

Autism and architecture

Autismo e arquitetura

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Dear Editor,

It has been proven that existing research regarding the relationship between Architectural Space and people with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) is scarce, despite extensive research being carried out in recent years into Autism.

Many definitions of “architecture” have been put forward throughout history, all of them coinciding in the fact that its main objective or purpose is “dwelling”.

Norberg Shultz (1980) states that, in order to research and understand an architectural space, it is necessary to understand existential space, that is, the concept of space that allows man to create a stable image of what surrounds him, at the same time allowing him and enabling him to belong to a society and culture.

Heiddeger (2001) concluded his conference “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” with the appeal “*build out of dwelling and think for the sake of dwelling*”, thus making the objective of architecture clear.

This fundamental objective is a consciously underlying notion for the architect. The fact that the built environment is a space to be lived in, inhabited, is an essential condition in order for architecture to exist.

This search for a “*lived-in, inhabited space*” carries with it the fact that architecture is brought to life taking into account the existence of people with varying degrees of disability (mainly visual, hearing and motor impairments); allowing the architect to create designs and projects convincingly, creating spaces that can be *lived in* without architectural barriers.

However, today, other disabilities are obviated in this process of making the built environment “*accessible*”.

Dianne Smith (2009) claims as such when referring to people with certain cognitive, sensorial deficiencies etc.; disabilities which we determine to be “*less visible*”. Among these we can find people with autism, for whom the supposition regarding how spaces are to be perceived and inhabited is far from the truth, and who, due to their deficits, sometimes have to make an enormous effort to be able to assimilate and understand the environment surrounding them, provoking a “*blockage*” as far as the composition of the environment is concerned, which in turn leads to a state of crisis.

Therefore, the architectural environment is a factor which directly affects those individuals with “*less visible*” deficiencies, as the architect John Jenkins confirms (Humphreys, 2008, p. 41).

We shall briefly present some of the aspects of people suffering from ASD, for whom a solution can be found using architectural design mechanisms.

The essential characteristics of autistic spectrum are reflected in the extreme difficulty when changing activity, including simply

moving from one space to another. The inability to “*imagine*” and create a mental image of what might be at the other side of a door is enough to trigger a panic attack.

The architect solves this problem by “*anticipating*” the activities to be carried out, responding to this inability to create a mental image by designing a clear structure and adding elements that provide the built element with a certain level of order and unity, resulting in a building which is easy to read, predictable and even “*imaginable*”.

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