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## INTRODUCING EXPERIENTIAL QUALITIES IN ARCHITECTURAL EDUCATION

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### Abstract:

Recently, a growing number of architectural practitioners and researchers have become interested in how people experience the built environment. Still, systematic or explicit knowledge on experiential qualities of the built environment -which are inherently subjective- lacks completely. Moreover, tools used to document or represent architectural space equip designers with the techniques they need to record its tangible and objective aspects, but do not contribute to coping with its phenomenal characteristics.

This surprising blind spot becomes particularly apparent in academic education, where experiential qualities tend to be suppressed as criteria to assess architecture in favor of more rational and quantifiable features.

The paper reports on applied empirical research -based on a course unit for master students in architecture- that focusses on the development of a guiding system that can assist in collecting and organizing experiential architectural parameters. As part of an ongoing research project, it aims to provide an aid to introduce the notion of experiential qualities in architectural education. And by including students in the development, it also acts as an instant test case.

During the course unit, twelve students collected and transcribed testimonies of various users on experiential qualities of several recent buildings in Flanders. A selection of twenty-three descriptions were studied by thematic content analysis in order to portray what is perceptually present in the user's experience of architecture. Core-themes that manifested in the testimonies were organized in three categories according to their overall content: denotative, connotative and affective expressions. The results from the analysis were then compared with related architectural ideas and concepts (Böhme, Zumthor, Makitalo, Mallgrave) in order to clarify, refine and -if only speculatively- explain the findings from the empirical research.

Research results show that spatial experiences are triggered by generators, that can be identified by their objective qualities, observed by the senses. As such, generators describe more or less quantifiable elements of architecture space (denotative). But, when functioning as generators, they operate through 'Ekstasen', 'Ausstrahlung' or 'Charakter'. Spatial qualities always result from a combination of 'Ekstasen' and require an empathic relation between subject and object. This relation is predominantly mimetic, not causal. The experiential content is communicated by connotative and affective expressions and its nature depends largely on personal sensitivities, that are in turn rooted in sense memory.

Based on these findings, a workable model is being developed that allows to collect and organize experiential data. Between February and June 2016, the model will be tested by master students on a number of Flemish crematorium buildings, with the aim to optimize its use for architectural education.

### Keywords:

experiential qualities, phenomenal characteristics, workable model, architectural education