into spaces of leisure; spaces in the middle of the city where they tend to go to, escaping the chaos of the city. The study mainly focused on interrelation between body, space and environment through analytical drawings that were abstracted from the reality. The choice of “unexpected” public spaces as case-studies was crucial for my research and design. The fact that those spaces were not designed for the purpose of being a public space let the city dwellers choose freely how to react according to the existing scenery and the “random” physical space. Certain physical characteristics of space such as the lighting, contrast and framing that appeared randomly in those spaces attracted attention to different elements from the background and scenery; thus, people reacted differently accordingly. They chose to spend their leisure time in the spaces that they find aesthetically pleasant.

As a theoretical framework two important subjects were studied in relation to the concept of well-being and happiness, namely “observing natural elements” and “Homo Ludens”. These two notions created a conceptual framework for my design.

1-Observing natural elements

For millions of years, in the process of evolution, human had a close relationship with the natural environment. Thus, human organism’s adaptions such as those of the brain are the result of an evolutionary response to the environment. The feeling of spiritual connection or emotional affinity to nature is an important subject to consider in designing the cities and buildings.

In order to achieve mental well-being, a process of restoration is needed and this urge arises in urban environments. Restoration means the “process through which people recover resources that they have diminished in their efforts to meet the demands of everyday life”¹. According to different psychological restoration theories such as Psycho-evolutionary Theory as defined by Roger Ulrich and Attention Restoration Theory as defined by Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, nature is a way to get away from the chaos of urban life and it lets restoration emerge, because it has features that man finds engaging and pleasant.

2-Man the player (Homo Ludens)

“Homo Ludens”, or man the player is a term first described by Huizinga in 1938. According to him the origin and fundamentals of play have been described as a discharge of superabundant vital energy, by others as the satisfaction of some imitative instinct, or again as simply a need for relaxation.² Huizinga explains that “fun” is inherent in playing and it resists all logical analysis and it cannot be reduced to any other mental category.

Mumford, influenced by Jung’s Ancient Therapy, builds on this idea that the mechanical order of ritual may have kept early man from going insane. To me, this subject is related to the concept of ‘play’; a child playing the same game over and over again, as animals do. Repetition causes restoration. The mind is now released from all the threats and it spiritually connects to the

² Huizinga, J., Homo Ludens, (Boston, 1955 first published in 1938), pp. 96-97
environment. Another characteristic, as Huizinga explains, is that “play” has a tendency to surround itself with some sort of secrecy. When children are playing, the charm of the play is enhanced when it is “secret”.

Play is something which is not real. It is related to the realm of imagination and contains expressive, spiritual, and social values.

From Research to Design

The design focused on both notions explained above. Certain design tools were extracted from the research. Framing, lighting, and contrasting are architectural tools in order to attract attention to certain elements of the environment and repetition, hidden spaces, movement and interaction are elements that define the notion of play.

The research was mainly related to the socio-psychological realm, a process of contextualization was needed to start the dialogues with the physical space. The site was chosen in a crowded urban part of Kadiköy in order to challenge the necessity of escaping from the city for psychological restoration. It was situated on the coast line of Bosphorus Strait close to a lot of bus terminals and between the two harbors on the eastern side of Istanbul. Building on Bosphorus, as a historically and politically important border, added another conceptual level to the design.

The building takes its formality from the shape of the border line between land and water or east and west. It takes the shape of the wall as perceived from far in order to start the dialogue about border; a border between land and water, old and new, nature and city, and east and west but it blurs this border due to the certain materiality of it.

The choice of only one material which is wire mesh for the whole building was crucial because first it made the possibility of creating a space that is perceived differently from different distances and different angles of view. Thus, it creates an interactive space. The visual effects, such as the anamorphic effects, create a vague space that leaves room for imagination of one’s mind. Second, the material together with the articulation of space through layering different densities of walls results in different gradients of the mesh. It creates diverse spaces like light or dark spaces, hidden spaces, and frames to show certain elements in the surrounding such as the horizon or the industrial port, the light house or the bus station, the historic peninsula or the modern city, the water or the sky. Third is the over-layering of different walls that creates a labyrinth-like space that gives the building features of a playground. Fourth is the transparency of the material that makes the possibility of seeing through the building, for instance, looking at water and the sea life underneath while walking.

Not only the labyrinth-like articulation of the walls and paths create an ambiguous space that emphasizes the element of play, but also other elements give the space features of a playground; hanging columns that move with the movement of water and wind and are also interactive with the body, and flexible weaved floorings accentuate the notion of play.

The single material of welded wire mesh creates load bearing walls through over layering different wire mesh panels with different load baring capabilities. The form of these walls sitting next to one another creates a table-like structure for the canopies and paths.

The citizens, who are now spending their time in a leisure environment, can have the possibility to explore their natural environment by the process of creation and re-creation. The wall creates a playground, an environmental exploration lab that seeks for happiness of its inhabitants. It creates an invisible border between the seemingly contradictory elements of its environment -such as nature and the city- to start the dialogue about this border but it immediately challenges the existence of a defined border with its blurry appearance. By creating a playground inside this wall it ironically talks about the fragileness and narrowness of this border and through creating frames of the surrounding, it reminds us of the things that are there, yet we do not see. It is an experience of a walk or a play in a natural environment inside the chaos of the city.

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