personality-based design

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a study in reflection of personality on residential design

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To all those who helped along the way... Thank You!
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This thesis attempts to study the connection that can be made between an inhabitant’s personality and their house. The basic premise taken was that by understanding a person’s personality you could respond architecturally to provide a house molded specifically for that person. Some of the major architecture issues that arose were ideas of privacy, security, and connection. Most, if not all, architectural decisions were based on these core issues.

The effects of the occupants upon the decisions made during design are of utmost importance. To ignore their input and desires would be a great injustice. They can provide the inspiration and driving factors for the design. By understanding the occupants’ personality, including values, beliefs, and attitudes, an architect can design a project for the them. This process results in a project
that becomes an expression of the occupants in built form.

This process requires an understanding of the occupants that is not easily attained and therefore requires methods that may seem unorthodox. One could say it focuses less on what they ask for and listens to what they don’t ask for, or how they ask it. It requires getting inside their head to understand where they are coming from and enough knowledge about how they live to provide the quality of life they truly desire. Personality is essentially the reflection of one’s behavior. As architects, our goal is provide a building that responds to the uses of the occupants. By understanding their personality, you can predict their behaviors. By predicting behavior, you can make decisions that affect the design.

To study the connection between personality and housing in the absence of a real client, it was necessary to develop characters to design for. This required more than just demographics, but required consideration of the daily life of the characters, their quirks, desires and thoughts. By creating depth in the characters, a personality would emerge and allow for appropriate architectural responses to be made in the design of their house. The personality of the character would inform the core issues of the architectural response and thus, shape the design of the house, affecting every aspect from floor plan to door handles. The key was understanding the inhabitants and how their personality and lifestyle would effect the decisions.

This should be applied in areas other than housing as well. A good example would be a church. It is the architect’s duty to reflect the values and beliefs of the congregation in the design. This requires knowledge of how they worship, what kind of ministries they provide, and how they plan on growing. As mentioned earlier, personality is reflected in behavior. Values and beliefs affect behavior, so to understand the congregation’s values and beliefs is understand their personality. All organizations have values, beliefs and a long term vision. A project designed for them should focus on these and respond to them. It will then provide a place designed specifically for the occupants that helps meet their goals.
In order to fully explore the role of personality in design, this thesis undertook the design of two houses, for contrasting people, juxtaposed against each other as neighbors. They were named Jack and Jill.

The first step was to develop the characters enough, that inferences about their daily life and the architectural responses to that could be made. Jack, was created first. Jack was based off of Melvin Udall in “As Good As It Gets.” The obsessive compulsive nature of Melvin led to Jack becoming a kind of recluse. Rather than spending his time enjoying the fresh air and comforts of the outside world, Jack retreats to his house where he remains for most hours of the day. He prefers the company of a good back to that of another human being. Complaining is the way Jack deals with the problems he faces. Rather than rationally considering why it happened and the best
course of action, he quickly erupts in a rant that results in something short of a conspiracy theory and a worsened situation. In his daily routine, he focuses on the specifics. Substandard products will never do and ultimately result in the aforementioned actions. To Jack, everything must be a certain way.

Jill is much more of a free spirit. She values the wanders that nature provides us and enjoys spending hours nursing those wanders in her garden. In fact, the outdoors is so important to Jill, that she rarely wants to separated from it. She enjoys viewing her garden and watching the stars appear as she drifts off to sleep. Her daily routine revolves around creative endeavors, never settling on just one, always changing and trying new things. The only constant is her gardening and the love of the outdoors. Spicing up her house with her own style and flavor is an important expression of herself. She also enjoys the company of others and sometimes throws large barbecues and parties that flow through her house into her garden. She cherishes the time spent outdoors and with others.
studying the use of color and materials in developing a sense of place

jack’s personality became readily apparent while jill’s personality required more layers of information and further development.
studying natural and artificial light

studying the extension of space

developing multiple social zones
studying the framing of garden views and the extension of interior space into exterior space
layering personality on a background
developing extended space, protection, multiple social zones and connections to neighbors
revealing space and life through use of openings and fenestration
studying the effect of artificial light on the quality of space

studying the effect of light and materials on the quality of space
studying connections of interior and exterior space
exposed house

jill
concealed house

jack
Approaching Jill’s house, you travel through the entry portion of the garden and ascend a wide set of travertine stairs arriving just in front of the main living spaces. The house affords views through the main living spaces to the garden beyond. As you see in the images on the right, several elements project out of the house, creating an extension of space that continues with the organization of the garden. The house went through a couple different versions before arriving at the final design. The layers of Jill’s personality required multiple layers of information and design to reach a final solution that expressed Jill.
Jill’s house was organized and designed to create the fewest boundaries between interior and exterior spaces.
The play and flow of interior to exterior expresses Jill’s love of the outdoors. Providing views and openings that allowed physical and visual movement create connections of interior and exterior spaces.
Jill’s outgoing nature required spaces to flow into other spaces. Providing an interior/exterior grill allowed the kitchen to be used regardless of where the party would be located.
Just as the garden changes throughout the seasons, the interior of Jill’s house changes creating more dynamic spaces, reflective of Jill’s personality.
Approaching Jack’s house can be an intimidating experience. As you travel down the driveway, you sink further into the earth. Upon reaching the lowest point, you are met by a thick limestone wall protecting the house from intrusion. Evergreen trees and surround the back side of the house, further protecting Jack. The house itself is of thick rammed earth walls, with view penetrations, making the whole structure appear impenetrable.
Using a pre-modern spatial scheme helped create private, secure spaces for Jack, and created difficulty in way-finding as an “intruder.” The protection inherent in the spatial scheme was required to create a house that reflected Jack’s own personal security.
Thick rammed earth walls with bookshelves built in provide the security and comfort necessary for Jack’s personality. Beyond books, Jack’s personality is hidden, secured behind wood, steel, and rusty steel doors.
Rusty steel doors sealed with nautical door handles ensure Jack’s most private area is safely sealed off from the intrusion of the outside world.
Wayfinding is difficult in Jack’s house, enhancing the privacy he enjoys. Wood and steel doors provide the only clues to where one is allowed to go.
During the course of this thesis, it became apparent that the occupant of the building should always be the main focus during design. This was not very surprising, considering that is who architects design for. What was surprising is how informative the occupant could be, and how the occupant could provide inspiration for design. In the process used for this thesis, the role of occupant and the personality inherit in them became as important, if not more important, than the role of interpreter and designer. That is not to say the role of architect is diminished in any way, but is meant to emphasize the architect-occupant relationship. There is a need to create a great friendship and understanding between the two in order to create a high quality project that correctly addresses the needs of the occupant.
Something else that became very apparent was the need for flexibility in process. Solutions to architectural questions are often custom tailored for a specific person or reason. The process of arriving at the solution may turn out to be just as unique. Just as one answer may not apply to all situations, one process may not apply to all architectural problems. By accepting the limitations that a process may have, and remaining flexible; the thesis was allowed to blossom and an appropriate final solution came forth. New processes that were unorthodox or unfamiliar at the beginning of the thesis became essential steps in understanding the occupants and developing homes that reflected their unique personalities.

In summation, the result of the thesis was very much the work of a collaborative process, and much thanks is due those who helped along the way. Challenging the ability to think critically, and create innovative solutions resulted in both a greater overall solution to the problem, and a new perspective on design for the architect. A perspective that will carry over into future projects.

Thanks to the understanding provided by this thesis, it is abundantly apparent that personality is an important aspect of architectural design that has yet to be appropriately explored and implemented. It is necessary for the innovative world of architecture to consider the value of understanding personality and how it can improve the overall quality of design.
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