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Reconceptualizing Space: Multisensory Rooms and the Immersive Art Experience

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Honors Thesis

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Department: Art and Design

Advisor: Emily Sullivan-Smith, M.F.A.

April 2018

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Abstract

The modern human being lives in human built society, very much separated from the natural world. Often, the thoughts, ideas, and feelings that filter through from our built environments do more to disconnect us from ourselves and the present moment rather than help us feel centered in it. As an artist, I've set out to build a multisensory, immersive art installation with the intent to use this space as a way to connect more deeply to ourselves and our surroundings. This thesis is an exploration into the psychology of lived-in spaces as well as an experiment to see if installation art can blend with functional design in ways that could promote greater mental and emotional wellbeing for people in our society.

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Introduction

The purpose of my research project originates from the notion of home, or a place of refuge that promotes safety and wellbeing. I find that my artwork becomes the most powerful when it comes from a place which resonates deeply within me, and the idea behind what makes a home has been central to my life for the past few years as I have traveled extensively and experienced many different peoples and cultures. This constant movement and adaptation to different environments has required me to create a home within myself; a center so that I do not get lost in the chaos of changing worlds.

Home is a place I go to feel calm and centered again. It is a feeling of peace, an intimacy shared only with oneself. Something about it connects me back to my essence, whether that be a physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual self. To me, home is a sacred state of mind which can be translated and transformed into a physical space as well. Using a mixture of architecture, interior design, and installation art, my intention is to create such a space for others in which peaceful, relaxing, and restorative experiences become possible.

The nature of contemporary culture supports lifestyles that are devoid or lacking in practices of stillness. Always on the move and stimulated by outside influences it is difficult to feel grounded and centered. However, I believe that this makes the experience of such states more important than ever. By spending more time in environments that nurture these feelings, it is more likely that our sense of peace and wellbeing will grow.

My goal as an artist was to build a fully functioning multisensory enclosed space in which art becomes a tangible, relaxing, and grounding experience. By stimulating the senses, viewers are invited to look, listen, touch, smell, and simply be. In this way, a person's being may be felt more intensely; helping to integrate the distracted pieces for a few moments and allowing for a more authentic, undivided, and joyful experience of the senses and the self.

In Spring 2016 I had the opportunity to study in The Himalayas for a semester. During that time, I traveled throughout Nepal and India, living and working with Tibetan refugees. I was exposed to so many different peoples and cultures from all around the

world and humbled by a shared sense of humanity. My cultural immersion taught me the value of experience – especially as it relates to education and self-understanding. Finding myself in a completely foreign environment, I had to learn to rely on my senses. This allowed me to connect and engage with my new environment more fully. Remaining open to the unknown, I discovered qualities in myself that I never knew I had and that, in turn, expanded my knowledge and self-awareness.

In Nepal, so much of daily life happens out in the open. I would walk through cities and villages, bombarded by all kinds of noises, colors, and smells, an organized and vibrant chaos that I was an integral part of. At the same time, there are the Himalayas; these massive snowcapped mountains that sometimes overtake the sky. There is a vast, untamable wilderness that the peoples of this region respect and revere because they understand its pervasive power. For the Tibetans especially, the Himalayas are a sacred place, a spiritual symbol of nature's supremacy. The colorful liveliness of this other world stuck with me, as well as the powerful presence of its natural landscape.

My shock upon returning to the US was the realization that we are not so open or connected to ourselves or nature in our daily life. Our society likes to separate and isolate ourselves in boxes. In fact, it seems that we enjoy doing so. Whether this is a classroom, office, house, or even our phone and computer screens, the spaces and mediums through which we live out our lives often do more to disconnect us from ourselves and the present moment rather than help us feel centered in it.

Our lived-in spaces tend to be predictable, boring, and bland. Although these environments prize efficiency and organization, they do little to create a pleasurable aesthetic experience for the people who occupy them. Sadly, these are the spaces in which we spend most of our time. I lived in Hawaii for 6 months last year; and even in an ideal landscape and climate, many of the same templates of our built environment are still in place. Unsightly concrete buildings crowd the skyline; Airconditioned rooms replace the tropical breeze. Florescent lights are more plentiful than sunlight. In a location so ideal for living and working in harmony with nature, still there is this tendency to shut it out.



I know that our buildings are comforting. They are functional and offer safety and consistency. However, with Honolulu as an example, as our cities continues to grow, the cement world is slowly taking over the tropical jungle. We have not found a way to preserve the natural environment and expand our cities at the same time. I think by trying to separate society from nature we begin to lose that connection to what makes us human in the first place. We are losing our identification with natural world and all the forces and cycles that keep it healthy and balanced. So many people feel that disconnect, and a dissatisfaction with life in general. I believe that's because we don't know how to inhabit ourselves fully and that we've forgotten how to live in the world outside of our boxes.

As much as we try to avoid or deny it, we are organisms bound to our environments. And our environments affect us just as much, if not more than, we affect them. This idea is central to my work as an artist. It is this very connection between ourselves, others, and our surroundings that has fueled my work. The varying differences of our spaces and the people that occupy them have far-reaching effects on our mental and emotional wellbeing. It seems that the more I become aware of each spaces' unique

and subtle influence on my state of mind, the more I realize that many improvements can be made, especially in the case of the built environments we live in.

We are a society that is becoming increasingly disconnected from ourselves, each other, and both our built and natural environments because of an inability to cultivate presence. But the task to remedy this does not fall on individual mental effort alone. Just as we are subtly shaped by our environments, we also are the ones who create them. This means that ultimately, we are the artists, the designers, and the architects who imbue our spaces with feeling and meaning.

Reconceptualizing Space

As human beings, we cannot forget that our consciousness is bound to our bodies, and that our bodies are bound to their environments. What takes place in our surrounding environment directly impacts our states of mind, even if this is only on a subconscious level. But by becoming aware of these influences, we can gain control of our reactions to them. Once we understand how our environments affect us, we have the potential to change them to better suit our needs.

This is how I am reconceptualizing space: Why not first choose how we would like to feel, and then create an environment conducive to that state? If we must stay bound to our boxes, then we should at least imbue them with more beauty, movement, and life. Instead of isolation, maybe we should strive for integration, and learn as individuals and as a society, how to achieve a greater harmony with the natural world. For the immersive space that I've been creating, the feelings of presence, harmony, and stillness are key. I think these are the states necessary in helping to heal the disconnect and dissatisfaction we find so prominent within society today.

The boxes in which we typically live are not just physical but have expanded to encompass our digital worlds as well. The hundreds of stimuli we receive each day from our phones, TVs and social media enter into our awareness constantly, so that our minds are always being pulled out of the present moment. Our minds are so busy and distracted

that a large part of our inability to stay grounded in the present moment comes from not knowing how to simply BE.

Being is something we inherently are. Many people choose to meditate because of the peace they find in letting their thoughts go. Some of us may have glimpsed this state of pure observation that comes from a quiet mind, but it is an extremely difficult state to maintain for long. It requires a certain kind of stillness and clarity; qualities that our society tends to avoid cultivating. The discipline and focus required is not very fun, so it helps to find shortcuts to make it easier.

One of these shortcuts is a relaxation technique known as sensory deprivation. This is where a person enters a floatation chamber full of salt water and floats on their back, surrounded by absolute silence and darkness. This lack of sensory stimulation can help to foster mental stillness and a calm and peaceful state. In essence, sensory deprivation removes the environment from the human being. I propose that a similar state of stillness can be achieved through the opposite means: Full sensory engagement.

In my case, this takes the form of an art installation that attunes and engages a person's senses in a harmonious way. Rather than turning off the senses, this immersive structure enhances them to a degree not usually encountered in our daily lives.

Installation Art as Multisensory

The sensorium is a term that refers to the total system of perception within an organism. Beginning in the surrounding environment, a whole host of different stimuli are received through a body's sense organs. This sensory information is, in turn, received by the brain, processed, interpreted, and transformed into an awareness of experience. In essence, the sensorium is the part of ourselves which makes experience possible. It is through our senses that we are able to observe, interact with, and respond to our environments. We are able to connect to and engage with things outside of ourselves because this system of perception is in place.

Environments are multisensory. There are certain sights, sounds, smells, and textures that are unique to all places. We may not realize that we're taking all of this information in all the time though. Especially because most of the spaces we move through in daily life remain very familiar to us. This familiarity can breed a kind of disengagement precisely because we already 'know' what to expect. Our brains don't have to work as hard to process what our senses are taking in and we become complacent within our surroundings.

Our ability to keep our senses receptive and sharp is important. However, there are certain circumstances where familiarity and disengagement are beneficial to us. For instance, in a dirty or toxic environment it is probably a good idea to not fully embrace your sense of smell. Or if injured in some way, it helps to numb our sense of pain through some kind of distraction. In any kind of unsafe or unhealthy environment, dulling our sense perceptions can offer some form of protection or relief. The idea of complacency though, becomes an issue when it is the norm of our life experience. If we walk through the majority of our day in some kind of monotonous auto-pilot consciousness, if we eat without tasting, hear without really listening, or see without really taking in form or color or the texture of anything, we aren't truly engaging and participating in life.

Multisensory, in the case of an immersive art experience, is all about shaking up this kind of complacency. When we bring awareness to our perceptions, our experiences can become more powerful. If we allow our senses to remain receptive to our surroundings, we don't fall into the trap of familiarity, but rather, have the potential to perceive with more lucidity and presence. Because this clearer form of perception is easier to accomplish in new or unfamiliar circumstances, an immersive art installation seeks to create just that.

Here, the artist is not just creating a flat composition or singular object. Instead, the artist utilizes space in a way that can immerse the viewer into the work more fully. What is known, expected, and presumed in a familiar environment becomes transformed into what is new, sensational, and exciting. It takes a viewer out of their normal state of functioning and transports them into an unfamiliar, altered space. Installation art can create a totally new environment which the viewer must physically enter into, thus

instead of mere spectating, they become a participant in an unfamiliar sensory experience.

Some of my favorite art installations do just that. Works by famous artists such as Olafur Eliasson and Yayoi Kusama have the ability to transform the space around a viewer into something wonderful and magical. In one of his most famous works, *The Weather Project*, Eliasson created a giant sun that hung in the Tate Modern Museum of London. This was a massive installation with colored lights and fog machines that gave the environment a ghostly glow. Yayoi Kusama is famous for her mirrored infinity rooms which refract light and cause the viewer to feel like they are suspended in space. People enter, and with the use of just mirrors and lights, they are transported into some kind of altered world. The experience is fully immersive, expansive, and many people leave with a renewed sense of wonder and awareness.

Both of these installations immerse viewers in an altered reality, outside of the norms of their daily experiences. This is part of the magic and appeal of these spaces. However, most of the time such spaces are hard to access. Typically, one must go to art museums or science centers and even then, many of these interactive spaces are geared towards children. We understand a child's need for fun and engaging spaces, but somehow, we neglect this need as adults. What if these kind of spaces and experiences were more accessible to us? What if they became functional parts of our built environment? Would they become familiar as well or would the increase of immersive sensory spaces within our society help heal the disconnect that many of us feel?

Restoring the Connection

I am seeking to heal this disconnect between ourselves and our environments by creating a new kind of space with the potential to foster a sense of calm and presence. To accomplish this, I've relied on three important themes or aspects of experience. These are synesthesia (unity of senses), psychedelia (altered perception), and biophilia (affinity for nature).

By heightening a viewer's aesthetic awareness, it is possible to create a deeper connection between mind and body. To stimulate a kind of harmony of the senses, I'm creating a synesthetic experience. Synesthesia is a condition where one sense may be co-activated with another. A unification or blend of senses happens where listening to music may cause someone to see moving colors, or certain names may have flavors and smells attached to them. Theoretically, any one of our sensory channels can link to another, so all kinds of combinations are possible. My goal was to create an environment where this is more likely to take place. I want the viewer to experience an altered form of perception within a unified field for the senses to be engaged.

By entering the multisensory structure, viewers will be able to escape the busy world and all its distractions for a few minutes and have the opportunity to do nothing but observe. This kind of observation involves multiple senses and requires only that the viewer be receptive, aware, and open to sensation. Here, a viewer is immersed in sights, smells and sounds that all swirl together within a single space and are experienced by a single being. The colored lights are multiplied by the reflective and refractive panels, creating the sense that one is inside a giant kaleidoscope. Ambient, cosmic music and the powerful, permeating vibrations of a large singing bowl soothe the ears as well as imbue the space with an almost spiritual atmosphere. The multi-faceted light reflections and spirals of color, as well as the resonating music and vibrations, take the viewer far outside the scope of familiar, daily functioning. So much so, that the space has the potential to create experiences of altered perception and consciousness.

Although the space is contained, it is not isolated. The mirrors and windows allow a viewer to see a distorted reflection of themselves and the total environment, while the inclusion of plants helps to lessen the sense of separation between the built and natural worlds. I love plants! I love that they grow and are alive and responsive. They are one of the few things that we can bring inside our built environments that aren't stagnant. By placing them outside and within, they help to transform my structure into an organic and grounding space and connect people to some resemblance of the natural world. They also function as a source of smell. Lavender and hyacinth plants can be found inside, permeating the space with a subtle, refreshing scent.



The ZenDen

Through reconceptualizing the use and function of space, I've created a multisensory environment that uses art as the means to foster a tangible, relaxing, and grounding experience. The ZenDen is a synthesis of architecture, interior design, and installation art all geared towards nurturing a greater sense of connection and presence in its viewers. This final project represents a combination of things I've learned while studying here at UD and abroad in both the Himalayas and Hawaii. It is an exploration into the psychology of spaces and how they affect us on both conscious and subconscious levels. Finally, it is a challenge to see if installation art can blend with functional design in a way that could promote greater mental and emotional wellbeing for people in our society. What follows is the creative manifestation of the actual structure. It's conceptualization and building process has taken around a year to complete.

The first decision I came to on the creation of the Zenden was what the shape of the structure should actually be. I had thought about yurts and other nomadic structures, but eventually decided on the geodesic dome because of previous experience with the shape and the availability of materials. I came across a child's jungle gym playset with the geodesic design and purchased two them to reconfigure into a larger sphere. The structure is very sturdy and made out of galvanized steel. At 8 ft tall and 10 ft wide, it is the largest thing I've ever constructed. But without the frame, the rest of my installation would not be possible. I spray painted all the bars black and had to move the entire structure into my living room for the winter to continue working on it.



The dome has 60 interlocking triangles of three different sizes. After creating wood templates from Masonite, I cut all of the panels out from a 100ft role of mylar film. Mylar is an interesting material to work with because it is reflective and transparent at the same time. For this reason, it is able to function simultaneously like a window and a

mirror. This plays with the idea of indoor/outdoor space, and the usual walls we construct to keep the separate from each other. I've folded the mylar triangles in 3 different tessellation patterns. This helps them to capture more reflections, and to refract the lights and colors. It gives one the feeling of being inside a giant kaleidoscope.



Mylar is flimsy, so it needed a frame around it to keep its structure. I built frames for the mylar using bamboo slats. These slats came in the form of a bamboo fence which I deconstructed and cut to the appropriate lengths. After assembling and gluing these frames I tied the ends with string and used double sided tape to attach them to the mylar.

After each panel was fully assembled, I placed magnets on the back, and that is how they attach to the steel geodesic frame. All in all, this was the most time-consuming process of the entire project, as each panel had 6 steps and had to be done 60 times. However, because the panels attach by magnets, total assembly of the entire installation is relatively quick: taking around 2 hours. The following photo shows the completed ZenDen from the outside. However, the immersive art experience happens upon entering the structure.



The textiles within the installation continue the use of natural materials. An 8ft round rainbow spiral rug is made from dyed cotton fabric and braided jute fibers. A small jute ottoman sits at the center of the structure as well. The colors of the rug are picked up by the mylar and create distorted psychedelic patterns. My dog really liked this rug, so I used her as inspiration and bought white synthetic fur cushions to be placed inside the structure. These are extremely soft and help to create visual resting space as the white contrasts the explosion of color. The varying use of textiles are intended to help one become aware of different tactile sensations and promote a stimulating and cozy atmosphere.

Natural Materials and Textiles



The final piece of my installation is a large crystal singing bowl at the center of the space. Similar to a gong, this is an instrument which, when played, sends out a powerful vibration that is heard and felt at the same time. Traditionally used as an object in meditation, it emits a calming and harmonious sound which resonates throughout the structure and beyond. Some people believe that certain frequencies of sound correspond to different parts of our bodies. This singing bowl is in the key of F, which is said to symbolize the heart center and the energies of love, compassion, nurturing, and healing. Viewers are invited to play the singing bowl and feel its vibration moving through them and expanding outward. Perhaps on some level these energies are being transmitted, whether through the singing bowl, or just from the intention of the space and the people within.



Singing
Bowl

It is my hope that viewers will respond to this space with same kind of mindful energy that went into making it. I believe that art has the ability to move people. Especially in the case of an immersive installation, people have the opportunity to experience their senses on a heightened level. In this way, a person is not only a spectator of art, but becomes a vital participant in it.

This participatory aspect is essential because it is through engaging with our surroundings that we come to a fuller and more connected experience of ourselves and our lives. By bringing the built environment closer together with the natural environment, maybe we can heal the disconnect. When we start to dissolve the boundaries of our boxes, it becomes possible to integrate ourselves into the larger whole and experience the wonders it has to offer more fully.



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