

# Exploring the Relationship Between Contemplative Spaces, Human Experience and Spiritual Architecture

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**Abstract:** To lead a fit and peaceful life, it has become very important to dwell in spaces that are contemplative and comforting. Space for contemplation can also lead the architect towards spiritual realms. The current era can be described as tumultuous, changeable, and unsettled. Rapid urbanisation and extreme intensification are being accompanied by technical advancements and a push for sustainability. Traditional architecture was often purpose-built with little care for adapting to new users, various purposes, or changing conditions down the road. Today, however, it is suggested that building flexibility is urgently required due to climate change, changing demographics, resource depletion, and affordability issues. It is believed that architecture in the twenty-first century must approach similar levels of flexibility and adaptability for a variety of reasons, one of which being the mental health and spiritual connection of the user. Rather than deconstructing structures to fill landfills, our architecture should be designed to be disassembled, reassembled, and reused in order to generate spaces of contemplation. There can be various ways in which architecture can bring out such spaces. It can be a garden oasis in urban land crowded with buildings, a small skylight in a dark space, framing a window to form a vista. Which language of architecture has to be used to create contemplative space depends upon for whom the space is being designed. The current study is the result of extensive literature reviews in the fields of contemplative architecture and spirituality. The focus of this paper is to study the impact of physical surroundings and architectural structures on leading a healthy lifestyle. Different spaces can be designed which connect the user to themselves in a deeper way by proposing a space where they have freedom to think or meditate and feel the present moment. People suffering from depression or stress can benefit from such contemplative spaces.

**Keywords:** contemplative spaces, spiritual architecture, human behaviour, human experience

## 1. Introduction

People spend the majority of their lives in buildings, which have a major impact on their lives. Spatial relationships have the ability to influence behaviors, decisions, and emotions, as well as physical and mental health (Andréa de Paivaa, 2019). Understanding how people are impacted by spaces has always been the main concern for architects (Figure 1). Through practical exploration, it has become possible to track changes in behavior. Humans have a variety of subconscious preferences and habits that control how they react to any given built environment (Rock, 2010). Individuals are always interacting with the various situations in which they find themselves. A hot environment can make individuals sweat, feel uneasy, and make it difficult to concentrate, which reflects the response of their physical bodies. Some people can feel anxious, vigilant, and unable to rest in a dark space, which is a response to their mental state. A well-lit classroom with enough natural light can help pupils pay attention in class. The environment has an impact on the people who live in it on some level. This relationship can be described using the architecture of individual relationships. The designed place should cause the user to think, feel, and act in such a way that they are profoundly lifted up to a higher realm. The user must be at ease after witnessing the many aspects of architecture and must fully appreciate the environment. Users learn a lot about themselves, the people they meet, and the environment around them through the architectural journey. The spaces created to allow users to absorb, process, and respond to the architectural design journey will result in a design that actually "listens" to them. Architectural spaces have the power to teach, inspire, and motivate people.

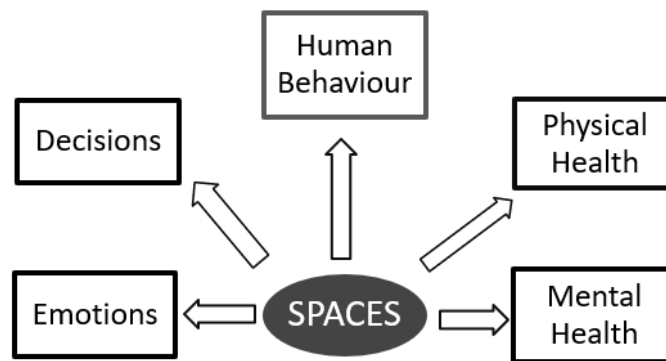


Figure 1. Effect of physical environment on human experience (source: authors)

People's conduct and well-being are influenced by their physical surroundings. Some effects are clearly detectable by observation, while others necessitate a more in-depth investigation to comprehend and quantify. While many changes might be beneficial, others can have a negative impact on one's well-being and mental and physical health (De Paivaa, Andréa, 2019). Recent discoveries, technology, and study methodologies in the field of neuroscience can aid in the understanding of physiological changes in the brain and body that cause behavioural changes. Individuals' physiological changes differ depending on when and for how long they are exposed to the same place. Variations in our surroundings have an emotional impact on the brain, which affects our behaviour. Architectural design affects our brains and behaviour when it comes to planning the settings in which we live (Gage, 2003). Cultural and individual memories and experiences, along with the occurrence and interval of connection to the environment, are all features that affect how individuals adapt to their physical and social surroundings. Furthermore, the brain actively acts together with the physical environment, as it is always functional, such as working, relaxing, learning, improving, memorizing, and creating. All of these vital factors have an impact on how architecture affects people. As a result, investigating the effects of the built environment on humans is difficult due to the numerous variables involved, some of which are difficult to quantify.

The place is a meaning-based term. With meanings created from interactions with the physical background, certain place writings lay emphasis on a strong "social creation" outlook. That sense of place is not inherent in the physical surroundings, but rather in people's understandings of it, which are formed via interaction with it. Through lived experience, spaces become loaded with meaning and become "places." New physical environment is a "blank space," having no distinguishing qualities of its own: When we provide value to an undifferentiated space, it becomes a location (Tuan, 1977). Individuals assign meaning to the environment based on their social and cultural experiences. Hence, a single space might comprise several "places," reflecting the variety of human culture and the diverse experiences people have had with the environment. (Eisenhauer, 2000) Places take account of both the physical context and human involvement and understanding (Brandenburg, 1995). Place attachment is a crucial concept that outlines the development of a good emotional bond between people and their environment. Place attachment is a person–location bond that develops because of certain place conditions and people's characteristics. As a result, our surroundings continue to shape and change us throughout our lives (Shumaker, 1983).

## 2. Research methodology

The objective of the research is to investigate and understand the relationship between contemplative spaces, human experience, and spiritual architecture. A qualitative research method has been used in this paper. The internet and secondary data from relevant published academic literature, journal articles and research papers were used to conduct the systematic literature review. The data collected in the qualitative research comes from a number of case study examples that are described descriptively and are supported by illustrations and photographs to reinforce the arguments put forward. The basic concepts and backgrounds are investigated through literature and online media, observations to work for the qualitative analysis conducted for the relationship between contemplative architecture, human experience, and spirituality. A framework model related to the factors and parameters enhancing contemplative spaces have been proposed in this paper.

## 3. Experience of spirituality in human behaviour and architecture

Spirituality can be defined in a variety of ways, including divinity, heavenliness, and holiness (Simpson, 1997). The presence of a special meaning, such as spirituality in architecture, can result in environmental and spatial immortality. As a

result, the location will be addressed and honoured not only at this time in history but also in the future, and it will serve as a space for improving human morale and spiritual uplift (Pourjafar, 2009). Spirituality pervades many aspects of everyday life, including architectural design, building, and work. Impermanence and non-attachment are powerful Buddhist principles that have had demonstrable effects on design theories and practices (Sinclair, 2016). Whether it's through spatial sequencing and organization, aspects of space-creating, scale and shape, or the symbolism of surface articulation, architecture communicates through spatial tools. This feature of encoding and decoding allows the user and the architectural product to have a real-time conversation. The communication's affectivity is determined by the encoded signals' ease of comprehension and their built-in compliance. This interaction occurs on three levels: sensory, experiential, and associational (Pandya, 2015).

Human behaviour has to be considered as the main parameter in the design process. But still, very little research has discussed the impact of the built environment and architecture on human psychology (Kader). The architect designs the outcome of the constituent spaces and forms, and thus, the function of this space is to fulfil biological, physical, and psychological needs, thus positively enhancing the psychological aspect of the user (Nasma Maan Mohammed, 2020). Emotions and thoughts and the way they are expressed determine the lastingness of any building. Mostly, architecture is either considered an art or a science. "Architecture sometimes overcomes aspects of scientific rationalism and sometimes facets the emotional expression of artistic intuition; both types can find an unbalanced architecture, so rational architecture is not a good building. Emotional architecture is also a good building, and we find it quickly" (Nasma Maan Mohammed, 2020). Spiritual places exploited these characteristics to the fullest, going beyond case functions and physical manifestations to instil the metaphysical and notional. As a result, they continue to be useful studies for understanding key architectural phenomena such as timelessness, experientialism, and interaction. Sacred architecture deserves to be studied and inferred for its basic spatial values and architectural syntax, which can be integrated and utilised in contemporary design, not necessarily as religious landmarks or destinations of faith, but solely as experientially engaging environment (Pandya, 2015).

Architecture mostly responds to human needs and motivations and speculates on their behavior. It reflects an understanding of the human senses and their functions in response to various stimuli. Thus, it can be stated that architects must design any built form for the human senses and human psychology. Sensual elements in the environment directly influence the mind, brain, and nervous system either positively or negatively (Gappell, 1991). Architecture is considered the third skin of the human body. The environment created by architecture must fulfil and comply with human needs. However, the role of an architect is to enhance the effective environment of people by enhancing the built environment by configuring it in a particular pattern (Jon, 1987). The user of a particular environment is highly influenced by the architectural environment (Figure 2). Hence, people try to cope with their architectural environment passively while also modifying it actively to fulfil their needs. It generates distinct interaction effects that vary depending on time, individual, and context (Elyacoubi, 1999). Physical perception is shared by all humans. The experiencing part is also universal, yet it interacts critically with the mind and cradles emotions. The process is unscripted and reacts to the complexities of space configuration and its constraints. The associational, on the other hand, is a location-specific perception that requires pre-conditioning, familiarity, or a knowledge base. It succeeds by establishing spiritual relationships and gaining a thorough awareness of cultural connotations. A healthy balance of all three is required for complete communication. Architectural places can potentially nourish you emotionally and spiritually with this (Pandya, 2015).

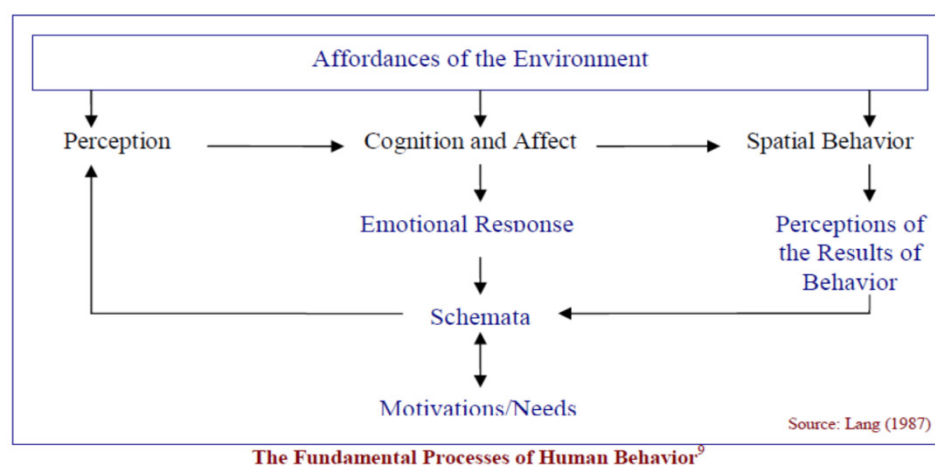


Figure 2. The fundamental processes of human behavior (source: Jon, 1987)

#### 4. Contemplative spaces: relationship between the user, the space and the higher realm through spirituality

Religion and spirituality influence one's actions in life and in society and harnessing this power can aid in the attainment of peace. Spirituality is the stage of life in which one finds meaning, hope, comfort, and inner peace. Many people obtain it as a result of their religious beliefs. Some people gain their inspiration from art and the environment, such as gazing at a magnificent sea. Some people look for it in their social ties, while others look for it in their principles and values (MahdiNejad, 2019). Investigating the elements of environmental peace in architectural work necessitates a thorough grasp of the idea and its influencing variables. Certain patterns have always followed a continuous trend in the construction of spaces in the past that created a logical relationship with the time before and after, but this continuity and trend are rarely visible today. The connection between environmental peace and the characteristics of religion and spirituality is seen to diminish with time. Religion refers to a set of detailed instructions and principles that, on the one hand, outline the desired outcome and advise the individual on how to accomplish it (JamaleDin MahdiNejad, 2020). Spirituality is based on human belief in the unseen world and the supernatural realm, and it gives the inner world its uniqueness. Allameh Tabatabai says, "The inner world is the home of spiritual life; it is a universe much more original, realistic, and extensive than the world of matter and sense." Instructions and full rules that, on the one hand, depict the objective and teach the human person how to accomplish it (Habibabad, 2019). Buildings for worship, places of deities, places associated with rituals from birth to death, even commercial places that sell materials used in rituals, pilgrimages, dharamshalas, ashrams, monasteries, and nunneries, places for meditation and retreat, and related residential buildings, treasuries, underground treasuries, and underground treasuries are all examples of contemplative architecture. There are separate places of worship as well as campuses with a variety of amenities such as cafes, libraries, book shops, artisan centres, chanting halls, and assemblies (Dengle, 2015). There are different ways in which the purpose of the space can be evaluated. In a hospital, contemplative space can accelerate the process of healing in a patient. The learning process of students in a school or the work efficiency of employees at a work place can be improved by such space. Specific building types must be designed considering the use of the building, the user, and the feeling the design must evoke (Figure 3). The design process must start with the thought process, which gives guidelines for

1. The climactic moments within the user's journey of the architectural design
2. The experience the occupant will go through
3. Maximum positive benefits of the space of contemplation on the user with the help of architecture
4. Providing "Breathing space" to absorb the experience of the architecture
5. Imparting better learning, creativity, healthier behaviour and mental peace.

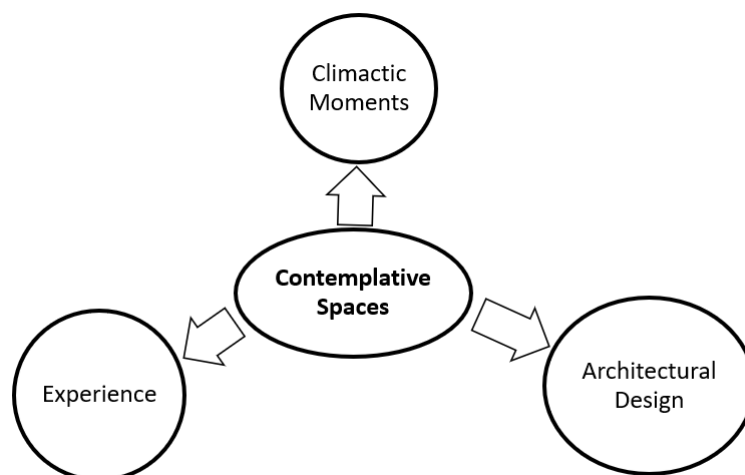


Figure 3. Factors effecting contemplative spaces (source: authors)

Followings are the factors enhancing the effectiveness of the contemplative spaces (Figure 4):

- Daylight: The exposure to natural sunlight gives better mental and physical health outcome and also elevates a person's positive behaviour.
- Nature: Healing powers of nature imparts sense of freedom to the individual and connects to itself, increasing the recovery rates and decreasing the stress.
- Positive focus: Positive focuses such as painting, music, yoga, meditation and good aroma help in healing and de-

veloping positive mental health.

- Use of colour, texture and materials: Balanced use of colors, textures and materials also plays a major role in the formation of contemplative spaces.
- Adding different elements: Arcaded walkways, serpentine pathways with water fountains, water body spatially and visually linking with the balcony and exterior space act as catalyst in the process of forming contemplative spaces.

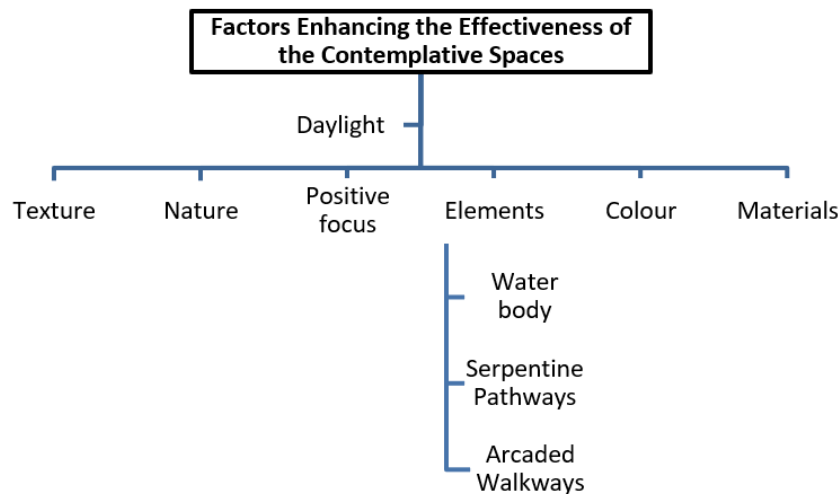


Figure 4. Factors enhancing the contemplative space (source: authors)

## 5. Conclusions

People are persistently interacting with the spaces in which they live. To respond to the changes, the brain and body are constantly reacting to external cues from the environment. In this article, we studied the impacts of constructed surroundings on the human behaviour. It has been observed that recent advances in science have added new perspectives in understanding the relation of spaces to the human behaviour with respect to spirituality. The external responses people have in relation to spaces, such as variations in behaviour, and the internal ones, whose outcome is behavioural changes, may both be easily detected. The duration and regularity of use, the manner individuals interrelate with the surroundings (the activities they will undertake on each area), values and individual knowledge, and the community background are all aspects that can affect how a built environment moves persons. Also, spaces are filled with invisible and visible data, and one feature is challenging to distinct from the others in order to understand their diverse effects. Geometric compositions, formal phrases, external appearances, element assembly, and inclination for associable motifs are all continuations of the classical mould. Some spaces are excellent instances of space design that goes beyond function to elevate the physical to the metaphysical and nurture the mind, body, and soul. In an attempt to explore the ability of environments to augment healing, design considerations can be proposed. It can be focused on a communal usage. There has to be more focus on the exploration of potential designs that could stimulate the senses to reduce stress and aid spiritual healing. In fact, reflection on any invented landscape, in terms of the psychological or mental states they induce, ultimately leads to the concept of contemplation. Contemplation is a major part of passive recreation, including activities requiring a minimal use of facilities and which have a low environmental impact on the recreational site.

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