

Spirit of Place

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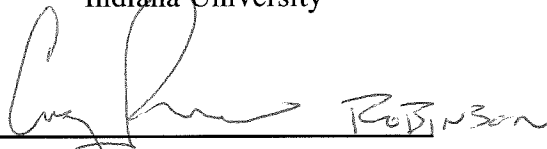
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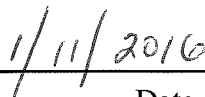


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Abstract

This paper explores the meaning and purpose of the various ancient and modern design elements of meditation room construction, and how they serve to define a specific design aesthetic inherent to all meditation rooms. Based on my investigations, I have concluded that those formal, intimate places in which we meditate are, by the content of their components, physical models of the technique itself. It is also my contention that these elements are both tools and archetypes designed to facilitate a specific meditation technique outlined in my research. I will present the subject of meditation: what it is, how it works and the results of its ritual practices and how they relate to the meditative process. Special attention is given to the composition of the furnishings that are placed around a single object of interest in the center of the room. I have designed the remaining components to be a visual extension of the center group detail in order to combine them all into one cohesive, visual unit.

Introduction

Early on I was particularly interested in David Hickey's idea that art and design are ultimately "an opportunity to get out" of all the stressful expectations and role playing of careers, positions, social statuses and so forth. Hickey maintained that it is vital, if only for a short time, to experience a renewal of the senses by becoming "alone again" through a familiar ritual. He described it as a reconnection with ourselves; to remind us that we are not some random amalgamation of distractions, but a whole, aware, in-touch human being.² Underground movements in the arts and music around the late 1950's to early 60's were a direct result of the needs of people to find a means to escape the same banal, soul-crushing grind that exists now. We are still so busy trying to "get in" to that competitive, success driven mode that we often neglect our need for some separation. For Hickey, the art world offered a "cushion against the banal".³ Gallery hopping became his ritual of finding places of seclusion and reflection. Those art galleries became places to get into that headspace and to experience this separation on an intensely personal level.

I crave this type of headspace as well. I go into my studio to get out. Deadlines, phone calls, texts, neighbors, all go away when I walk through that door, I'm no longer available. And what I find particularly interesting are the components that turn a neutral space, such as the room that eventually became my studio, into to a designated place of daily ritual filled with meaning. Ranging from formal tearooms, chapels, and galleries, to relaxed, intimate spaces, such as a quiet living room, all operate by creating an environment that is completely centered, focused and distraction free. They are designed in pointed opposition to the fragmented, information-saturated spheres we find ourselves in every day.

The bulk of my research has been of the study of the formal designs of interior rooms meant to induce this type of headspace, particularly meditation rooms. There are underlying elements that are common to all of these. For example, the architecture is designed to manipulate the senses by incorporating changes of scale, light or sound. An integrated threshold will serve to physically separate what's out there from what's in here. The interiors have a distinct visual center that is defined by the architectural-structural plan, and the objects within tend to be organized around a focal point in the center of the room. A good example would be the placement of the altarpiece within the sanctuary of a Catholic church. These rooms often serve as a safe haven in which the adjacent community may practice meaningful daily ritual. Once the interiors are demarcated and the interior objects composed, it becomes identified as a place where the person is invited to repeat an intimate act as often as they want. In his essay *Space and Place*, Yi Fu Tuan describes it very concisely as; "a center of felt value that grows into a place enriched with self-study".⁴ Within our respective routines, we all carefully choose the place where we perform a reverent act.

Humans have a natural tendency toward habit that drives our need for ritual to break up those activities that are relatively meaningless. They provide a healthy, rhythmical balance to counter the hyperbolic tempo of daily life. Indeed, it's how the majority of us survive with our sanity intact. But daily rituals have two major requirements: isolation and concentration. These can be hard to come by as we get caught up in the web of our professional lives. Perhaps the most beautifully simple and elegantly complex example of this concept is the design tradition of the meditation room.

Historically, the design models that are built to accommodate meditation proper have

changed little; only the aesthetics have evolved to meet modern tastes. From the most urbane, contemporary Christian chapel, to the understated sophistication of a modern Japanese tearoom, they share the same design language.

What I am presenting here is a room conceived and designed in the meditative tradition. The design scope of this thesis work is to construct a space that eliminates distractions, quiets the mind from its normal thoughtful chatter, and re-introduces one to a crystal clear state of awareness. The furnishings are arranged around an object of interest in the center of the room. The viewer is invited to sit on the circular mats and fix their attention upon the tip of a plumb bob atop the center table. It is the only object on the table surfaces. During the practice of sustained, single pointed concentration, the plumb bob then becomes the idea and the object of the meditation, and finally, the integration of the viewer with the object. The entire interior space is designed to facilitate the practice. The whole vibe of the room is akin to that meditative headspace Hickey was writing about; the opportunity to “become human again”.

The Meditation Tradition

The beginnings of meditation are lost in history, but documentation can be traced back to at least 3000 years.⁵ Perhaps because mediation practice is equally taught in the oral as well as written traditions. Much is dependent on the teacher-student relationship. Some schools do not write anything down, the teachings being passed through word of mouth on down the line, and yet others are sensitive to posterity and provide a sacred document(s) in order to further communicate the theory and practice. Some maintain that meditative practices were originally devised to aid one in realizing the capability of the

highest possible functional harmony in body and mind, but these views differ from culture to culture and vary from mind to mind.

Meditation proper may be defined as the practice of training the mind to induce or develop an altered state of consciousness, “the goal being either to realize some spiritual, physical benefit, or for the mind to simply acknowledge its content without becoming identified with that content.”⁶ According to formal method, this is how the mind resists identification with thought: through a willful detachment from the content of our thoughts, and ultimately, detachment from the thoughts themselves.

Now this new mode contains an interesting paradox. How do I train myself to become unaware of a thought that I’m already aware of? The trick is to sever the mind from the question itself. The classics on the subject offer the analogy of the moon’s reflection in a running stream. Although the water is continually moving, the moon remains still. In this example, the image of the moon becomes the object of our fixed attention and the water is made up of the countless thoughts that continue to go this way and that. Yet we do not give consideration to any of them, we simply let them slip away.⁷ Eventually the result of this practice is a return to our first, unadulterated, base state of consciousness. Unbound by the chatter of the mind, our awareness becomes neutral, pure and unbiased. In time, the student eventually becomes a master when he is able to sustain that new mode of awareness to any life activity.⁸ Quite simply, if we persist on a daily basis, then meaning will find the opportunity and fill the act.

Along with the theory, there are droves of specific styles of meditation, and many different types of activities commonly referred to as meditation practice. Cultural, religious and political influences no doubt shaped the stylistic landscape of meditation; even

geographical location plays an important role in an identifiable way individuals meditate. Some styles are “sitting practices” and emphasis non-movement. To move around or to fidget about is regarded as a distraction to the task at hand, which is to still the mind and block out distractions. These tend to be popular within different religious systems and often play a major role in ceremonial rites and rituals. On the other hand, there are meditation styles such as dance, music and poetry that consider movement to be one of the fundamentals to a successful practice.⁹ G.I. Gurdjieff, who is probably the most famous example of one who taught moving meditation through sacred dance, referred to himself as a “teacher of dancing” and became popular for his meditative techniques in the 1870’s.¹⁰ From my research I have found that historically, people are encouraged to work from their own personal experience in whatever manner pleases them.

One particular form of meditation practice, and the one that is the focus of this thesis, aims at an “effortlessly sustained, single pointed concentration.”¹¹ The neutral, pure and unbiased mode of awareness that we started out with is now replaced with a single idea, object or thought that fills all corners of one’s consciousness. As the Taoists say, “like water, it penetrates and fills all space”¹². Another way of putting it is an exercise in concentration: my ability to suppress all thought by direct concentration upon a single thought for as long as desired.¹³ In the end, one needs to be able to quiet the mind long enough to experience the next stage of the technique. The aim is to develop an overwhelming, indestructible sense of contentment and well being in the practitioner. And eventually, to retain this sense during the transition from the meditation room to one’s workaday mode of existence. It becomes a means, not an end.

The fascinating thing about this form of meditation is that there is an entire design lexicon that has been developed and refined since antiquity to support the practical techniques. Here is where my interests lie. I will talk about the components of the meditation room using this language, and I'm able to do that in a clear and concise way by breaking down the different features that make up the design. As I flesh them out, I'll describe them in terms of both signs and symbols. First, they act as signs in the practical sense: literally they are what they are, a physical boundary, a threshold, or an object of devotion; things meant to inform or direct the viewer. Secondly, they are also symbols that carry many layers of meaning, and over time they become those archetypes specific to this tradition.

The physical interplay of these design features serves as an overall mechanism that allows the mind to understand and accept the discipline of meditation according to one's own individual temperament. This is why the design tradition remains fresh and vital. Because cultures seem to learn meditation through the color of their own unique filters, no one can predict what the next generation's tastes will be. Each new wave has their own design lexicon and their own unique perspective. With this in mind, let's move on to the design.

Spirit of Place

Demarcation, Threshold and Passage

Using the extant architectural plan of the room (Figure1), we begin the steps of demarcation using the geometry of a square around an origin. The origin, or what could be considered the visual beginning the architectural footprint of the room, is found by drawing two lines that extend from corner to corner. Where the lines cross is our relative

center. I say relative because this is often not the mathematical center but the proportional center of the room. The square creates an outline of the dimension around the origin. Later when we get to the 3D orientation, the space's volume will extrapolate off the dimensions of the human body. So in this sense, man really is "the measure of all things".¹⁴ When these first two steps are complete, the demarcated space now becomes a place; the vessel to be filled with the nature of one's practice. It becomes the where we choose to perform daily ritual to perform those reverent acts of intimacy that create extraordinary meaning in our lives.

Again, manipulating the square, we can introduce the second element of the threshold by bisecting one corner at a 45-degree angle, completely removing the corner from the room's original footprint. (Figure 2) A threshold, unlike a doorway, changes the design entirely. A doorway is only considered a method of entrance and egress, it can be placed anywhere without any intrusion on the origin. A threshold, by contrast, completely removes one of the corners of the room, which is a dramatic alteration to the strict symmetry of the square. It creates a 2D orientation between the viewer outside the room, and the origin inside the room. We now stand at point A, and only by passing through the threshold may we access point B. Ritual place making tells us that there needs to be a separation between A and B because they are identified as two very different headspaces; one immersed in the fragmented, sporadic environment outside, and one in the singular, focused concentration inside.¹⁵ Part of the meditation training is in teaching our minds to recognize the difference.

The third design element, that of passage is perhaps the most important and compelling. We have placed a threshold between the viewer and the origin inside the room;

now one must make the decision to pass from our workaday space “A” into the phenomenal space “B” which tradition tells us is an altered state of consciousness. (Figure 3)

The passage serves as a psychological-physical transition from one to the other. The archetype is that of a marker; once we have crossed, there is no going back from where we’ve come. Meditation invites one to take the leap into uncharted perceptual territory with no regard for the way things appear now, because according to the adapts, things are not as they appear to be in the first place.

Meditative places carry a certain reverence in various cultures and religions. Muslims will remove their shoes before entering a mosque to pray. In Japanese tea ceremony, the participants will change into a uniform before entering the teahouse. And I change into my old, weathered and beloved shop apron before entering into my studio. Each time we cross into these intimate settings, we reconstruct our intent. This is one mechanism that allows our minds to be guided through the beginning discipline of meditation.

Centering the Origin

Now that we have established a phenomenal space by boundaries and marked its passage via a threshold, one needs to define the relative origin of the room. Centering the origin (Figure 4) are the steps in creating a focal point in the meditation room where one can sit and get down to it. If we return to the strict geometric template of the square, we can now introduce two concentric circles within its interior. I have designed the furnishings accordingly. Seating platforms become the outer, circular boundary that surrounds the nesting tables, and the table group is the inner boundary around the origin. Essentially the circles divide the room’s square footage into thirds after their layout. The

aim here is to establish a spatial hierarchy, as we get closer the center, the level of intimacy is increased. Because the circle has no beginning, the eye cannot fixate on any point around the circle's circumference. It is important that our gaze doesn't get hung up on anything other than the center origin that contains the single object of our concentration. (Figure 5)

My approach to the nested table design (Figures 6-6a) is loosely based on the Japanese concept of Wabi-Sabi. In Japanese aesthetics, an appreciation for the beauty of imperfection is the basis of tearoom design. It states that imperfection and impermanence are the key ingredients to the ideal of perfection itself. The Japanese philosophy of Wabi-Sabi teaches that to seek a perfect prototype of beauty is a false search; imperfection is the inspirational mold for our ideal of perfection.¹⁶ When Wabi-Sabi is applied to design; the method is to place one imperfect element in the composition to demonstrate its presence.

In order to convey this, I created a break in the continuous line of the circle. The three parts fall away from one another in tiers. Again I am trying to construct a hierarchy through terracing each table down in height from the next. Each piece seems to take on its own personality in the composition, like three siblings competing for space. They are related, but individual. And when assembled, they become a collective table form.

Integration

The purpose of this design is to facilitate a form of meditation that aims at a sustained single pointed concentration. The technique requires focusing the attention on a single object for as long one would like. By concentrating on this object, all other thoughts are eliminated from the mind. I chose a plumb bob because it has a unique, instantly recognizable shape. (Figure 7) The geometry of a truncated cone has always intrigued me. The practical function of using this tool to find plumb center is an old school technique and

a good illustration of the slow, deliberate process of quieting the mind. The plumb bob gradually sways back and fourth on the inertia created by swinging from an anchor above. As the weighted bob slowly succumbs to gravity's pull, it eventually becomes motionless at what is termed as plum center. This is similar to meditation in that it requires a steady, ramping down of mental chatter until the mind is still.

The technique I'm describing, which is the next design element in the meditation tradition, should be considered an integration of oneself with the object being concentrating upon. Maurice Merleau-Ponty described it as a total integration of self, object, and perception. The perception is what the technique seeks to change. Our perception of this object then expands and transforms until the plumb bob is the only object in our entire field of perception.¹⁷ Pythagoras's statement that man is the measure of all things no longer applies when it is compared to the inflation of the mental image. Because the single object takes the place of all others, everything else diminishes in importance.

The room's interior must orientate to the object as well. The components of the meditation room can be seen as a series of concentric circles and squares. (Figure 8) The plumb bob rests in the place of our center origin. By becoming the center of a series of vertical, geometric planes from floor to ceiling, I have aligned everything to the room's origin, or relative center, much as the plumb bob does. This was visually designed to raise the importance of meditation to the level of daily ritual practice. From the moment one enters the room and is seated, the attention is drawn to the plumb bob in the center of the room. The detail view shows the plumb bob tip coming down to rest just above the circular aluminum fixture sitting on the table surface. With subtle changes in air pressure in the

room, the plumb bob moves ever so slightly. These subtle, delicate movements help with the difficult challenge of holding one's concentration on the plumb bob, while attempting to shut out all other thoughts.

Upward Orientation

The last design element in the meditation tradition is an upward orientation. Until now, everything I have talked about has been geared toward turning one's attention and awareness to a single object and keeping it there. The technique of single pointed concentration upon the plumb bob is, in the best sense, the micro practice of meditation.

The next technical step is the macro practice of extrapolating one's awareness from the tip of the plumb bob outward into the entire interior space of the room. So far, the result of our concentration upon the origin's plumb bob has indeed created a microcosm of attention bound up at the very tip of the bob. For the interior space to then become a macrocosm of Meditation technique, I have designed a cloud structure with a baffled surface that is suspended above the viewer. (Figure 9) The cloud structure represents a 3D orientation that is intended to be a guide for the meditator to fix the attention in stages. First, by focusing on the tip of the plumb bob and then to the baffled surface of the cloud, and dissipating outward to the remaining dimensions of the room. The plumb bob is anchored at its four corners which are tied together before a single cable draws down and stops just above the detail sitting on the table. In this way, the attention begins to cycle upward, outward and then back down again to the object. My design is meant to induce this subtle rhythm that allows one to ease into meditation practice. (Figure 10)

Through my research, I have discovered the reason and purpose of why we design mediation rooms. We do it for the same reason we design any intimate place: to return again and again to practice those daily rituals that continue to inspire, heal, and ground us.

This mediation technique is a means for us, not an end. Earlier I discussed one of the goals of meditation as being a way to create an indestructible sense of well being in the practitioner, but the practice has something more to offer; more than just sitting and feeling good. It offers one the opportunity to go out and live with a deeper sense of perceptual awareness. The challenge is to carry this newly developed perception back into the world and beyond the walls of the meditation room. And ultimately to once again bring us to that wellspring of a fresh awareness to invigorate our relationship with the world we live in.

Figure 1

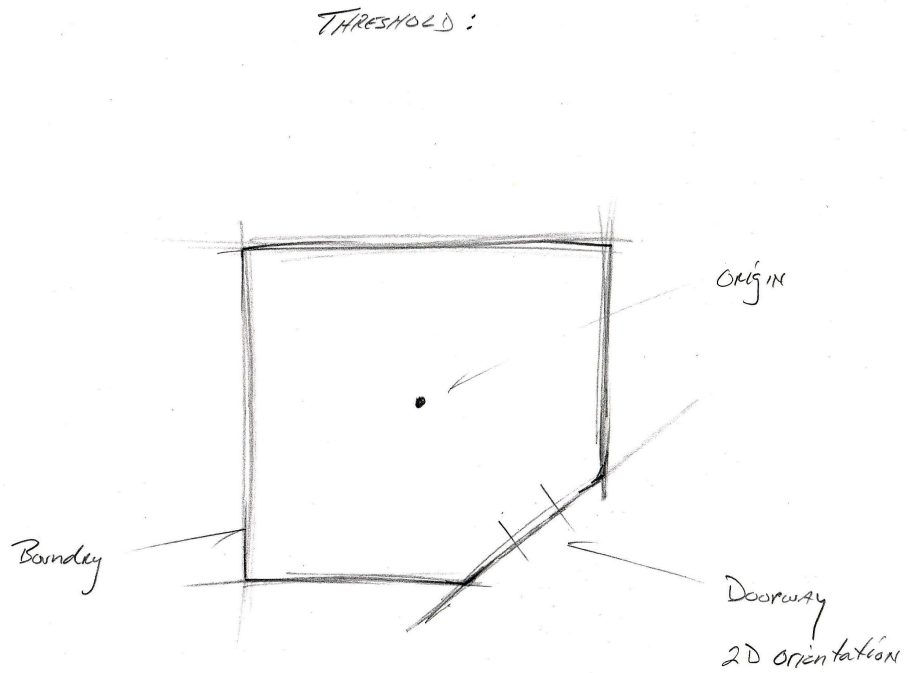
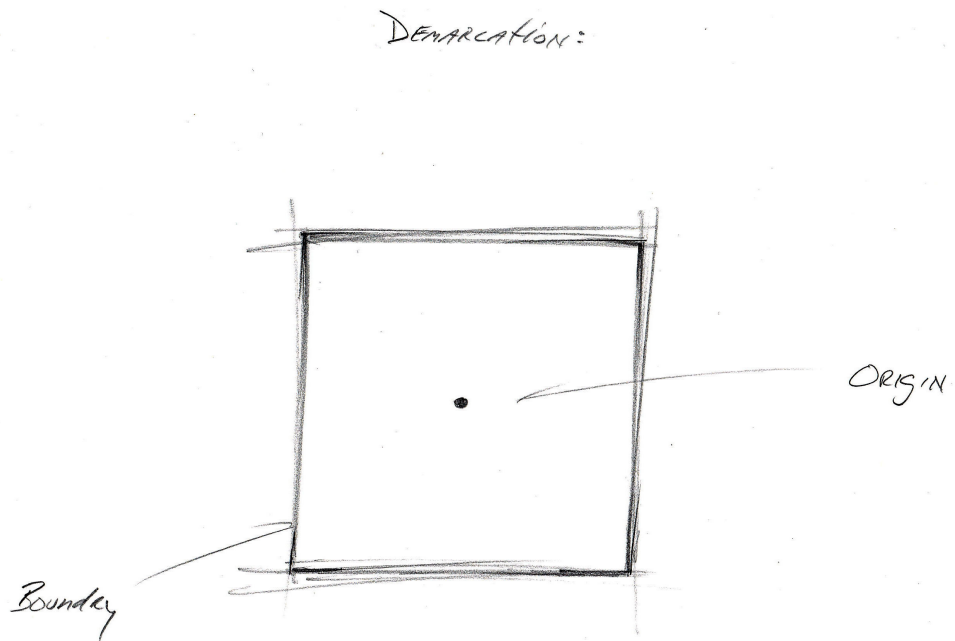


Figure 2

Figure 3

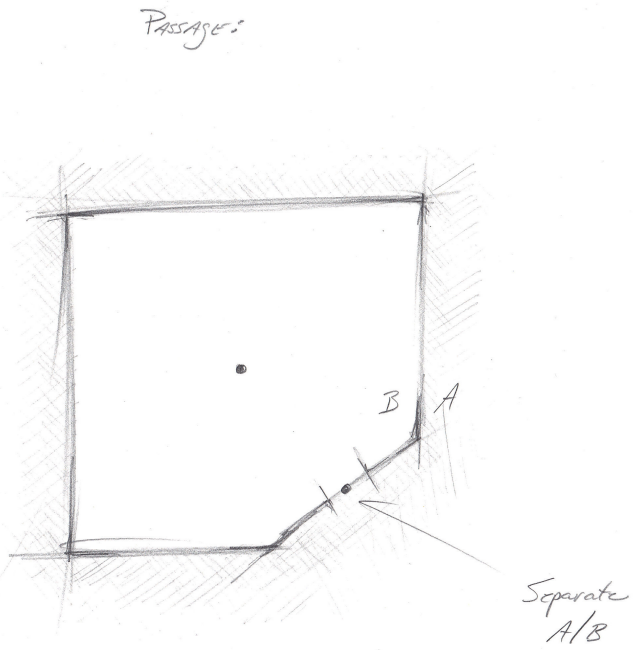


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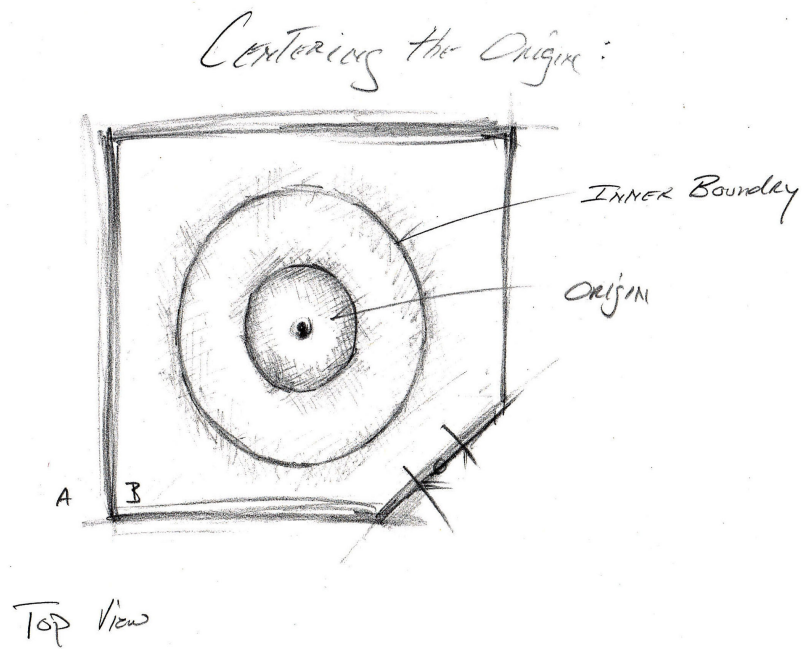


Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 6a

Figure 7

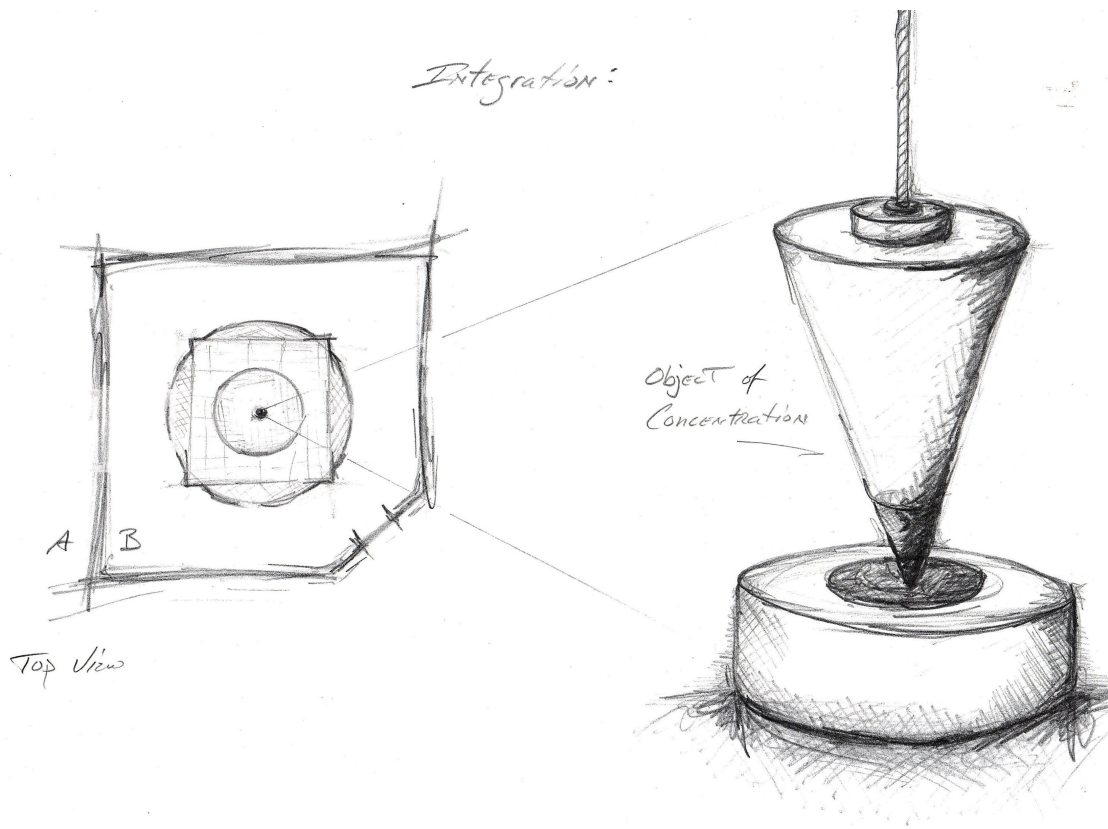
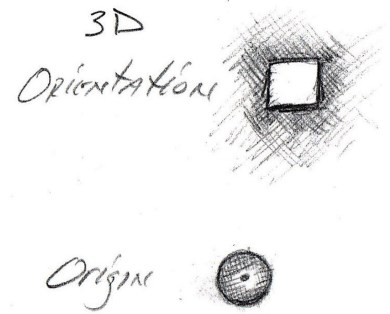
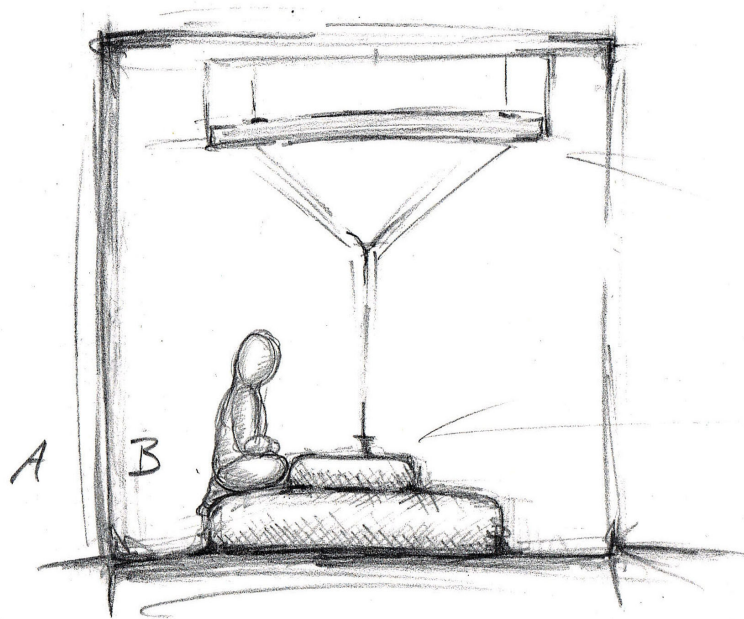


Figure 8

UPWARD ORIENTATION:



Section view

Figure 9



Figure 10

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