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Essay

Time Out: The Built as a Refuge from the Temporal

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Abstract

Signs of the passage of time can come as an unwelcome reminder of our own eventual passing. Historically, many cultures have sought refuge from the march of time in the notion of a timeless present. More recently, studies have shown that presence achieved through meditation lowers stress. This essay explores how the built environments where we spend most of our lives might help us to be more fully present. Rather presenting a comprehensive theory of the present in architecture, its intent is to make a series of design suggestions.

Keywords: presence; fascination; natural change; archetypes; isolation; manual adjustment

1. The Present as an Escape from Time

As Herbert Spencer reminded us, we may attempt to 'kill time,' but it is more likely to kill us [1]. As a result, awareness of the passage of time has been described as both a 'trauma' and a 'terror' [2,3]. As we age, especially, its passing can often be perceived as a harbinger of our own eventual demise.

On an everyday level, anyone familiar with running late or sitting in a long meeting can attest to the fact that to be over aware of the passage time is rarely pleasant. Simply being conscious of time, then, whether it is moving too quickly or too slowly for our liking, seems to make us uncomfortable. Indeed, in a reversal of the well-known saying that "time flies when we are having fun," Aaron Sackett and his colleagues have argued that we enjoy many activities mainly because they distract us from time. In other words, we seem to have fun when time flies, rather than the other way around [4]. It may be no coincidence, then, that hobbies are often described as 'pastimes.'

The present has long been considered an escape from time. As Aristotle famously argued, 'time is only made up of the past and the future. . . Now is not part of time at all' [5]. Eight centuries later, St. Augustine went even further, insisting that the present is all there really is:

> We live from that which is no more toward that which is not yet through a slender, fragile boundary called now that is too fugitive ever really to be laid hold of. Where, then, is time?. . . The present alone exists, located in the mind, and having three foci: a present memory of past events, a present attention to present events, and a present anticipation of future events [6] (pp. 63)

For Adrian Snodgrass, Augustine's emphasis on the present as the only reality 'is one variation on a theme shared by all the traditions: time is illusory; reality abides in the punctual present, standing at the junction of the past and future. What the dimensionless point is to spatial extension the timeless is to temporal duration and succession, just as the dimensionless point equates the Infinite, so the atemporal instant equates the Eternal' [6] (pp. 65).

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Academic Editors: Greg Keeffe and Avi Friedman

Received: 15 July 2024
Revised: 12 May 2025
Accepted: 24 September 2025
Published: 2 October 2025

Citation: Nute, K. Time Out: The Built as a Refuge from the Temporal. *Architecture* **2025**, *5*, 90. https://doi.org/10.3390/architecture5040090

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Presence has also been a key idea in Eastern thought, and especially so in the Zen Buddhist tradition in which it is a central goal of mindful meditation. A range of recent studies have shown that presence achieved through this kind of active concentration on the here and now can even lower stress [7,8].

2. The Duration of Now

The 'punctual present' referred to above by Adrian Snograss is a theoretical moment without duration representing the interface between the past and the future. Because such a fleeting moment cannot be experienced, however, for many, this scientific model of the present fails to reflect the lived experience of 'now.' The late nineteenth-century psychologist William James, for example, famously challenged the notion of the present as a duration-less instant, arguing instead that what we experience subjectively as 'now' can actually last several seconds [9]. Soon after James, the early 20th century philosopher Henri Bergson drew a similar distinction between chronological and lived time in the idea of "duration," which, he argued, was essentially subjective [10].

While time, and more especially the past, had interested architects for centuries, architectural concern with the present, at least in the West, does seem to have emerged until the early 1960s, and Team X's questioning of the notions of space and time common in prewar modernism. Under the influence of Bergson, Aldo Van Eyck, for example, responded to his former mentor Sigfried Gideon's famous book, *Space, Time and Architecture*, with the essay "Place and Occasion," arguing that the latter were far more relevant to people's lives [11,12]

Following Bergson's notion of duration, Van Eyck insisted that 'the present should never be understood as the shifting a-dimensional instant between past and future or as a closed shifting frontier between what is no longer and not yet is, but as a temporal span experience' [13]. A decade later, the American urban designer Kevin Lynch made the same point, explaining that 'the psychological present is not the philosopher's dimensionless moment but a space of real duration, up to five seconds in length, but more usually less than two' [14].

More recently, the writer Daniel Stern has expanded on this theme, suggesting that 'our subjective sense of life as lived at the second-by-second local level—does not sit well with the idea that the present has no thickness. The experience of listening to music, watching dance, or interacting with someone requires a present with a duration' [15] (pp. 5–6). For Stern, these contrasting models of the present were not new, however, and he explained how both had existed in ancient Greek thought:

> Chronos is the objective view of time. . . In the world of chronos, the present instant is a moving point in time headed only toward the future. . . It is an almost infinitesimally thin slice of time during which very little could take place without immediately becoming the past. Effectively, there is no present.
>
> The problem with chronos is that if there is no now long enough that something can unfold in it, there can be no direct experience. That is not intuitively acceptable. Also, life-as-lived is not experienced as an inexorably continuous flow. Rather, it is felt to be discontinuous, made of incidents and events separated in time
>
> The Greeks' subjective conception of time, kairos, may be of use here. Kairos is the passing moment in which something happens. . . It is the coming into being of a new state of things, and it happens in a moment of awareness. . . It is a small window of becoming and opportunity [15] (p. 7).

Stern explained that the findings of modern psychology are consistent with an experienced present of 'three to four seconds.' He suggested that there are three main reasons for this: 'it is the time needed to make meaningful groupings of perceptual stimuli. . ., to compose functional units of our behavioral performances, and to permit consciousness to arise' [15] (p. 41).

3. Fascination

At first glance, the two contrasting descriptions of time described above may seem irreconcilable. In one, awareness of passing time is seen as something to be avoided, while in the other temporal extension is considered essential for us to be able to experience events. The two arguments can be reconciled, however, if our perspective is taken into account. Temporal durations become tolerable, and can even seem to disappear entirely, when we are fully immersed in something. Henry David Thoreau, for example, gave us a wonderful description of the latter experience of what amounts to being in an extended 'now':

> There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hand. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revelry, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undiluted solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveler's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time [16].

Psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan have since described this kind of experience as 'soft fascination,' and have suggested that it stems from the fact that many natural phenomena are so familiar to us that they can engage our senses without requiring any active effort [17]. The building scientist Lisa Heschong has observed the similar capacity of fire to enthrall us:

> Perhaps the human fascination with fire stems from the totality of its sensory stimulation. The fire gives a flickering and glowing light, ever moving, ever changing. It crackles and hisses and fills the room with smells. . . It penetrates us with its warmth. Every sense is stimulated, and all their associated modes of perception, such as memory and awareness of time, are also brought into play. . . Together they create such an intense feeling of reality, of the "here and nowness" of the moment, that the fire becomes completely captivating [18].

4. Natural Change in Built Environments

One of the first architects to expressly connect presence and changing natural phenomena was the Japanese modernist Tadao Ando, who described how 'sunlight, wind and rain affect the senses and give variety to life,' and how such change 'allows us to glimpse the eternal within the moment' [19,20]. Ando described his built surfaces as akin to 'canvases,' on which nature is allowed to simply express itself (Figures 1–3).

During the 1990s other architects, many of them also in Japan, began integrating weather-generated movement into indoor environments even more directly (Figures 4–6).

Two studies involving the author have since tested the physiological and psychological effects of these kinds of natural movement patterns, and found that they not only make us less conscious of the passage of time but also significantly calmer [21,22].

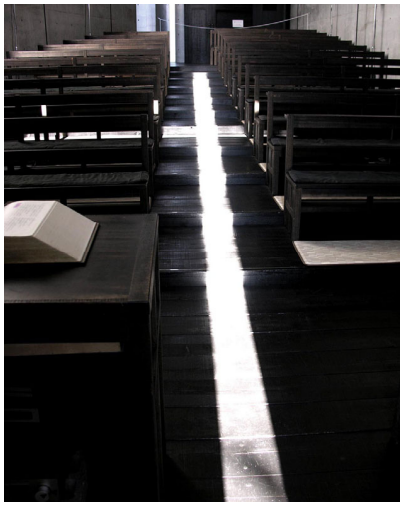

Figure 1. Migrating sunlight, Church of Light, Tadao Ando, Ibaraki, Japan, 1989. (image source: Kevin Nute).



Figure 2. Wind-animated foliage shadows, Chapel of Wind, Tadao Ando, Ashiya, Japan, 1986. (image source: Kevin Nute).



Figure 3. Rain-animated pond, Benesse House Museum, Tadao Ando, Naoshima, Japan, 1992. (image source: Kevin Nute).



Figure 4. Wind-animated light patterns, Oasis 21, Obayashi Construction, Nagoya, Japan, 2002 (image source: Kevin Nute).



Figure 5. Wind-animated foliage shadows, Baisouin Temple, Kengo Kuma, Tokyo, Japan, 2003 (image source: Kevin Nute).



Figure 6. Rain-animated roof pond, Mizu no Yakata, Toshihito Yokouchi, Himeji, Japan, 1996. (image source: Kevin Nute).

5. The Perpetual Present

The temporal qualities of Frank Lloyd Wright's iconic house Fallingwater have been noted by a number of authors [23,24], but the house also seems to take us beyond time. The view of the falls from the terraces above it perfectly manifest Edmund Husserl's description of the present as the sensing of what is happening now combined with the recollection of what has just happened (retention), and the anticipation of what is about to happen (protention) [25]. The lip of the rock ledge over which the stream flows sharply divides the past from the future, but because the water takes a moment to fall, its presence has a discernible duration that we can directly experience. Since each drop is immediately replaced by another; moreover, the effect is of time seemingly standing still, a 'perpetual present' (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The perpetual present manifested at Fallingwater (image source: Kevin Nute).

6. Timeless Forms

In his book *The Eternal Return*, anthropologist Mircea Eliade suggested that most civilizations have sought to overcome the passage of time in some way, and often through rituals that effectively recreate an 'eternal present' [26,27] (pp.85–86). These ceremonies would have been originated in actual experiences, but Eliade describes the oral tradition by they were transmitted as characterized by its 'inability to retain historical events and individuals except as it transforms them into archetypes' [28]. Carl Jung had earlier described such shared models as the basis of a common unconscious that transcends both time and culture:

> This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes.
>
> [instincts] form very close analogies to the archetypes, so close, in fact, that there is good reason for supposing that the archetypes are the unconscious images of the instincts themselves, in other words, that they are patterns of instinctual behavior [29].

Gottfried Semper's architectural elements—the hearth, platform, canopy, and screen, are built examples of such archetypes [30] (Figure 8).

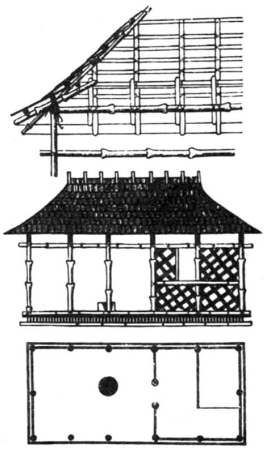

Figure 8. Gottfied Semper's archetypal building elements: the hearth, platform, canopy and screen. (image source: public domain).

More recently, in Christopher Alexander's work, archetypal built forms have been directly linked to the atemporal. The title of Alexander's 1979 book *Timeless Way of Building* referred primarily to the *process* by which vernacular buildings were created [31], but it also implied that the spatial configurations Alexander and his colleagues presented in *A Pattern Language* (1977) also transcended time [32].

7. Isolation

Mircea Eliade argued that shared rituals place their participants in a present beyond chronological time. The Japanese tea ceremony would seem to be an especially clear example of this. The *wabi* form of tea ritual was a Zen-inspired appreciation of the transience of being. Its intent was summed up in the famous Zen saying *ichi go ichi e*, which can be roughly translated as 'on this one occasion.' In keeping with this philosophy, to this day, for example, measures of time are strictly excluded from the tearoom as antithetical to the goal of celebrating the here and now.

In the design of the tearoom itself, this was achieved primarily through spatial isolation. The path to the room was deliberately convoluted in order to increase the apparent distance traveled from the world outside, and the interior was strongly introverted. The interior, then, was intended as a gap or pause in the continuity of space and time, and the experience of the tea ceremony itself was effectively an 'extended now' that could last several hours (Figures 9 and 10).



Figure 9. The spatial isolation of the tearoom, Fusin-an, Omote Senke, Kyoto, Japan. (image source: Katsuhiko Mizuno).



Figure 10. The introversion of the tearoom, Koto-in, Daitoku-ji, Kyoto, Japan. (image source: Katsuhiko Mizuno).

8. The Presence of the Body

In describing the philosophical intentions of the tea ritual, the leading Meiji era art critic Kakuzo Okakura explained that "it is in us that. . . yesterday parts from to-morrow" [33]. In other words, it is our own being that effectively creates the present. Shortly after this, Henri Bergson made a similar point, describing the human body as "an ever-advancing boundary between the future and the past" [34] (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Okakura and Bergson argued that we ourselves constitute the present. (image source: Kevin Nute).

While our mind can imagine the past and the future, it is our body that makes us physically present. It does so primarily by allowing us to interact with the material world around us. Today, that environment is more often than not the inside of a building [35,36], and, as we have seen, one way that indoor spaces can make us more consciously present is by providing our body with sensory change, but another is by enabling us to use our body to physically change the environment around us.

9. Initiating Change

In an increasingly automated world, the architectural writer Henry Plummer has lamented that our physical engagement with buildings is rapidly diminishing. Using the example of opening a heavy door, Plummer suggests, for example, that "to be able to affect . . . is, in the last analysis, the proof that one is" [37], in other words, that we are physically present.

Adjustable building elements have a long history, but among contemporary architects Tom Kundig has made them a signature of his practice. Although Kundig's work is especially known for including mechanical gadgets, almost all of his moving architectural elements require the direct physical engagement of their occupants. The movement of these elements could not take place without the intervention of a human body. Every change in

their position, then, effectively affirms the physical presence of the person interacting with them (Figures 12 and 13).



Figure 12. Manually adjustable façade, Tye River Cabin, Olson Kundig, Skykomish, WA, USA, 2006 (image source: Olson Kundig).



Figure 13. Heavy entrance door, photographer's home and studio, Olson Kundig, Stiges, Spain, 2013 (image source: Olson Kundig).

10. Implications

Indirect awareness of the effects of time are not inherently unwelcome. Indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that built environments can and should be designed to actively encourage this [38]. It is the direct awareness of time itself that seems to unsettle us. This essay has examined four distinct ways in which built environments can help to make us more consciously present, and hence less aware of the passage of time. Although the approaches examined here—perceptible change, archetypal forms, spatial isolation, and physical engagement—are by no means as exhaustive, of these, sensory change and manual adjustment would seem to be the simplest ways for built environments to reconnect us with the here and now.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not Applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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