

White-Space World:

Architectural Determinism in and out of the Nasher

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Stark white walls, heavenly ceilings, glossy-white lights, and Apple-store floors. As you walk through a Nasher exhibit, these architectural features surround you in a cloud of pretense. The razor-sharp corners whisper in your ears, “I’m important. I know who I am, and I’m perfect. Do you fit in here?” The snow-white labels on off white walls assert in rounded speech, “I am the information you seek. I am bolded *and* italicized. My words are tiny. Lean in close to me with your hands clasped behind your back. Now, read me. Isn’t it remarkable that my artist grew up in eastern Oregon? The overlapping, two-shaded shadows boast, “the piece above me is illuminated by multiple light sources. Did you hear me? *Multiple.*”

All the while, a black folding chair cowers in the corner. It addresses you with its eyes on the floor: “I... I’m sorry. I don’t mean to distract. Look away. Please carry on. I’m so sorry...” The folding black chair is the only object that is not heavy, sharply cornered, and white. It is impermanent in nature. Folding and portable. Light and dispensable. It is not a part of the exhibit. “Don’t get distracted!” The gilded frame around a hulking painting chastises. “You have things to look at. Now, look!”

In this essay, I will characterize my perspective by describing my anecdotal experience with architectural determinism and apply those insights to my experience at the Nasher. I aim to answer the questions: *What feelings does walking through the “Art for a New Understanding: Native Voices, 1950’s to Now” exhibit evoke? What architectural, spatial, and social features effect those feelings? How are these spatial and architectural features conserved across other buildings in general?*

Throughout my time at Duke, I have made some observations about how people interact with their spaces. On East campus, in particular, an interesting pattern emerged. From upperclassmen and alumni, I would hear things like, “the people in quad dorms, like Bassett, always get so much closer than students in the backyard” and “you’ll miss Marketplace—it’s so much friendlier than West Union.” I would ask to myself and others: *How is it possible that the students in Bassett end up close-knit year-by-year? If there is an entirely new cohort on East Campus every academic year, how is a social culture conserved? How can Marketplace be what people miss and not the people themselves?*

At first I thought that perhaps the RAs and faculty-in-residence who have greater than one-year terms caused this kind of culture conservation—but from alumni I learned that the

cultures persisted even through changes in RAs and faculty-in-residence. I concluded that the constant in these situations are the buildings themselves—not the people. Perhaps the reason why students in quad dorms become closer than students in other dorms is because all of these dorms have only a single exit and entrance. Additionally, they have only a single common room, which is directly in front of the main door; it's impossible for anyone exiting or entering to ignore a pair playing ping-pong, for example. The result is a community that feels cohesive and unified—in other words, close-knit. Compare this setup to a “backyard” dorm, and you'll see stark differences—social groups are more fragmented, and dorms lack a centralized culture. In these buildings, there are two common rooms and two main dorms. Travelling from one end to the other is a long trip; it follows that a fragmented building leads to a fragmented culture.

Imagine walking into Marketplace. You enter, and there are two choices to sit: right side or left side. Like a middle school cafeteria, there is nowhere to hide. Tables are long and aligned front to back. From any given viewpoint, you can see nearly 50-percent of the people in the building. The air hums with conversation, and groups interacting are often ten or more in size. Now, imagine West Union. A four-floored labyrinth seemingly out of Escher's sketchbook, West Union is defined by tiny tables and a lack of a centralized space. From any given point, you'll struggle to see even ten percent of the people in the building. The result? Stilted, planned, formal catch-ups with acquaintances and a distinct rarity of spontaneous large-group dinners with friends. The space defines the socializing. These insights marked my foray into the field employed by the museum curators in the Nasher: architectural determinism.

Architectural determinism refers to the belief that the physical environment massively affects social behavior of the inhabitants (Marmot). Although this position is often contested, it will act as the ideological framework of this paper. The Nasher museum curators and architects, whether intentionally or not, predestined the way in which the viewers move and interact socially.

As characterized by my personifications of the various elements in the “Art for a New Understanding” exhibit in the first paragraph, the museum space has an air of importance. The lofty ceilings, the cylinder lights on steel rails, and the flawless walls all contribute to a sense of grandeur that makes the temperature a few degrees colder and tilts chins a few degrees upward. Although more dynamic than permanent fixtures like the lights, artworks, and walls, even the

people within the space merit discussion on their spatial ramifications within the space. *What is the effect of viewing turtle-neck-toting, clear-frame-glasses-sporting museumgoers consuming the artwork?* I'd argue the effect is mimetic—what you see is what you become. The result is a positively reinforcing cycle of appearing intellectual and worldly, but even this is not the whole story. You do not simply appear intellectual and worldly; you present yourself how you *think* it looks to be intellectual and worldly. The next viewer imitates the new actor. Are we iteratively caricaturing ourselves? Maybe, or perhaps that view is too absolute and lacks the acknowledgment of agency which all people have.

Tabling this question of person-caused comportment, the physical arrangement and the artwork also inform social behavior—drastically so, I would argue. From a bird's eye view (if the ceiling were glass), one can see that the exhibit is arranged in six large compartments composed of three larger sections and three smaller sections. Moving circularly, the room size alternates larger and smaller as you tour the gallery—which is structured so that viewers walk in a circular route. Functionally, these segmentations serve many purposes: the increased number of walls the sections require allow for more surface area to display art. The walls also serve to obstruct our gaze, in turn preventing any viewer from being able to see how many total people are in the gallery space, boosting a sense of privacy and intimacy with the artworks.

The pieces, of course, also define the space. In large segment one (moving counterclockwise) two huge garments hang from the ceiling. As the colors of the deep red and teal tassels clash, so, too, does the textural richness with the smooth whiteness of the museum walls. The pieces displayed are not minimalist—most are quite the opposite. *So then, what is the effect of displaying the pieces on such a stylistically different plane?* I'd argue that the contrast produces something of a halo effect—the pieces seem to float, isolated from the infinite white space that the walls suggest. The most similar surface to the style of the artworks is the wooden floor. Although glossy and minimalist-passing, the wood conjures an earthiness which mirrors the aesthetic of the art. The floor allows the viewer to walk through the minimalist purgatory of the exhibit without feeling like they're free-floating in postmodern nothingness. Hypothetically, if the ground were glossy-white linoleum, then the only element keeping the viewer anchored to any kind of maximalism would be the artworks themselves—the museumgoer would be forced

to Tarzan from piece to piece to avoid plummeting to their minimalist demise in the void now beneath them.

The second large room boasts a unique element: a flat disc in the center of the room on the ground. Roughly ten feet in diameter, the snow-white dot exists as if a giant cyclops accidentally dropped a glob of paint from their massive Pantone pail as they were renovating their cave. Although the interlocking wooden sculptures that sit atop this disc are interesting, more intriguing to me is the social behavior the floor-disc causes—there was a three-foot buffer around the circumference of the disc that people would not engage. The circle is only raised from the ground by an inch or two. The sculptures on top are no more than three feet high—they're no 17-foot-David! I wondered what was stopping museumgoers from parking a toe on top of the circular surface or even stepping through the sculptures that sparsely occupy the area on top. Clearly, we recognize that the piece is a part of the gallery, and it's unacceptable to step on gallery work, but the implication of such an assumption goes further than that. Unlike physically imposing objects, like a twenty-foot-tall wall, which obviously directs viewers' behaviors, physically *unimposing* gallery items can have an equal effect on behavior. This leads to the conclusion that symbolic social cues can have an equal effect on the viewer as concrete cues.

But amidst this commentary on the bareness of the walls and the brightness of the lights, have we forgotten about our humble chair? Our portable, tubular, folding chair... who sits in the corner like a child in time-out? Our soft-spoken, apologetic friend who has to its name for comfort only a single length of cloth? A spatial element so overlooked that it took me multiple watches of the iPhone video documenting my experience of the exhibit to even notice its existence? Surrounded by real and feigned intellectualism, immersed in high-art pretension, is our Lilliputian throne, the symbol of museum security guards and the middle class. Fred Wilson's sculpture, *Guarded View*, challenges this institution by displaying headless guards on center stage in a high-class gallery (Sturken).

Every wall, light, artwork, and chair affects our social behavior. All of these elements have a unique relationship with visual power—the light *directs* what we see, the wall *constricts* what we see, the artwork *is* what we see, and the museum guard chair is what we *don't* see. In an architecturally deterministic world, the physical space controls the people. We are leaves in the river—the walls are the boulders and trunks that sculpt out paths. We leaves may know how the

eddies change our movements, and how the tree trunks cause the eddies. We leaves may know from where the boulders came, and on what ground the trunks once stood, but leaves are leaves are leaves in the river, and the leaves will flow nonetheless.

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Grading Comment:

*Shailen*

*I've found your writing lucid and entertaining all semester, but this one takes tops. This is beautifully done — I wonder if you've considered journalism as something you're interested in pursuing? Your approach of what is called "exploding the object" (the black chair) worked really well, and I appreciate your extended analysis of the ways that architecture determines social forms beyond the walls of the museum. This was quite enjoyable to read!*

*A+*

Works Cited

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