

Do absent users blindside architects?

February 8 2017

A visionary edifice, a revolutionary feat of engineering, a blot on the landscape, a brutalist carbuncle. Rarely does architecture lead to subtle superlatives. But, sometimes architects design with only a vague notion of the users of their constructions. In the absence of personal profiles of the people that will swing through those grand front doors and ride the escalator to the giddy heights of the top floor, what guides an architect in planning their stucco stairwells, their fantastical fenestrations, and their vaulted visions?

Writing in the *Journal of Design Research*, Ann Heylighen of KU Leuven, Belgium and her co-worker Lore Verhulst and colleague Catherine Elsen at the University of Liège, explain that as design processes become more complex, the distance between architect and user increases. "In large-scale projects, future users often remain absent or hypothetical during design, and in some design competitions, architects are not even allowed to interact with the client," they point out. The team has carried out an in-depth study from the penthouse suite down to the basement to look at real-world design and attempt to fathom who it is that architects have in mind when they design given that actual users of their proposed buildings are usually absent.

Fundamentally, the team has found a significant gap between how users are considered in the research literature in this field and the observations of architects. Indeed, architects themselves apparently do not employ the term "user" at all. Moreover, one has to then question how, in the absence of putative [users](#), [architects](#) keep in mind such requirements as sustainability, accessibility, heritage value, and the people, the

stakeholders, client bodies, consultants, contractors, who will be involved. Architects have to [design](#) for "the other" but without necessarily knowing who the other is.

Perhaps it is this disconnect that gives rise to those emotionally charged responses to new buildings whether unsightly carbuncle or dizzying edifice.

More information: Whom do architects have in mind during design when users are absent? Observations from a design competition. *J. Design Research*. [DOI: 10.1504/JDR.2016.082032](https://doi.org/10.1504/JDR.2016.082032)

Provided by Inderscience

Citation: Do absent users blindside architects? (2017, February 8) retrieved 28 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-02-absent-users-blindside-architects.html>

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