

Perceptions of the Forum and JRC Grills: Architectural and Experiential Approaches to “Atmosphere”

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Abstract

An examination of the Forum and JRC grills using interviews and GIS data suggests that both architecture and experience are important and interrelated factors that shape perceptions of atmosphere, with experience playing a particularly influential role for people who have memories that they associate with place.

Introduction

Theoretical approaches to understanding perceptions of place tend to fall into one of two categories: “architectural” and “experiential.” The former examines the effect of physical structure of place on inhabitants¹, while the latter acknowledges the power that experiences and memories have in coloring perceptions of place². Both of these approaches are valuable lenses through which to understand perceptions of the atmosphere of the Forum grill as compared to the JRC grill.

This project explored differences in perceptions between people who did and did not know the Forum, as well as compared the physical structure of the grills, in order to understand the extent to which architecture and experience each influence perceptions of place.

Experience plays a strong role in shaping how we see place, which may explain why people who experienced the Forum generally prefer it to the JRC, as opposed to those who did not experience it.

Results of Interviews

	Forum	JRC
Interviewees who knew the Forum described it as:	Full of people Friendly Intimate Homey Comfortable Relaxed Less sophisticated Intellectually lively Weird building Not accessible	Didn't/ don't like it Getting used to it Really like it Open Accessible Sterile Hodge-podge
Interviewees who did not know the Forum described it as:	Cold Creepy Claustrophobic Not welcoming Not comfortable Concrete-y Ugly	Modern Bright Airy Social Loud Overwhelming Not welcoming “It’s just a building”

Results of GIS

Borrowing from Hillier and Hanson’s spatial syntax measures³, I selected physical features to compare between the Forum and JRC grills:

- Size and partitioning of space
- Visibility indicators: windows and convex space
- Accessibility indicators: entrances and pathways
- Location in context

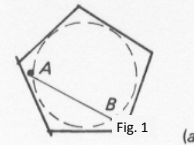
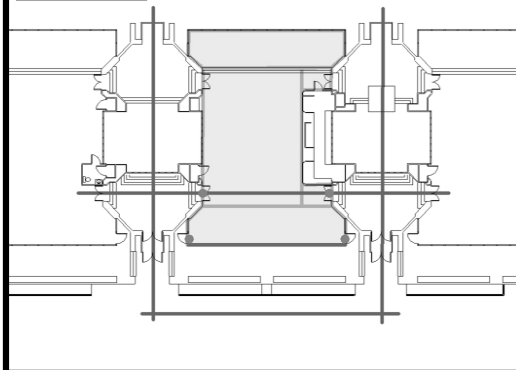


Fig. 1 Convex space:
No line drawn between any two points in the space goes outside the space.
From Hillier and Hanson, pg. 98.

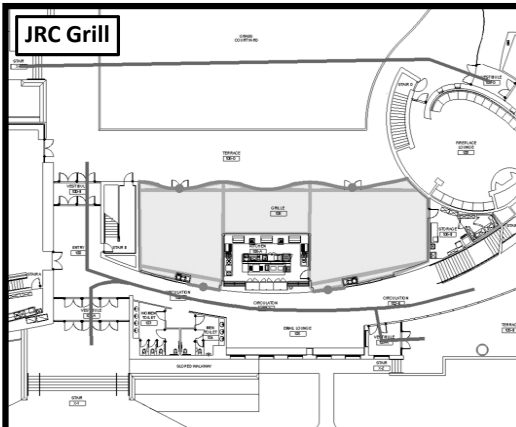
Forum Grill



The size of a space influences subjective perceptions of the space. Larger spaces like the JRC grill (254 m²) may seem “airy” or “overwhelming,” while smaller spaces like the Forum grill (232 m²) may seem “claustrophobic” or “intimate.” Another aspect of size is whether the space is partitioned, which convex space measures. The Forum grill is partitioned by levels but connected by visibility, whereas the JRC grill has more obstacles to visibility, but no level differentiation.

Windows and convex spaces indicate visibility, which can be both an asset and a deterrent depending on personal preferences. Both grills have similar amounts of visibility, with the Forum being slightly more open, and the JRC having a slightly larger window area.

JRC Grill



Entrances, pathways, and the location in context enable accessibility, which is important for central gathering places. Both grills have two main internal and two external entrances and multiple pathways, although only the Forum grill has a pathway through it. The main difference is revealed by the location in context – the JRC also contains the dining hall and post office, and is located centrally to dorms, whereas the Forum is located centrally to academic buildings and the library.

Conclusions

Both architectural and experiential approaches to understanding perceptions of place are relevant to this comparison of the Forum and JRC grills. As hypothesized, experience plays a strong role for seniors and others who remember the Forum, and who consequently perceive it in positive terms, in contrast with those who do not remember it. That the same structure can be perceived in such contrasting terms speaks to the power of experience. On the other hand, many people in both groups attributed both positive and negative perceptions of the JRC to physical features, such as the size and the layout, and overall reactions to the JRC grill were far more neutral. This suggests that experience can strongly color perceptions of place, but when there has not yet been time to amass memories, architecture becomes significant.

It is interesting that the GIS analysis did not reveal drastic differences between the grills, while the interviews complicated the spaces. It is important to understand the similarities and differences in the architecture, as revealed by GIS, in order to understand to what extent experiences are shaping perceptions. In addition, connections between certain architectural features and certain perceptions were far more complicated than imagined – people in both groups used the same adjectives (modern and open), although with different connotations.

Two other important factors to note are the role of people and context. As learned from interviews, a room full of people can shape space in much the same way as architecture, and the presence of familiar individuals reinforces emotional connections to space (which complicates the distinction between architecture and experience). In addition, it is important to look at the places in context, as, for example, some people tend to associate the Forum with Quad and Cowles and the JRC grill with the dining hall.

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