Sense of Place

What is Sense of Place?

Sense of place in architecture is about context as well as the identity or unique characteristics of a building or space that create meaning for an occupant. A sense of place can be derived by incorporating vernacular design elements, local materials and craftsmanship and connecting to the natural and cultural resources of a community. Sense of place has also been defined as people’s perceptions and experiences of an environment. Creating a sense of place involves understanding how people develop place attachment and feel part of their physical and social environment. This attachment is often based on a community’s cultural response to the environment’s features, the role that a place plays in satisfying human needs, historical meanings and symbolism embedded in the location, and the possibilities for individuals and groups to identify with the space. This latter phenomenon is sometimes called place identity. Sense of place is believed to contribute to a social group’s caring and preservation for an environment.

Satisfying the psychological needs of the human community means that built environments are created with an awareness of the interrelationships between natural, cultural, social, and economic resources both locally and globally. Oscar Newman proposed and studied a concept known as “defensible space” where inhabitants of a location adopt a place and care for it as their own, resulting in less crime. Negative experiences can also construct a sense of place, for example when a location is associated with fear.

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How to Create Sense of Place

Scale, materials and vernacular design elements all contribute to creating a sense of place. Genius loci, the recognition and expression of the spirit of a place, can help guide the development of a unique and memorable place. The US EPA also offers a guide to help developers think about how to create spaces that encourage a sense of place.

A standard for measuring building quality has been created by the Construction Industry Council (CIC) and it measures the key attributes that constitute good design and produces high performance buildings. The CIC has developed the Design Quality Indicator (DQI) a standard method of assessing the quality of buildings in three main areas: Functionality, Build Quality and Impact. Functionality is concerned with the arrangement, quality and inter-relationships of space and the way in which the building is used. Building Quality relates to the engineering performance of a building such as structural stability and the integration of systems, finishes and fittings. Impact refers to the building's ability to create a sense of place and have a positive effect on the local community, the occupants, and environment.

A study should be conducted that attempts to develop an understanding of the important elements of the community, the site, and the culture of the organization. This inquiry might enlist the aid of informants in the community, local historians, organizational managers, and organizational psychologists. Information can be sought about the general social characteristics of current or anticipated occupants of the building. Design should incorporate features that reflect the local history and familiar environmental features of the region as well as symbols that represent the meaning that the corporation would like to communicate to visitors and inhabitants. Design that frustrates the objectives of work tasks and creates obstacles for comfortable negotiation of the space can tend to alienate individuals from the facility. Built-in flexibility that enables people opportunities for choice, decision-making, and personalization in their spaces and access to daylighting and good indoor air quality contributes to a positive connection between inhabitants and the designed space. One can implement a sense of place through landscaping. Landscaping design can promote psychological health by maximizing meaning, increasing sensory pleasure and reducing environmental stress.

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   http://www.epa.gov/care/library/community_culture.pdf
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Example

New Jersey’s Transit Village Initiative

The New Jersey Department of Transportation and New Jersey Transit lead a multi-agency partnership known as the Transit Village Initiative that encourages pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods and community revitalization. This program aims to reduce traffic congestion, improve air quality and promote growth in areas where infrastructure and public transit already exist. Many of the designated Transit Villages, such as Metuchen, Rahway, Rutherford, South Orange, and South Amboy, have used the program to create and reinforce a sense of place around their historic train stations.

EcoVillage, Ithaca, NY

Commercial businesses have developed out of the local culture and environment of Ithaca’s EcoVillage, an intentional community.

http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/

Benefits

- Supports local/regional economy
- Creates viable, valuable and memorable architecture
- Connects to community
- Preserves natural and cultural resources
- Celebrates culture and spirit
- Promotes health and well-being

Costs

The costs associated with creating a sense of place and incorporating regional and vernacular materials into a project varies widely according to the project’s context, scope and goals. Time is needed to develop information about the site and community and managerial staff will need to contribute time to defining the culture of the organization.

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Resources

CIC Design Quality Indicator
http://www.dqi.org.uk

The Living Building Challenge 2.0
http://ilbi.org/the-standard/version-2-0

NJ DOT Future in Transportation – Sense of Place
http://www.state.nj.us/transportation/works/njfit/toolbox/sense.shtm

US EPA - Community Culture and the Environment: A Guide to Understanding a Sense of Place
http://www.epa.gov/care/library/community_culture.pdf

American Institute of Architects - What Makes a Community Livable? Livability 101

Whole Building Design Guide – Psychosocial Value of Space
http://www.wbdg.org/resources/psychspace_value.php?r=promote_health