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Question: A Behavioral Study of Architecture

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/86p951p7>

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Publication Date

2019-10-01

Peer reviewed

QUESTION: A BEHAVIORAL STUDY OF ARCHITECTURE?

The ease with which we perceive architecture stands in sharp contrast to its formal richness, but how is it that the same thing can be easy and difficult at the same time? Take the case of Louis H. Sullivan's ornament (figure 1): Within the blink of an eye, your brain takes in and reads a mind-blowing vocabulary of shapes, contours, crossing lines, and surfaces, which are each complex enough to fill a voluminous treatise of art. Yet, only a few of the visitors of this marvelous architecture ever needed a book to see what they saw. Sullivan's theoretical work, "The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered" (1896), certainly adds meaning to ornament, but wouldn't it be interesting to know what the brain's first steps are when interpreting architecture? Did Sullivan maybe sense the hidden workings of the brain, foretoking later neuroscience in his early theory? Or were the German gestalt psychologists the first to ask questions of phenomenology in the twentieth century?

Regardless of how you answer, maybe the twenty-first century will eventually bring new technologies that will allow us to address the matter directly and scientifically. It is already easy to track eye motion, and it is inconvenient but possible to record and visualize the hidden workings of the brain. Not all laboratory methodologies can be deployed outside the lab, but maybe the time will eventually be ripe to experiment in the real world in Sullivan's original architecture. Then what will happen next? Will a new perspective be introduced, additional to the historian's? Will knowledge of the brain's hard-wired interpretation of visual, geographical, and other sensory information help preservationists and historians praise and appraise architecture? Let us imagine that we would study the Sullivan Center in downtown Chicago. Would this not be the beginning of a new behavioral study of history, similar to the behavioral study of economics pioneered by Dan Ariely of Duke University or Richard Thaler, the 2017 Nobel Prize recipient from the University of Chicago?

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Figure 1: Sullivan's ornament on a rainy day.
(Source: Dan Costa Baci.)