THE THEORY BOOK
AN EXERCISE IN CRITICAL OBSERVATION & PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING

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Key Words
Theory, Observation, Critical Thinking

Category
Environmental Psychology
Type
Non Studio Project
Level
Sophomore
Duration
2 Weeks

Note: The majority of the project was conducted outside of class. However, one class session was dedicated to introducing the project and relevant theories, and a second session (at the end of the project) was used for peer-to-peer presentations. The students conducted observations and compiled materials outside of class. The instructor can use class periods between the project’s start and finish to introduce related materials.

Abstract
Students are assigned one of five theories and are asked to examine the same space through the lens of their assigned theory. At the end of the project they are required to teach their peers about their respective theories and how they manifest within the assigned space. To do so, the students conduct simple photo ethnography exercises and behavioral mapping observations. Then, depending on their assigned theory the students are required to answer specific prompts about the space. They compile these answers with corresponding evidence (i.e. photos, sketches, and diagrams) and offer suggestions for improvement. Answers and evidence are assembled into a booklet or presentation (instructor’s choice). As the students are all observing the same space, but have different lenses for observation, the assignment provides opportunity for comparison and discussion.

Learning Objectives
• To gain awareness of various environmental psychology theories and their relationships to the built environment.
• To build skill in critical observation and spatial analysis.
• To introduce research methods used in post occupancy evaluation.
• To demonstrate appropriate vocabulary in peer-to-peer presentations.
• To engage in critical discourse regarding the built environment and potential successes and failures of a design.
• To demonstrate writing competency through the construction of informative documents/presentations.
Criteria  For this project, students randomly select among five theories. These include:
  § Prospect + Refuge
  § Sociopetal vs. Sociofugual spaces
  § Third Place Theory
  § Architectural Determinism vs. Possibilism
  § Environmental Complexity

Process  The instructor first determines a proper site for observation. Past examples include airport terminals, libraries, and large coffee shops. It’s best to select a large space with many occupants and one where photography is allowed. The instructor may want to call ahead for permissions and create a letter on school letterhead describing the assignment in the event students are asked about their actions.

Depending upon the number of students in the course, the instructor selects a representative number of theories to be used (more can be added). A short presentation is given to the class, which provides a brief overview of the theories. During this presentation it is helpful to have the students discuss the theories relative to spaces encountered on campus. It is helpful to break the students into groups of five (or however many theories the instructor opts to use) so that within each group each of the theories are represented. Within these groups students then select out of a ‘hat’ a question prompt sheet which lists the name of a theory and what questions should be answered.

Critical thinking is reinforced throughout the project as students are required to both seek and create additional sources to explain the theory, determine the best location for observation, determine if the theory is exemplified within the space, and evaluate improvements that should be made (beyond just surface level or aesthetic judgments). Students then seek methods to communicate the theory, and emphasis is placed on how tools such as color, font, and layout reinforce the constructs of the theory.

Writing skills are reinforced through the generation of succinct, yet informative answers to the question. Students are required to label each image, restate the theory in their own words, and provide APA citation for references used.

Oral communication is reinforced through the peer-to-peer teaching.

Presentation Method
The instructor may opt for the students to create on-screen presentations (if laptops are available for students to use in their groups) or create booklets. For consistency and ease in evaluation, the full rubric (handed out at the beginning of the project) instructs students on what is to be included for each page/slide.

Evaluation Guidelines
40 points are allotted for this project (approximately 13% of course grade) and are allocated as follows:

- Sheet or Slide 1  
  Title, student name, name of space, and image of space  
  1pt

- Sheet or Slide 2  
  Student generated diagram explains the theory  
  Student generated written statement about the theory  
  5pts

- Sheet or Slide 3  
  Citation of original research with brief description  
  Image of the theory exemplified in another space  
  4pts

- Sheet or Slide 4  
  Annotated floor plan sketch and sketch perspective  
  5pts

- Sheet or Slide 5-9  
  Answers to question prompts with visual evidence  
  20pts

- Appendix  
  Scans of field notes and additional images  
  Citations  
  5 pts

Total 40 pts

The point allocations here may be altered to reflect project focus and the student’s skill level.

Resources
To build upon the students’ knowledge, the following set of resources may be useful:


*Note the attachments include additional resources respective to each theory.*

**Attachments**
- Project statement
- Advanced organizer for student note taking
- Introductory presentation slides
- Question prompts for the five theories
- Rubric
- List of resources