TEACHING ARCHITECTURE AS A PROCESS

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During the last 10 years I have been teaching a Design studio course at the Department of Architecture, Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem, and at the Design Faculty of the Holon Institute of Technology. In the studio, I teach students how to approach architectural design and plan development. Students are given a task to design a project and I help them develop a concept and an actual concrete plan. Usually I teach first-year students. This specific juncture of their first year and first design project—this “spot” between their life experience so far and their entry to the academic situation—is a perfect place to point out to them the endless possibilities for exploring how to perceive the world as students of architecture.

I would like to write about my experience of using open Focusing sessions in teaching the design studio course. Focusing provides a tool for implicit inquiry that helps with inspired knowledge from multiple sources, including the students’ felt senses, visual memories, physics, literature and more. Focusing can help students achieve a fresh perspective on a variety of topics. Through Focusing we can get a deeper look at the understanding that there is no line between our body and the universe, and that we influence and are influenced by all that is around us. In this way, architecture becomes a process-oriented practice, rather than simply dealing with forms, or with finding solutions for a set of problems. Architects and designers can approach their fields as a way to innovate with endless possibilities through Focusing and working with the implicit.

While preparing my notes for this article I realized that I am looking for a specific point of view. I want to talk about teaching architectural process, but not through describing it abstractly—more through trying to demonstrate the felt sense of this kind of teaching. I was reading a lot of other people’s writing, for example Peter Zumthor’s, “Thinking Architecture”, “The words of Louis I. Khan”, and more. Their words have this special, unique ability to take me to other places—on journeys to many different places. Through that experience, I realized that my way to write would be through the felt sense. I wished to create for the reader a “felt sensation” through their interaction with the words, so that curiosity and the desire for new understanding would occur while reading it.

My wish as a studio instructor is to awaken or to point out the deep memory of the body-environment connection. I’m trying to create a space for the student to observe and explore the endless possibilities of how to perceive their actions and body movements. I invite them to take their time and focus on their daily activities, observing how their body interacts with their surroundings via motion through space, noticing their relationship to the place and what felt sense comes to them from being in the place.
The procedure creates its own sense of presence and slowly the intricate implicit rises up. The students start developing this tool for implicit inquiry that helps with combining inspired knowledge from multiple sources.

The roots of our understanding of the architectural relationship lie in our childhood and our youth—in our innermost memories. Students are learning to work with their personal world biography and felt senses. They learn to listen and observe, giving time to the process.

So, this is how it works at the Academy, where I am now teaching 23 first-year students their first studio for architecture and design.

EXERCISE #1

In order to understand the architectural act, I ask the students to choose any daily activity such as brushing their teeth, taking a shower, drinking coffee, running, smoking, hand clapping and so on. They need to break the actual body movement into many fractions, and so create a sequence of the action with no less than 30 parts (Figures 1–2).

Figure 1. In the first exercise, S. was working on the act of skipping
How do we measure a hand clap, or a scream, or an eye blink? My intention is to provide a platform for this action to unfold. Through this exercise, these delicate micro movements become part of the student’s awareness of the intricate implicit-explicit-occurring body-environment topography. (“Topography” is a term being used at architecture school. It means the “surface” that represents all the intricate-explicit-occurring. It is the accumulative data that the student will work with.). This creates the possibility for them to have a dialogue or interaction with what is there in their experience and to unfold their implicit awareness of these daily actions.

As Gendlin says, “Living bodies consist of ongoing body-environment interaction”. Through Focusing, the students are getting in touch with their experience of their body-environment relationship. Analyzing it, thinking about it, and putting it on paper as images or in a 3D medium is similar to the TAE process, but instead of a sentence we receive a set of images that refine the process of understanding the body-environment relationship for each student.

I ask the students to focus on their movement: “...Be with it, be the movement...Let the movement become topography...Can you sense the interaction with the space?...What is the underlying structure?...Can you sense the occurring?...How is your movement perceived when looking at the movement from outside?”

I love to teach, to remind students of the wealth that exists in our movement in the world. The interaction between people and places creates rich possibilities to sense living. Curiosity and the desire for the not-yet-expressed are most important for any creative profession.
EXERCISE #2

After working with the body movement, the students are given a new task: Look for a site and analyze it. Heidegger says, “The relationship of man to places and through places to spaces is based on his dwelling in them.” Therefore they should pick a specific site that would be a place for them to dwell in or on.

The research on the site should focus on light-shadow, density, rhythm, texture, axis, opening and more. The work on the site is similar to the work on the body. Using their tools of observation and focusing on the site, I ask them to investigate “What does the place want to be?…What is the rhythm of the site?…What felt sense does the site bring?” If the site is a room, for example, we can focus on what the room was like, what smell was in the air, how the floor felt under the feet or the door handle in the hand. Was there a feeling of narrowness or width, or a feeling of intimacy or vastness?

For her site, S. chose a passage between buildings with stairs. There, she can climb up or down. She was working with understanding the movement of opening and closing her eyes, joyfully skipping along while getting through the passageways through the building (Figure 3).

The students are starting to establish the body-environment relationship. We focus on the body movement qualities on one side, and on the other we focus on the qualities of the chosen site. Then I ask them to hold the question, “What is the felt sense of them both
together...How does it feel?” I ask them to pay attention to the situation where body and site meet. There is a certain felt sense to it. By dwelling in the chosen site with their bodies, they create a “new” meaning to it. Now the body-environment is an occurring situation. It is not simply the body and the site interaction as two parts, but more as a “new” environment which is occurring. There is more to it than just the body or just the environment. This is why I ask them to dwell into what is occurring and try to sense the structure which holds it all together. Each student has his or her own unique field, in which I ask them to look for the “new” occurring.

**EXERCISE #3**

The final stage for the students is to create an architectural program after sensing their body-environment felt sense. The program should represent an architectural layout of the bodily understanding they gained through working with the site and their body movement. In some ways it is similar to Evelyn Pross’ steps of TAE (steps 3-5). While working with the crux sentence or the phrase, they hold the phrase and sense the expanded meaning of the site with their body, as one new bodily understanding. This hopefully will bring a new way to design the site after realising how they wish to dwell in it.

S. chose to create a set of ramps, stairs and platforms in order to provide the skipping sensation and movement that she found in the first two exercises (Figure 4). While skipping she was aware of what the eyes can see, how the body would resonate with the actual physical site, and its interaction with the rhythm of skipping. Her ramps and stairs definitely create the skipping sensation that she sensed through Focusing. Her solution to the design task would not have been the same if she had designed the stairs without going through the experience of Focusing and dwelling in the felt sense of skipping. Her work is dynamic and resonates with her skipping study. The “new” place is a result of her study in the previous exercises. There is a new “felt sense” to the place.
After completing their projects, each student presents his or her work in front of an audience of architects, other teachers from the faculty, and other students. After the presentation, there is an open discussion and review of the project by the audience. A central point discussed by the reviewers at the presentation was that our studio deals with pre-body movement. By pre-body movement I mean micro-movement. The ability to separate the movement into a sequence of micro-movements generates an implying which expands the bodily understanding of motion through space.

Through these exercises, the students have realised how deeply one can go while observing the experience of situations and motion in space. The students learn to zigzag between their inner felt sense of the body-environment situation and their work on a concrete site with analysed materials. It is a movement back and forth between intellectual knowledge and the inner grasping of body-environment experience.

The students learn to “say” the place. The “new” design and planning were developed from within. The “new” is implying into occurring, it is an ongoing process. There is a deeper connection to the site and to the specific intention to be developed at the site. In Gendlin’s words, this would be the “carrying forward,” which is much more “precise” than an analytical research approach to finding a solution or a certain shape that would fit the site.

The ability to skip between inner body environment and outer environment—the ability to cross between inside and outside, whether it is a physical body or a concrete site, a
small object or a large building—this ability and flexibility help us to create a living, dynamic creative universe. I try to help the students develop this flexibility to sense and observe the different parts and at the same time to feel and observe the whole as one—to be able to skip joyfully in between. My cumulative experience throughout the years and my current felt sense together make me realize that this is the beginning of a new, more structured language for architecture. TAE and Focusing provide tools to organize the intuitive. Working with these tools enables me to teach that architecture can also be architecting.

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