

Royal Academy of Arts
Exhibition in Focus

Sensing Spaces

Architecture Reimagined

This guide is given out free to teachers and full-time students with an exhibition ticket and ID at the Learning Desk and is available to other visitors from the RA Shop at a cost of £4.95 (while stocks last).

An Introduction to the Exhibition for Teachers and Students

Written by Rob Gregory

For the Learning Department
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Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined

Main Galleries

25 January – 6 April 2014

Cover:

Details of conceptual image by Li Xiaodong (*front*) and
'Blue Pavilion' by Pezo von Ellrichshausen (*back*)

RA Royal
Academy
of Arts

The RA is a unique organisation that remains true to its origins in 1768 as a place where art is made, exhibited and debated. Our aim is simple: to be a clear, strong voice for art and artists. The RA's Learning Department fulfils this objective by engaging people in the practice of art through hands-on creative experiences and exploring the art of the past and the present.

Introduction

Visitors to *Sensing Spaces: Architecture Reimagined* will experience a new type of architecture exhibition. Described as an approach that highlights not the functional but the experiential aspects of architecture, it features the work of seven of the world's leading contemporary architectural practices. Conceived as an experiment to challenge the conventions of traditional art and architecture exhibitions, it sets out to awaken and recalibrate our sensibilities to the spaces that surround us. As such, it is part demonstration and part experiment, which in the spirit of enquiry requires interaction and participation from its audience. With such unique and ambitious aims, *Sensing Spaces* has already prompted critics to call it a must-experience, once-in-a-generation show.

For a period of ten weeks, visitors to the Royal Academy's Main Galleries are invited to observe, move through and around, touch, adapt and occupy a series of specially commissioned architectural installations. During this time, the familiar character of its grand Beaux-Arts galleries will host a series of contemporary architectural interventions that will radically transform the apparently dominant character of the classically planned and detailed interiors; transformations that will simultaneously amplify and diminish, mask and frame, illuminate and shade, and reinforce and unbalance the familiar gallery experience.

Presenting the work of the internationally preeminent architects, Grafton Architects (Ireland), Diébédo Francis Kéré (Burkina Faso and Berlin), Kengo Kuma (Japan), Li Xiaodong (China), Pezo von Ellrichshausen (Chile), Álvaro Siza and Eduardo Souto de Moura (Portugal), the exhibition not only focuses on the essential elements of architecture (space, proportion, light and materials) overlaid with the subtle presence of cultural nuance, but also, with visitor engagement, on how we perceive these elements through our senses and associative memory – making the experience both personal and collective.

As the art form that most directly affects our day-to-day life, the ever-present background to our days, architecture is nothing without the people who occupy and use it. In response to this, *Sensing Spaces* takes delight in and heightens our awareness of the essential architectural interactions that exist all around us. Through this exhibition, the RA hopes that people will become familiar with a new way of engaging with architecture. Conceived by Kate Goodwin, Drue Heinz Curator of Architecture at the Royal Academy of Arts, the exhibition creates, above all else, an essential interaction between three factors: the nature and quality of physical spaces, how we perceive them, and their resulting evocative power.

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**Working session with
Grafton Architects**

Photo © Royal Academy of Arts



'Architecture is not produced simply by adding plans, sections and elevations. It is something else and something more. It is impossible to explain exactly what it is.'

Steen Eiler Rasmussen,
Experiencing Architecture,
1959

Architecture Unknown

Do people really understand architecture?

Writing in his 1948 book *Architecture as Space*, Italian architect, historian and theorist Bruno Zevi (1918–2000) posed an important question, 'What do most of us truly know about the riches of meaning in architecture?' While recognising that architecture has a constant and profound effect on everyone's life – at home, school, workplace, and in public buildings – his book revealed an acute frustration that in his view very few people understood how powerful architecture is or how it can so profoundly affect us. Drawing an analogy with people's understanding and engagement with other art forms, he went on to ask, 'Why do cultivated people, [who are] intensely interested in literature, painting, sculpture and music, know comparatively little about the art that has a closer influence on them than any other?' He theorised that unless people had a valid and clear interpretation of what architecture is, it would remain shrouded by 'public ignorance and lack of interest'.

Sensing Spaces tackles this issue head on, setting out to show how architecture as an art form can only be truly experienced in person, through the senses – vision, touch, hearing, and even smell. Supporting and building on the established contribution made by traditional shows – such as the Royal Academy's own Summer Exhibition, which presents architectural drawings, models and sketches – these site-specific installations, that may or may not be works of art in their own right, have been built to encourage the audience to become more attuned to their own experience of architecture. Which, it is hoped, will help people to understand the attributes of an art form that exists beyond the gallery, in the buildings and places that surround them every day.

'Our illiteracy regarding space derives mainly from the use of these means of representation. In painting this would be like describing it by the size of its frame, and calculating the areas covered by the various colours and then reproducing each colour separately.'

Bruno Zevi, *Architecture as Space*, 1948

What do you think defines architecture?

Do you think these installations are sculptural works of art or pieces of architecture? What is the difference?

Which installation do you think responds in the most interesting way to the existing format of the Royal Academy galleries?

What relationship exists between the installations, as a series of experiences?

Architecture Experienced

Architecture has to be experienced to be understood

In reframing the established form of an architectural exhibition, *Sensing Spaces* extends the focus of Bruno Zevi's writing even further. Following Zevi's principles, what lies at the heart of this exhibition is the desire to help visitors 'reimagine'

architecture; a desire founded on the premise that the 'true riches of meaning' in architecture are largely misunderstood, being based on a superficial reading of the art form. This is not to say that exhibitions that present the measurable and theoretical efforts of architects and how these relate to the buildings they produce, do not have their place. It would be nonsensical to argue against the fact that background knowledge augments appreciation. However, as the adage goes, a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, which Zevi argues has for generations resulted in a broad and common misunderstanding of what is specific to this form of art. While the function of the arts overlap at many points – with architecture having much in common with sculpture and music – architecture also has its own peculiar province and pleasure which is typically its own. This means that the use (or misuse) of words like rhythm, scale, balance and mass will continue to be vague until we give them meaning specific to the reality which defines architecture. As Zevi wrote, 'The fact is that buildings are judged as if they were sculpture and painting, that is to say, externally and superficially, as purely plastic phenomena. In this way, they fail to consider what is peculiar to architecture and therefore different from sculpture and painting. They miss the qualities that are essential to architecture.'

In sympathy with these views, this exhibition sets out not to teach people what to understand – through illustrations and information – but to understand above all else that 'architecture is a personal, enjoyable necessary experience. [Architecture] has a monopoly of space ... [and] alone of the arts can give space its full value. To grasp space, to know how to see it, is the key to the understanding of building' (Bruno Zevi).

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Olafur Eliasson in
collaboration with
Gunther Vogt

**The mediated motion,
2001**

Water, wood, compressed
soil, fog machine, metal, foil
Dimensions variable

Kunsthaus Bregenz, Austria, 2001
Photo: Markus Tretter 2001
Courtesy the artist
© 2001 Olafur Eliasson





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Peter Zumthor
Thermal Baths, Vals,
Switzerland, 1996

Photograph by Hans Danuser

'A large part of the pleasure we obtain from architecture – pleasure which seems unaccountable, or for which we do not trouble to account – springs in reality from space.'
Bruno Zevi, *Architecture as Space*, 1948

How does this exhibition compare to other exhibitions about architecture you have seen?

When watching other gallery visitors interact with the installations, what observations do you make?

Do you think contemporary architecture creates good or bad experiences? Can you think of two extreme examples?

Architecture Reimagined

If people are attuned to the spaces that surround them, they will be moved

Knowing how to 'see space', or how to be spatially attuned, is an ability with which we are all born. As described by Royal Academician Colin St John Wilson (1922–2007), writing in the *Architectural Review* in 1989, 'All of our awareness is grounded in forms of spatial experience, and that spatial awareness is not pure, but charged with emotional stress from our first born affinities. It is in fact the first language we ever learned, long before words.' He describes this language as being drawn from a wide range of sensual and spatial experiences – rough and smooth, warm and cold, of being above or below, inside, outside or in between, exposed and enveloped. For this reason children often make more articulate responses to architecture than adults do, as what seems to happen as we get older, gaining knowledge and rational thought, is that we somehow disconnect ourselves from the ability to respond instinctively.

Wilson described this condition as if it were a medical ailment. Spatial blindness he says is 'a baffling and perhaps dangerous transparency ... a condition that we do not see but see through', one that not only accounts for mysterious moments of elation, but also acts 'as the catalyst for those responses of alienation and exasperation provoked by buildings that, as we vaguely say "do not work"!'. What we need therefore is to tune back into the stream of awareness that operates just below the level of day-to-day self-consciousness, in order to monitor the field of spatial relationships around us, which impacts more deeply than many of us realise on the quality of our day-to-day lives, both collectively and as individuals.

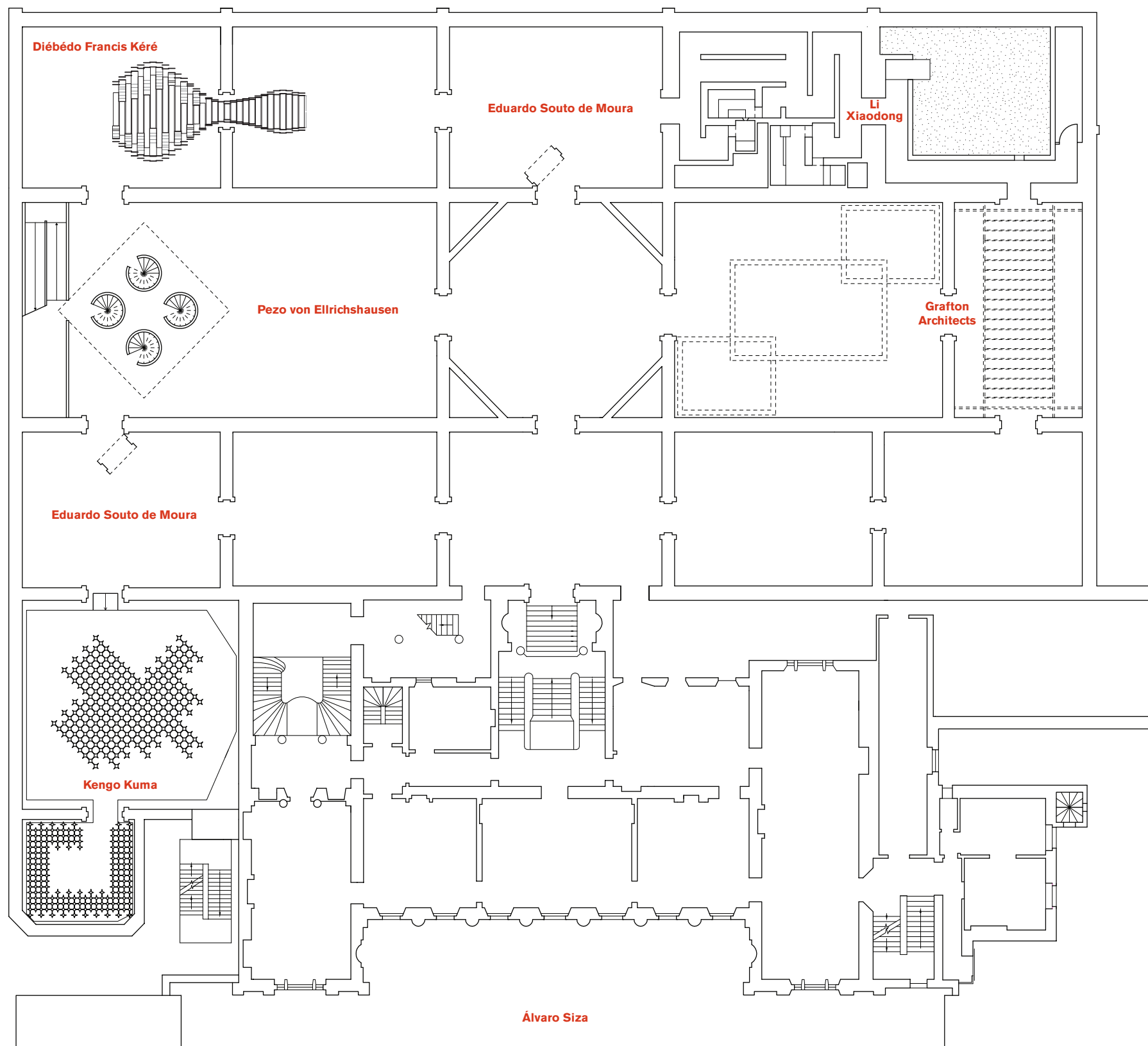
Do you think architecture has the power to move you?

Which installation has most affected you? Explain why.

Being physically, emotionally and psychologically aware of the spaces we occupy is a feeling that could be described as being 'present'; a sensation that is personal and difficult to explicitly or accurately describe. Can you identify this feeling? Where did you feel present?

'Architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces.'
Louis I. Kahn

'We cannot lay down fixed proportions of space as architecturally right. Space value in architecture [...] is affected by a hundred considerations, such as lighting, shadow, colour and vertical/horizontal emphasis.'
Bruno Zevi, *Architecture as Space*, 1948



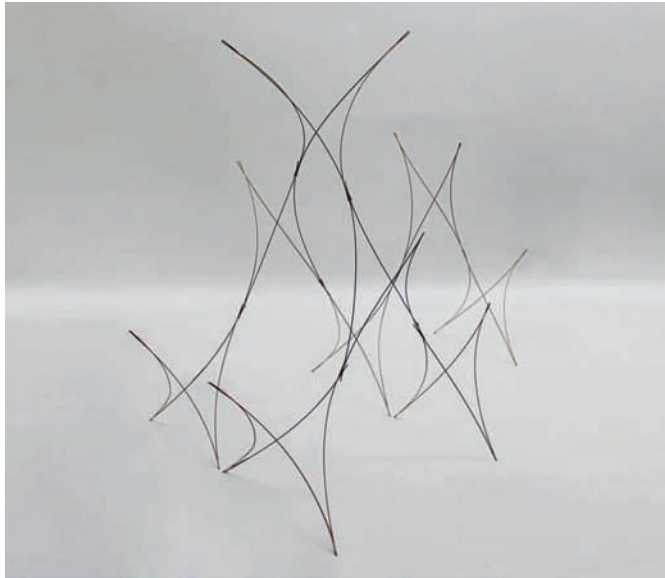
'Historians of architecture have failed to apply a coherent method of studying buildings from a spatial point of view. Not one architectural treatise before the last half of the nineteenth century will be found in which the concept of space is regarded as essential, if at all.'

Cornelius (Cornelis) van de Ven, *Space in Architecture*, 1987

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Kengo Kuma & Associates
Bamboo sticks used to construct the pavilions

Commissioned by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
© Kengo Kuma & Associates



Kengo Kuma

‘The more the volume of the material is reduced, the more the human body becomes sensitive and tries to concentrate on the limited, thin, small and slight material in order to smell out or catch “something” from it.’

Kengo Kuma

‘We built two houses in two different spaces. One is “architecture of reality”, or “architecture of a father”, whereas the other is “architecture of void” or “architecture of a mother”. The father’s construction stands alone in the space and is filled with the aroma of Hinoki (Japanese Cypress). The mother’s structure is a cocoon that wraps your body and is full of Tatami smell.’

Kengo Kuma

The two installations by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma comprise a pair of delicate structures that occupy the Royal Academy’s Large and Small Weston Rooms. Touching the floor lightly, the structures are made from carefully selected lengths of bamboo, imported especially from Kyoto in Japan. Matured for between three to four years and whittled to a diameter of 4 mm, this material was chosen by the architect to exploit its capacity to be bent into shape. It was also chosen for its ability to absorb and slowly release scent, each piece being impregnated with the liquid scent of Japanese Cypress or Tatami, before being vacuum-packed and shipped to London. Fragile, yet held in structural balance, each structure is made up from a repeated diamond-shaped module, formed by four lengths of bamboo bound together in pairs by sleeves of heat-shrinkable plastic and pulled apart in opposing directions. Where each module touches the floor, the bamboo is clamped in hidden pockets set within a raised plywood floor, which also provides space for a number of recessed LED light fittings.

Consistent with much of his work, this installation extends Kuma’s trademark use of small sections of timber, and his ability to combine traditional, natural materials with innovative modes of construction. It also demonstrates his ongoing interest in how to achieve the maximum effect with the minimum use of resources. To this end, he has combined a regular geometry of bamboo rods to create two distinct permeable figures that are analogous with the architect’s recollection of sitting inside a mosquito net as a child. However, unlike a net, which finds its form

when hung and tethered in tension, these freestanding structures are self-supporting, and gain both formal and structural stability by being bent into a sinuous matrix of regular diamond-shaped cells.

With one assembly described as ‘pavilion’ and the other as ‘cave’, visitors to the Weston Rooms observe one before entering the other, shifting their relationship to the work from viewer to participant, and translating their understanding of the structure as an object to the structure as a setting. Located at the end of the gallery’s formal suite of rooms, the cave forms a dead-end and becomes a place of even deeper contemplation; a static space that is rendered dynamic to the senses. As light levels drop, one’s eyes are forced to shift in and out of focus, jumping from foreground detail to background abyss as our sense of smell heightens to detect the aromas of Japanese Cypress and Tatami.

How can a sense of smell evoke a sense of place? Think of an example.

Do these two structures have different qualities? Describe how or if your reaction to each of them differed.

What do these structures remind you of?

6 *overleaf*

Kengo Kuma & Associates
Concept image of environment, called the ‘architecture of void’ or ‘architecture of a mother’

Commissioned by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
© Kengo Kuma & Associates

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Kengo Kuma & Associates
Great (Bamboo) Wall, near Beijing, China (2002)

Photo © Satoshi Asakawa







Grafton Architects

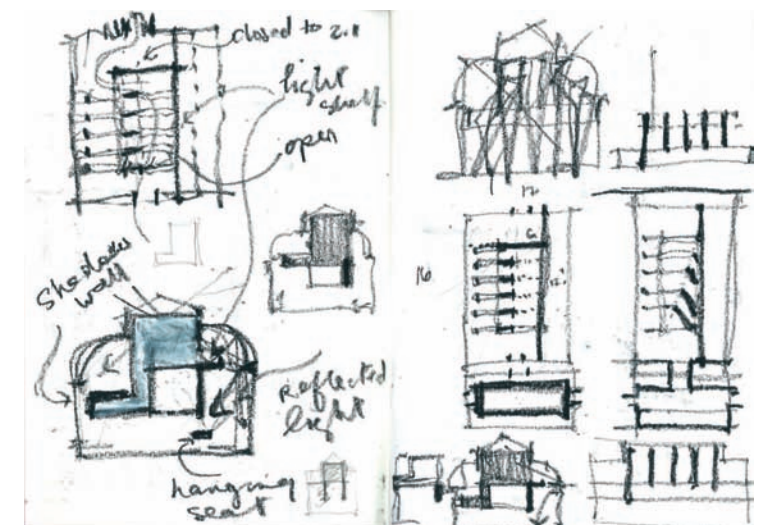
The structures by Grafton Architects, founded by Shelley McNamara and Yvonne Farrell, hover above Gallery IX and the Lecture Room, suspended from the roof lights above. In order to create a strong spatial tension between adjacent rooms and to set up different lighting scenarios, two dramatically different compositions have been made. Choosing only to work with the roof lights, both installations feature a series of suspended surfaces and forms that manipulate the light and reshape the space in two entirely different ways; one as an exploration of lightness, with what is referred to as a waterfall of light, and the other being the exact opposite, exploring weight, containment and the formation of carved-out space. In the Lecture Room, a series of dark, brooding and apparently massive solid forms obscure most of the existing ceiling and roof light, articulated by two relatively small, high-level 'apertures' or openings of light. In contrast to this, Gallery IX features nine blades, suspended in alignment with the gallery's exposed trusses to reflect a balance of natural and artificial light filtered through the exposed roof light. While both installations drop down within the galleries to create an implied headroom of 2.5 metres within the 8.5-metre-high spaces, two entirely different relationships are established between the floor and the light. In the Lecture Room, the installation intensifies the perception of distance between the floor and the light, while in Gallery IX the hanging blades bring proximity and unity.

By quoting American architect Louis I. Kahn's statement that 'to hear a sound is to see a space', Grafton Architects allude to a consistent ambition in their work to make space tangible. As they put it, they seek to 'make as much nothing as possible', and to structure space through the careful orchestration of the passage of light and movement through the void. In response to what they refer to as an 'amazing generosity of space' within the Main Galleries of the Royal Academy, their installations set out to radically transform each visitor's perception of the familiar. As such, between Gallery IX and the Lecture Room the architects have created two distinctly different scenarios which, when experienced side-by-side, set up a powerful spatial duality and tension that reinforces the qualities of the existing rooms while radically transforming them into something new.

How can light affect your understanding of a space?

What kinds of buildings require a lot of light?

Do you consider galleries to be usually dark or light spaces? Why?



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Grafton Architects
Concept image of environment

Commissioned by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
© Grafton Architects

'Our aim is to communicate the pleasure and power of architecture. How to emphasise essential aspects of architecture. Here we are describing spatial experience using not words but light.'
Grafton Architects

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Grafton Architects
Concept drawing of environment

Commissioned by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
© Grafton Architects

‘Western architecture develops from perspective, with the building as an object to be looked at from without, while Chinese architecture develops from the idea that the building is something to be experienced from within.’

Li Xiaodong

Li Xiaodong

Unlike the other installations in this exhibition, this piece by Chinese architect Li Xiaodong is not seen or experienced as an object in space. Instead, it builds upon the sequential experience of visiting the Academy – via courtyard, town-palace, grand staircase and Beaux-Arts gallery – by adding a new maze of spaces to an otherwise familiar route. Experienced as a choreographed one-way route, the timber frame is in-filled with small sections of coppiced timber (coppicing is an effective method of growing sustainable timber fast, without the need to replant). An acrylic raised floor is illuminated by LEDs, and plywood-lined niches provide accents along the route, culminating in a space that Li Xiaodong describes as a Zen garden. Complete with pebbles on the floor, this space is presented as the final scene on a route that the architect likens to ‘a walk through a forest in the snow at night’.

There are well-known examples of Chinese architecture such as the Forbidden City, which are laid out to be experienced as a sequence of spaces rather than a collection of individual buildings. Li Xiaodong also draws on Chinese philosophy when describing how this work focuses on the intangible rather than the tangible, in order to allow room for the visitor’s imagination to help create a satisfying physical experience. This he states is ‘the fundamental difference between “being present” in a space, where you are absorbed within it, and looking at images of a space, where the mind is detached.’ In this place, visitors are invited on a journey of discovery and to sense that alternative worlds run alongside their path and intersect with it. They can experience the different spaces, from the narrow passageways and intimate niches, to the expansive Zen garden. Likened to a Chinese hand scroll, this is an unfolding story that is best moved through slowly and appreciated over time. The architect intends this to arouse curiosity and generate impact, to create a moment of escapism from London; an experience that ends in a Zen garden, which represents clear-sightedness and inspiration.

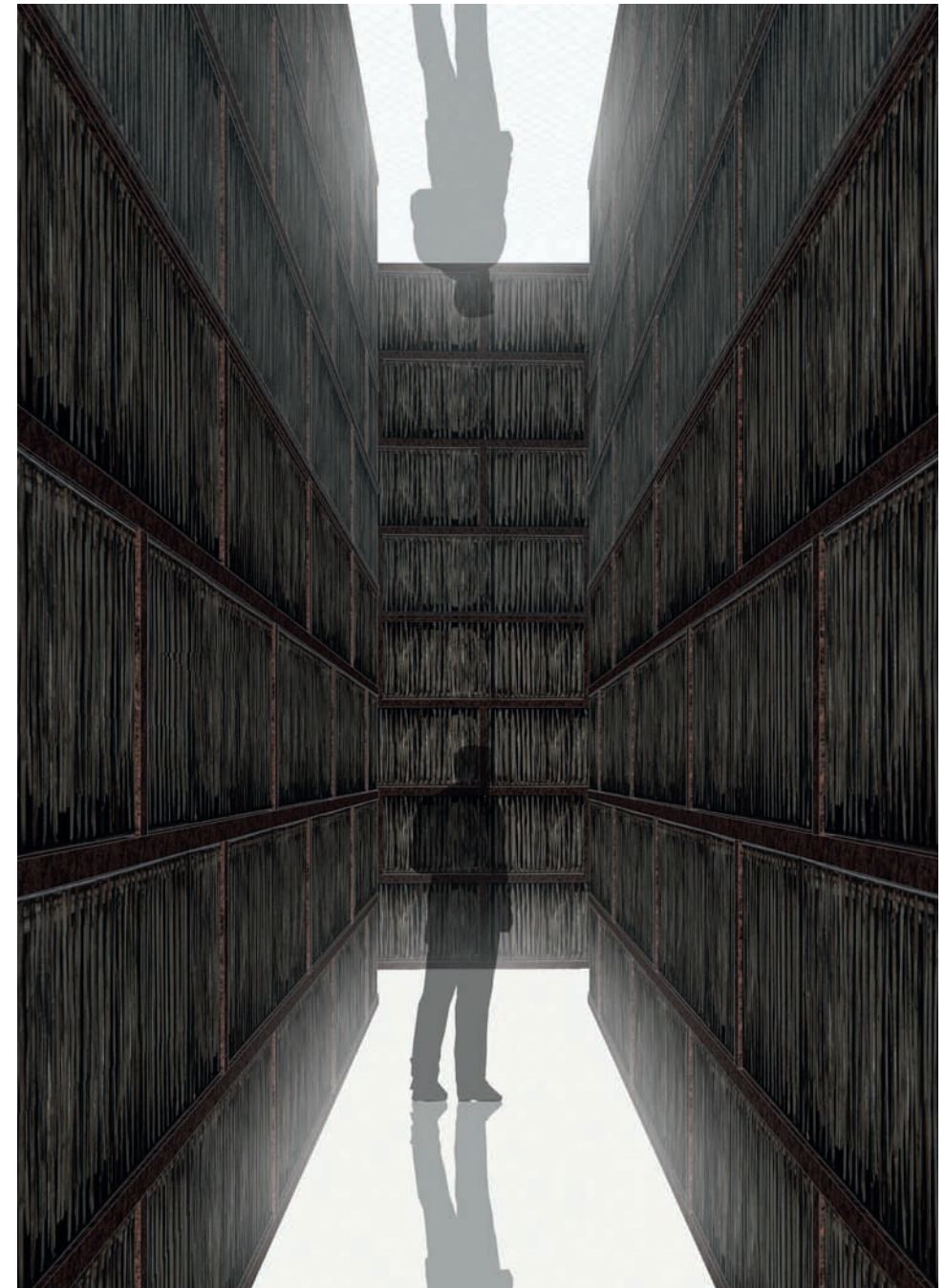
Describe what you experienced walking through this installation.

Did you feel differently in the passageways and niches?

How did you react when you emerged in the Zen garden?

‘Chinese literature clearly illustrates the importance of architecture in our lives and the relationship we have with it. Chinese stories often situate their narratives within architectural settings, while Chinese architecture can allude to experiences derived from literary texts ... In Chinese literature, every story happens somewhere.’

Li Xiaodong



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Li Xiaodong Atelier
**Concept image of
environment**

Commissioned by the Royal Academy
of Arts, London
© Li Xiaodong Atelier



Pezo von Ellrichshausen

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Pezo von Ellrichshausen
Concept drawing of environment, called 'Blue Pavilion'
Oil on canvas,
30 x 30 cm, 2013
Commissioned by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
© Pezo von Ellrichshausen

Comprising four cylinders and two rectangular forms, this installation is unadorned and apparently primitive in its architectural language. Decoratively mute and on first impression impenetrable, each of the supporting structures provides access to the elevated box above, via four spiral stairwells, one in each of the cylinders, and a ramp that rises inside the vertical box. However, the basic form of construction belies the refinement and precision of its timber structure, which was prefabricated

by the architects' contractors in Chile, before being shipped in modules to London. As an object in itself, the installation also exhibits the architects' trademark attitude to the art of building, working with a limited palette of materials and the most basic modes of construction to produce an installation that is monumental in relation to the gallery, but intimate and tactile in its engagement with the visitor.

Described by the Chilean architectural duo Mauricio Pezo and Sofia von Ellrichshausen as a small room elevated on four massive columns, this installation extends many of the designers' enduring preoccupations. As with all their work, the pair reject the pursuit of fashionable invention, choosing instead to take inspiration from what they refer to as the ordinary and the familiar, based on the premise that timeless beauty exists in forms of architecture that on first impressions often seem too simple to be sophisticated. Simple in form and unadorned in detail, the timber-clad structure has been composed in response to the scale and proportions of the gallery. Exploring the architects' interest in geometry, the square form occupies exactly half of the gallery, and its points align precisely with the decorative structure in the Academy's vaults and ceilings. The structure provides three distinct experiences for the visitor. The first is a shared experience below the platform, where people can collectively gather around or move between the massive cylindrical columns. The second is an individual and sensual experience, when ascending or descending the ramp or stairwells, which expands the visitor's perception of distance and time. Finally the third is an intimate and surprising experience when elevated above the gallery on a platform, where a new relationship is established between visitors and the hitherto inaccessible ceiling vault.

This installation both brings people into closer proximity with the late nineteenth-century decorative detail and establishes a new spatial relationship between the visitor and the broader context of the Academy itself, simultaneously providing a new aerial view of the gallery, and setting this in context with the outside world through the glass roof light.

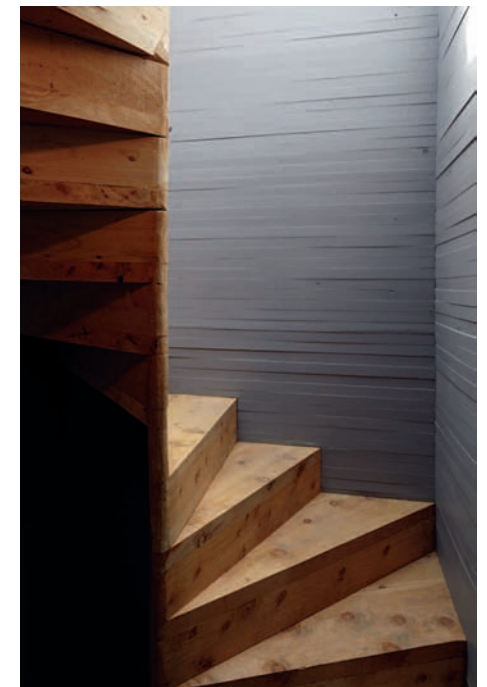
Describe your own reaction to the three different experiences created by the architects.

What differences did you notice between using the ramp and the stairs?

What was it like to be on the raised platform? In what ways did it change your perception of the galleries, including their shape and size?

'From the beginning we were fascinated by the size and proportions of the galleries. As a temporary installation within the historical space of the institution, our project focuses on framing the most permanent yet inaccessible architectural [detail], the decorated vaulted ceiling.'
Pezo von Ellrichshausen

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Pezo von Ellrichshausen
Cien house, Concepción, Chile (2011)
Photo © Cristóbal Palma



Diébédó Francis Kéré

'To move forward people need to be inspired; they need buildings to enhance their creativity and encourage them to take the future into their hands. I want to build inspiration.'

Diébédó Francis Kéré

Described as a room within a room, this installation by African architect Diébédó Francis Kéré interrupts the Academy's enfilade of rectangular rooms with a curvaceous wineglass-shaped form that links two galleries and funnels people together into a more intimate cave-like space. Forming an arch made up of a matrix of 60 mm thick honeycomb plastic panels, Kéré's construction extends his interest in working with ready to hand and adapted material. In this instance, he finds new potential in perforated plastic sheets from Germany, typically used in construction, but hidden within doors and walls as fillers. Kéré's specification of this material provides a mechanism for interaction and adaptation, with visitors being offered brightly coloured plastic straws to thread through holes in the honeycomb structure and thereby adorn the otherwise monochromatic cocoon with an ever-changing cloak of colour.

For an architect who places community at the heart of his work, and whose role often extends to that of activist, fundraiser and builder, it comes as little surprise that Kéré's installation relies on the engagement, interaction and

contribution of the gallery visitor. Often working with communities that have experienced particular hardship, Kéré adheres to the belief that architecture has the potential to genuinely inspire change. Recognising the need that exists in everyone to have buildings that enhance their creativity, Kéré states that his main aim is to create comfortable spaces for informal gatherings, and to help communities build their own inspiration. To this end, he has created a structure that is both object and context; object in the sense that the structure is an autonomous form that creates a new focus within the gallery setting, and context in how that form does much more than serve its own end. He has created at its heart a new place to meet, to sit, and most crucially a place that becomes a focus of interaction and adaptation, as each visitor is invited to leave their mark both as an individual and collectively.

Did you walk straight through the installation, or did you pause, sit down and occupy the space it creates?

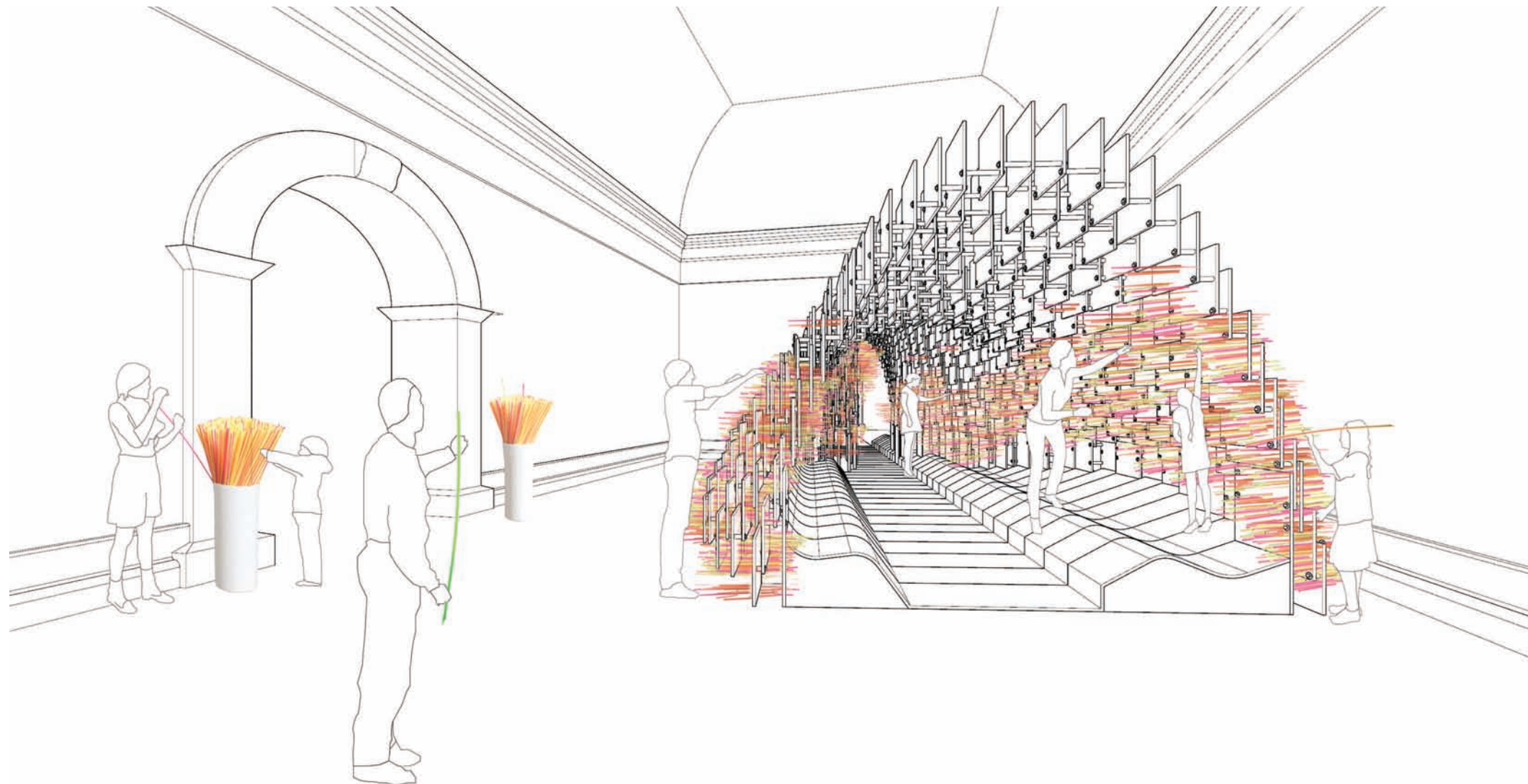
What did you notice about how people's behaviour changed when they were gathered together inside the installation?

'When you change a building you become part of its creation!'
Diébédó Francis Kéré

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Kéré Architecture
Concept image of environment

Commissioned by the Royal Academy of Arts, London
© Kéré Architecture



'First, my doors are not architecture, they are sculpture. Second, I think they are elegant. Third, when you cross these thresholds perhaps you experience a sensation, an emotion. Fourth, they are logical.'
 Eduardo Souto de Moura

'It's not possible for an architect to design a space – such a concept does not exist. Instead, we design the thresholds and the limits: the walls, windows, doors and so on. I'm interested in designing the elements that give the impression of space.'
 Eduardo Souto de Moura

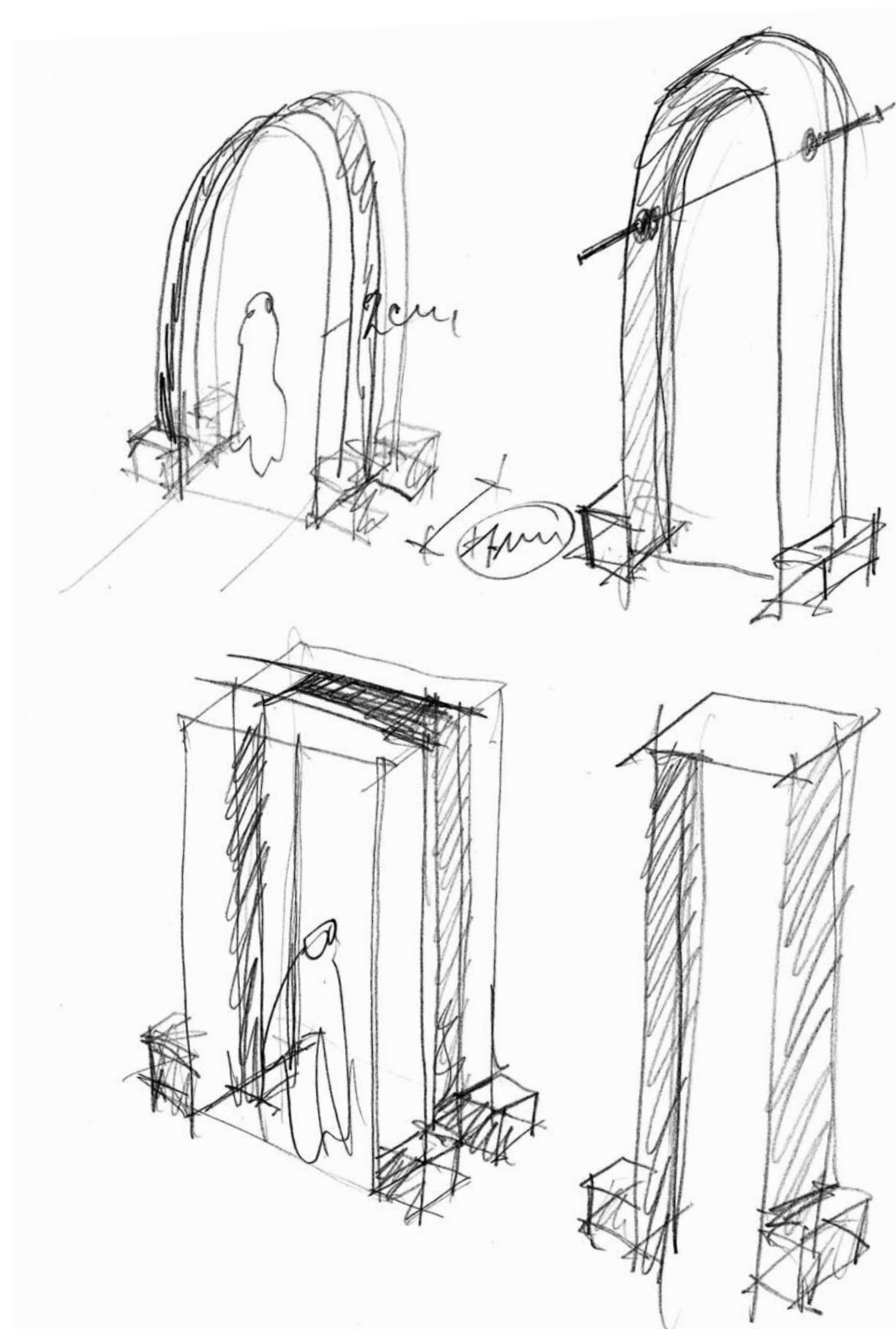
Eduardo Souto de Moura

Situated in Galleries II and VI, these two replica door cases are precise facsimiles of those in the Royal Academy and play on the tensions that exist between original and copy. Freestanding and set at a 45-degree angle to their predecessors, these 3.5-metre-high structures are made from ultra high-performance reinforced concrete (UHPRC). Cast in precision-made joinery moulds, this advanced concrete product allows even the finest detail of the door cases to be replicated, with a relief as shallow as 0.2 mm being perfectly formed. Despite their apparently simple composition and construction, cutting-edge finite-element analysis was run using computer software to predict how the 30-mm-thick concrete frame, without the aid of a supporting wall, would perform structurally and react in the event of impact.

Portuguese architect Eduardo Souto de Moura states clearly that his installations are not in themselves works of architecture. Instead, he describes them as sculptures, which he sees as *reflections* of architecture; an assertion that draws on both the literal and notional meaning of the word reflection. By making copies of two of the Academy's existing door cases (both the marble arch that occupies the main axis and the timber square door frame which runs in the secondary axis), Souto de Moura is not only reflecting the gallery's architectural detail in physical form, but is perhaps more profoundly providing two new architectural devices that cause the visitor to become aware of and to reflect upon subtle spatial notions – of scale, axis, threshold and transition – that may otherwise be overlooked. Despite forming the gallery's most consistent and prominent architectural element, in the day-to-day use of the galleries many people typically move through the enfilade of rooms apparently unaffected by the spatial nuances of passing through the Academy's door frames. In response to this, Souto de Moura's new freestanding door cases, which are disembodied and independent of the walls, impose a material and geometric shift that makes passing through the apertures a more present experience. This gives visitors the opportunity to more consciously focus on the sensations associated with movement and transition, and helps to make them more aware of the architectural elements that form the limits and thresholds both inside the Royal Academy galleries and in architecture generally. Souto de Moura considers these limits, edges and thresholds to be the architect's principle medium for defining space, underlying the fact that it is impossible for architects or architecture to actually create space. As these pieces make manifest, architecture defines the limits of our spatial experiences.

Did the doors seem bigger or smaller when replicated as freestanding sculptures?

Having experienced Souto de Moura's sculptures, were you made more conscious of the galleries' existing doorways? If so, how did you react?





Álvaro Siza

Located outside in the Annenberg Courtyard, the installation by Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza consists of three elements; a column lying down with its head or 'capital' beside it, another standing upright, and a third with its capital in place. Inspired by the architect's first response to the site, when he was struck by the presence of the Burlington House façade as seen through the archway from Piccadilly, these fragments refer back to the birth of the column. They also mark the beginning and end of an important route that sets up a straight axis, linking street with gallery – via courtyard, salon, staircase, vestibule and Central Hall – and terminating in Gallery VI with the first of two installations by Siza's lifelong collaborator, Eduardo Souto de Moura. Presented as a shared response, like Souto de Moura's freestanding internal door cases, Siza's 4.8-metre-tall columns are also made with precast concrete. However, unlike the ordinary Portland cement grey of his colleague's sculptures, Siza chose to use an embedded pigment in yellow, inspired by a flash of colour seen as a yellow bus drove past the courtyard's archway.

Álvaro Siza states that to make architecture is to start with what is already there, and when describing his own work, the Portuguese architect often refers to what he recalls as being his deep emotional response to any given site, and its existing history and traditions. In this case, that highly attuned and personal reaction focused on the relationship between the Royal Academy and the city beyond – a relationship that is celebrated and mediated by the presence of the Annenberg Courtyard. The three-piece sculpture also reflects his interest in continuity, both in terms of the theoretical continuity of architectural history and the physical continuity of place. As such, the elements not only become abstract figures in their own right – tracing the birth of the column and combining to create a sculptural entity that occupies the courtyard as a type of external gallery. They also form a series of signposts to what lies within the Main Galleries, which Siza hopes will activate visitors' memories rather than simply draw visual comparisons with Souto de Moura's door cases. The columns also mediate the process of leaving the gallery and courtyard as visitors effectively re-enter the realm of the city, with the architect's choice of colour bringing elements of street life in closer proximity to the architecture of the Royal Academy.

Did you notice Álvaro Siza's columns when you first entered the Annenberg Courtyard?

What relationship exists between these columns and Souto de Moura's sculptures?

What did the distinct yellow colour mean to you?

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Álvaro Siza
**Concept drawing
of environment**

Commissioned by the Royal Academy
of Arts, London
© Álvaro Siza

'From the courtyard, visitors climb the stairs to the beautiful octagonal room, and beyond it they move into the gallery where they find Souto de Moura's installation. The sequence is more intense and richer because you cannot see both his and my installations at the same time.'

Álvaro Siza

'Architecture is always set in a particular place, whether this landscape is natural or urban. As architects, we are always building in relation to something else. What we create is not an isolated object but transforms and is transformed by what exists.'

Álvaro Siza

Conclusion

In her introduction to *Sensing Spaces*, exhibition curator Kate Goodwin encourages participation by reminding us all of our capacity to sense architecture and to play our part in this experiential experiment. 'Since birth,' she writes, 'we have been making sense of our place in the world and architecture has been part of the process.' She goes on to say, 'our physical exploration of space is central to our understanding of architecture, first detected through the body and senses before being rationalised by the mind'; here alluding to the core ambition of the exhibition, which sets it apart from a backdrop of image- and information-based architecture shows. In *Sensing Spaces*, nothing is being rationalised or taught, and very few signs, directions, facts or figures are given within the galleries. Instead, the installations begin a process of unlearning, of turning off our rational mind and getting back in touch with our core senses; or, as the subtitle neatly expresses, a process that will lead us to see architecture, *reimagined*. The challenge faced by these architectural practices was to give our visitors a new perspective on architecture. Only you, the visitor, can tell us how successful this experiment has been, as you explore – touch, climb, walk, contemplate – the different environments and bring this extraordinary exhibition to life.

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Visit www.sensingspaces.org.uk for more information, interviews
 with the architects and an in-depth curator's blog

