



***Beyond Narrative:  
Discovering the Innate  
in our Environmental  
Responses***

***Más allá del relato:  
Descubrir lo innato en  
nuestras respuestas al  
entorno***

***Para além da narrativa:  
À descoberta do nosso  
passado profundo  
nas nossas respostas  
ambientais***

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In deconstructing the power of architecture and urban design we typically resort to narrative, a story about what our environment means. This is natural, as we are creatures of narrative, reliant on shared stories that impart meaning. Modern architects are notorious for narratives which diverge radically from those of the public at large, in which theory as narrative can create its own private conversation, or even its own language foreign to the layperson. Yet an art critic or historian rarely relies on an artist's interpretation

of their own work. Likewise we should feel free to discard architects' imposed narrative and to dig into our physiological reactions to their work. By doing so we avoid endless arguments about style and form, precedent, and purpose. Our physiology is the product of evolution and operates independently of fashion or theory. And we ignore our instinctual responses to environmental cues at our peril. These evolved to enhance our chances of survival, and continue to determine our internal states, up to and including physical and mental wellbeing. Design for optimal physiological response is set to become a reality. In the second edition of *Cognitive Architecture* (Routledge 2021) Ann Sussman and Justin B. Hollander share their vision for achieving this.

Places carry an emotional charge and can be comforting, inspirational, depressing, or even threatening. Such reactions are hardwired as a result of millions of years of natural selection. Specific behaviors such as edge-seeking (*thigmotaxis*) or facial pattern recognition (*pareidolia*) are shared across species as tried and tested means of self-preservation. Safety is an overarching behavioral priority, and our mammalian mechanism for achieving this is attachment, facilitated by our social instincts. Such comprehensive evolutionary adaptation informs perceptual processing and extends to all reactions to our environment. The fractal complexity of nature conforms to innate expectations, and its absence is as troubling and as ultimately harmful as social isolation.

Once we understand these dynamics we can no longer disregard the dimension of human perception in environmental design. Health outcomes alone require that we investigate this area in earnest. Sussman and Hollander deserve our gratitude for bringing the matter to our attention. Now it is up to us to apply their findings.

**Ann Sussman and Justin B. Hollander**  
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