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Beyond Appearances - Architecture and the senses

Transcript: The Comfort Zone
Host: Alan Saunders
Guests: Rebecca Maxwell & Peter-John Cantrill
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Alan Saunders:

Hello, I'm Alan Saunders, and this is The Comfort Zone.

This week we're looking at the senses, and notice how as soon as I try to tell you what we're doing, a sensory metaphor obtrudes. We're looking at the senses, not tasting them, or smelling them, not even hearing them, even though this is radio.

Well very shortly we'll find out whether our bias towards the visual has impoverished our view (here we go again, our view) of architecture.

We'll take a trip round the garden, that unlike most other gardens is dedicated to what you can touch, taste, hear and smell, as well as to what you can see.

We'll also find out about textures in the food of Malaysia, the crunchy versus the smooth, and also, more surprisingly perhaps, the texture of wine in the latest of our monthly wine chats.

But getting back to that ocular bias: it's surely nowhere more evident than in contemporary architecture, where appearances seem to mean everything. Shortly, I'll be speaking to an architect about how his profession can even things up a bit, so that our experience of the world we build around us becomes a truly multi-sensory one.

But first, we thought it might be valuable to understand what kind of experience architecture offers to someone without sight. In a world were buildings are predominantly judged by what they look like, how does someone without sight measure whether a building is a good one or a bad one?

So I spoke to Rebecca Maxwell, a writer and former teacher who lives in Melbourne and who lost her sight at the age of three. And I began by remarking to her that if I were to describe a building, my description would start with what it looks like. So how would Rebecca's description start?

Rebecca Maxwell:

I think I'd start with the floor plan. It's very important to me to be able to internalise the being of that building. I don't just happen from space to space; any building I'm going to
familiarise myself with has to be in an internal map, and really, if I were to give you a parallel experience, I could ask you to close your eyes and put yourself in your bedroom at night, and then imagine the layout of your house, and you would have a spatial experience I think.

Alan Saunders:
How do you get a sense of the floor plan? Does this mean that you have to walk the perimeters?

Rebecca Maxwell:
Probably I wouldn't say the perimeters, because I probably wouldn't circumnavigate every room, but I'd begin with let's say the final column, the skeleton of the building, so it would be the hallways and how spaces radiate from that, and then I'd do the second level of enriching my inner map, and that would mean getting a sense of each of the rooms. And that then goes beyond the floor plan. It also becomes a sense of the three dimensions of the room, and where there are places that let in the outside, that actually brings a space to life. If I can feel the air or the presence of balcony or garden, or whatever.

Alan Saunders:
Now you talk about getting a more three dimensional sense. Like a lot of people I think given a choice, I prefer high ceilings to low ceilings, because I think they look more elegant; but are you aware of ceiling height when you're in a room?

Rebecca Maxwell:
Oh, very much so. A low ceiling, well I don't know that it's a low ceiling, I feel an oppression that I work out by checking with someone else eventually, that it is connected with a low ceiling, or a disproportion of the space. I can't be geometrically accurate about that, but there are proportions that are comfortable and proportions that aren't, and the ceiling height is an important part.

Alan Saunders:
Is that sense of oppression connected to any of what we think of as the five, perhaps we might call them the five traditional senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste, or is it a separate sense, as it were?

Rebecca Maxwell:
Well if one had to connected it to the five senses, one might say it's the sense of touch, but it's touch without a conventional physical contact. But I believe that there are a lot more senses. We haven't identified them and we don't use them. I think by identifying them we would begin to turn them on, as it were. You see, I think there is a sense of pressure, a sense of balance, a sense of rhythm, a sense of movement, a sense of life, a sense of warmth, even a sense of self, which psychology is beginning to recognise.

Alan Saunders:
Just getting on to one of those senses that you mention, a sense of balance. A sense of balance will certainly affect the way I experience a space if I'm standing on the edge looking down into an atrium, say, I might find this an uncomfortably vertiginous experience, but I wonder whether that's because I can see how far I might fall, or whether it's
something else. I mean, can someone without sight find a space similarly vertiginous?

Rebecca Maxwell:
Absolutely. I am very troubled by fear of heights, and it isn't visual, it feels to me like gravity or the earth pulling me down, as if I could so easily surrender to it, and let myself go over the edge.

Alan Saunders:
I think it's reasonable to say that for a sighted person, the stimulus of what one sees when looking at a building tends to over-ride what one feels through many of the other senses, like touch or hearing, although some of us, like me, do when we're in large spaces, might just sing and clap to see what they sound like. But I'm an embarrassment to all around me.

Rebecca Maxwell:
Congratulations!

Alan Saunders:
But let's just take touch. Do you think that architecture can offer a rewarding haptic experience?

Rebecca Maxwell:
I'm glad you used that word in that way; I find myself an only person using it that way. Yes, look I take delight in the shapes of columns and the textures of walls in buildings, and I love to find apses and spaces that have no meaning at all. Yes, I think architecture could delight us more by focusing on other senses indeed.

Alan Saunders:
I think you like visiting the National Gallery of Victoria, because of the water wall near its main entrance.

Rebecca Maxwell:
I do, I do indeed, and it isn't just that I'm just as embarrassing as you are to other people, play in the water and all that, but the water has a revivifying sense, it feels as though renewal is happening all the time, and respiration is gratified by a different balance in the air.

Alan Saunders:
You were talking about smoothing through a house and getting a sense of where there's a balcony and so on, where the outside air and sound is admitted; is your sense of the layout of a building altered at all if it's air-conditioned rather than naturally ventilated?

Rebecca Maxwell:
Yes, an air-conditioned building feels dead. It has lost one of its features, one of its distinctions. It becomes all amorphous, too homogenous, and even the size of spaces is lost, yes, an air-conditioned building torments me, actually.

Alan Saunders:
So what message would you like to deliver to architects, any architects who might be listening, about what they should be aiming to achieve in their work as far as the senses are concerned?

Rebecca Maxwell:

Well I would say the main thing that anyone can do is to give a bit of time to thinking about what senses they may have that they haven't thought of, and just live with them, and then if it's an architect, try and feed that sense, gratify that sense, so that we're not half dead in our sensibilities.

Alan Saunders:

Rebecca Maxwell, you're very obviously not half dead in your sensibilities, thank you very much indeed for joining us.

Rebecca Maxwell:

Thank you, Alan, it's been a pleasure.

Alan Saunders:

Well I'm joined now by Peter-John Cantrill, who lectures in architecture at the University of Technology, Sydney, and is a Director of the architecture firm, Zanis Associates. Peter-John, welcome to The Comfort Zone, a virtual space that definitely favours the sense of hearing over sight.

Peter-John Cantrill:

Thank you, Alan.

Alan Saunders:

Well Le Corbusier, probably the most influential figure in 20th century architecture, once declared 'I exist in life only on the condition that I see', and he also said that 'Everything is individual'. But listening to Rebecca Maxwell there, one is reminded of how much more architecture can offer the senses, the other senses. So who are we to blame for this obsession with appearance?

Peter-John Cantrill:

Well I don't know that anyone is singularly to blame. But today in particular, we have a wonderful outpouring of knowledge of architecture through the visual media, the print media in particular, and although this is a fantastic thing for architecture, it does have some side effects. And two of the most unfortunate side effects are to do with this concentration on the visual, without the other senses, the first being that you can't, when you open a magazine, smell the building, you can't sense the volume of the space, you can't feel the air moving through it, or the warmth of the sunlight. It's impossible to convey that through photographs only. And this leads architects to concentrate more on the visual, because they know that more and more their clients understand their buildings through media representations of them, rather than visiting them. This also leads to another unfortunate consequence, where more and more often, buildings are discussed through the critics' understanding simply of their representation. The media is so competitive that the first magazine to publish a building often sells more. So if you can discuss the building before its completion, then you're first involved, so to speak.
The other thing is, the critics can extend this and discuss buildings before they're built and even discuss buildings that will never be built, and so I'm disappointed in a way this tendency towards discussing architecture without ever being there, without even the building being built.

Alan Saunders:
Yes. And in the past when all you had to go on were plans and engravings and things like that, you couldn't fool yourself that you'd seen the building, whereas you now can fool yourself that you know the building.

Peter-John Cantrill:
Well unfortunately some people do tend to fool themselves. I don't think you can, even now really.

Alan Saunders:
A celebrated American architect, the late Charles Moore, once designed a house that I think Rebecca Maxwell would probably like very much. So tell us about his house for a blind person.

Peter-John Cantrill:
Yes, he did design a house for a blind client in California, and he found this the most delightful building that he had designed as a house. And in describing the house, I saw him describe it, I haven't been to visit it, it was a wonderful description. The house was oriented by a series of rooms containing scented plants, containing water, things that made noise, that gave you a sense of smell. There was within every room things to touch to remind you of the room that you were in, to help you find your way around. I found his description of that house to be a wondrous thing, it's a place I'd dearly like to visit.

Alan Saunders:
If you can't fool yourself that you know it. Rebecca spoke about forming an internal map of the floor plan, but in fact many buildings in Japan make it easier for people, sighted or not, to work out the floor plan as soon as they walk in, don't they?

Peter-John Cantrill:
Yes, there's a tendency today in Japan for public buildings to have a kind of perspex model of the building in the foyer, as soon as you walk in. You walk in and you can put your hands on a three dimensional model of the building and so as soon as you enter, you can be informed of, as Rebecca described, the plan of the building. The other thing is that there are way finding devices all through these buildings, there are tactiles on the floor, there are visual indicators that are bright, so that even partially sighted people can make them out, and so forth. And I think particularly in public buildings, they should be designed for all of us to understand and experience them and find our way around.

Alan Saunders:
Let's turn now to some of the senses that architecture could be doing more to stimulate. Hearing seems an obvious one to begin with, because architects do take acoustics into consideration, even though eating in some restaurants these days we might find that hard to believe.
Peter-John Cantrill:

Well you may find it hard to believe, but the restaurant owners quite often brief architects to make the sound of a restaurant quite lively, because the din is quite attractive to many diners, it's a happening place if there's a lot of sound. Also for others if there's a lot of sound you may not dwell in the restaurant after you've finished your meal and their turnover is increased. So you may not feel they're taking that into account, but most definitely they probably are.

Alan Saunders:

As I said to Rebecca, I like clapping my hands and singing in large enclosed spaces, like churches (I once got thrown out of a church for doing that), and churches can offer some fine examples of architects getting the acoustics, whether by good luck or judgment, right, can't they?

Peter-John Cantrill:

They do. In fact in the late baroque period in particular, and particularly in Germany and Austria, places like that, one judgment of a good architect was that you could walk into the church and just inside the entry, if you stamped your foot or clapped your hand, the whole room would resound like a beautiful bell. ... The buildings were judged by their sound, not just their visual experience.

Alan Saunders:

It should be said this is not all baroque architecture, the acoustics of St Paul's in London are notoriously bad. I once went to a concert there and I could hear nothing but the odd chorus.

Peter-John Cantrill:

Well yes, some succeed and some don't.

Alan Saunders:

The opera theatre in Venice which burned down and has been rebuilt, that was a really good example wasn't it, of an architectural space that was almost a musical instrument in its own right?

Peter-John Cantrill:

Yes, it was perhaps at the zenith of this understanding. Before the reconstruction, and I haven't been there since the reconstruction, but I went several times to the opera before that. The whole room of the opera was finely tuned, and it was finely tuned during its construction and afterwards, so that each panel of wood was shaved to a certain thickness, it was mounted in such a way that the ideal reverberation was given and that the fullness of tone was distributed throughout the room. So the room was really tuned like a musical instrument, it's an extraordinary thing.

Alan Saunders:

The Swiss architect Peter Zumthor was in this country recently, and he designed, didn't he, a pavilion at the 2000 World Expo that was a very successful multi-century experience?

Peter-John Cantrill:
Yes, a delightful pavilion, the Swiss Pavilion there. It consisted of timber that had been cut and had not yet been dried, that was stacked, and the idea for the pavilion is that that timber would later be reused in buildings. But during the Expo the timber was drying and you could hear the creaking and groaning of the timber as it dried, you could sell the resin and tannin and other things coming out of the timber, the building was open to the elements in many parts, and so as you walked through, you the rain would fall on you, you could hear the sound of the rain hitting the timber and so forth. It's quite a delightful place.

Alan Saunders:

So it's clear that although most architecture these days seems to be odourless, that doesn't actually have to be the case.

Peter-John Cantrill:

No, and in fact a lot of architecture isn't odourless, it's often the smell of the concrete curing or the chemicals in the paint which you can sometimes be overcome with in a new building. Traditionally, buildings built of more natural materials are imbued with the odour of those materials. But timber itself more often than not today is treated with sealants that seal the smells in, and you can treat timber with more traditional products that allow them to imbue the space with their smell. Some of these products, like you can oil a floor with polyurethane, which is hard-wearing and long-lasting and low maintenance, and kill the smell of the timber. You could oil the floor with a mixture of tung oil and citrus oils and bring out the most delightful smell of the timber for years. It's a difficult choice, because an oiled floor in the traditional way needs a lot more maintenance, and will not wear as evenly as a floor treated in the newer way.

Alan Saunders:

The place where I store some of my excess stuff is a former wool storage place, and so the floorboards are utterly coated in lanolin, which is a really a lovely smell. Unfortunately I'm told, highly inflammable, but a lovely smell.

Peter-John Cantrill:

It is a wonderful smell, that's certainly true.

Alan Saunders:

Several years ago we had the Finnish architecture theorist, Juhani Pallasmaa, on the show, arguing that to be truly meaningful, architecture should awaken all the senses. And when I said to him that it wasn't immediately clear that there was any connection between architecture and the sense of taste, he begged to differ, and this is what he said:

"Architect: To me, it is, I have experience on a number of occasions that certain qualities of stone, for instance, certain metals, detailing of wood, can be so subtle that you feel it in your mouth, and I'm myself, in my own work, conscious of that possibility. I don't think it is an essential quality of architecture, but I have made the observation that architecture can be subtle enough to even evoke a sensation of taste. Maybe 20 years ago in California was just about to enter a grey, rough stone building by the Green Brothers and when I opened the door, I saw the shining white marble threshold, and that whiteness of marble juxtaposed with the rough stone almost made me automatically kneel and taste the surface with my tongue."
Alan Saunders:
Well, should we all take to licking our floors and walls, and should architects be flavouring them so that we're more inclined to do so?

Peter-John Cantrill:
Certainly I've never done that, and I notice that he said that he didn't kneel and taste the building. But I think the sense of smell and the sense of taste are very closely allied, and quite often the smell of a building, you can sense as taste. I can understand what he's saying.

Alan Saunders:
What about the sense of touch, Peter? The machine-made materials favoured by contemporary architects tend to eliminate accidental variations and tend towards uniformity, so that doesn't allow for much of a haptic experience, does it?

Peter-John Cantrill:
It certainly reduces that experience to one where your sense of touch is always cold and smooth, and the variety of things that you can touch is much wider than that. So again, more natural materials offer a greater variety of touch sensation: timber or brick and stone and so forth, but they do have difficulties, in that they're not even. People see them as, they see weathering as being a distasteful thing in a way, that things change and develop texture.

Alan Saunders:
Well that's yes, that is interesting, because weatherboards today don't weather and splinter, paint isn't allowed to flake off walls. So the avenue for tactility is eliminated, isn't it?

Peter-John Cantrill:
Well if that's your attitude, it certainly is, or it's restricted, and you have a certain narrower palette of materials to use for touch. But all these natural materials and others are all still available for use in buildings today.

Alan Saunders:
Are we just afraid of ageing?

Peter-John Cantrill:
Perhaps we are, but I'm certainly not. I find that when I see a well-weathered building, that's what delights me, and when I see a building that's kind of caught in its moment of conception and destined never to change, I'm a little saddened.

Alan Saunders:
Peter-John Cantrill I see your point, you've touched us all. That was a very tasty discussion, it was good to hear from you, and as usual with Radio National, it was all done on the smell of an oily rag. Thanks very much for joining us.

Peter-John Cantrill:
Thank you very much.

Footnote:

Each week The Comfort Zone "debates and celebrates the cultural significance of architecture and design, landscape and gardens, and food" with inspiration and ideas from areas such as philosophy, psychology or anthropology. Past programs have included interviews and discussions about sensory gardens, houses of the future, health and design, universal design, public buildings and restaurants.

The Comfort Zone is presented by Alan Saunders, with producer Kerry Stewart and Executive Producer Mark Wakely. It airs on the ABC's Radio National on Saturday morning at 9am, repeated Saturday evening at 9pm. For information about how to tune your radio to the local frequency and upcoming program topics visit The Comfort Zone web site.