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Tye Farrow, a Salutogenesis for the built environment

Tye Farrow, una salutogenesi per l'ambiente costruito

In the book "Constructing Health", the Canadian architect proposes its application for an architecture that generates health

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In modern Western culture when we talk about **health**, almost automatically, our **thoughts** focus on **disease.** Too often we adopt a **defensive,** pathogenetic **approach** aimed only at limiting damages. The opposite is the vision of those who, focusing on psychophysical well-being, suggest **health-generating strategies**: this approach, which has a lot in common with the ancient traditional medicines holistic vision, has been defined with the term Salutogenesis by doctor and sociologist Aaron Antonovsky.

In his book 'Constructing Health', Tye Farrow, a Canadian architect active on the international scene, proposes applying **salutogenic principles to the built environment**. Starting from the research that has consolidated the existence of continuity between brain, body and environment and considering the scientifically recognized influence that the built environment

has on the state of psychophysical well-being, Farrow argues that it is not enough to try to limit the damage caused, but that **architecture** must itself become a **tool** that contributes to **health generation**. The book describes some of the most relevant scientific references the research has produced and gives an overview of the projects developed in Farrow's office starting from these premises. Although neuroscientific research has been strongly focusing on the relationship with architecture, the **cases** in which a conscious **translation into constructed forms** are proposed are **few.** Farrow's book is interesting precisely for its connection between research and practice.

Fundamental in his theoretical system is the concept of **Antonovsky's Coherence,** which is "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring, though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected." (Antonovsky, 1979, p.123). The presence of coherence in the perception of reality could generate health. This intuition of the New Yorker doctor, as only sometimes transpires in Farrow's text, is now scientifically well supported by theories on perception, which have been working precisely on the congruence between internal projection and external perception.

Transposing Antonovsky's theory **in the architectural field**, the author suggests questioning oneself about the **three elements of coherence (Manageability, Comprehensibility and Meaning)** suggesting, for example, to consider the readability degree of space, the ease and intuition of its use and the deep meaning of some elements in certain contexts.

To explain the mechanisms of the experience of reality, Farrow refers to the constructive theory of perception and emotions. The **perception of reality** is based on a continuous overlap between inputs from the environment directed to our body and the predictions that the brain elaborates on the basis of schemas consisting of previous experiences and biological mechanisms. Using those schemas, the architect can build places that foster the construction of coherent experiences because they accommodate people's different emotional projections.

According to Farrow, an **interesting role in the process is played by the ambiguity of some stimuli**. A slight irregularity, a dissonance, or an evocative element can make an already coherent experience more interesting. To build it, the brain must do some "extra work" that stimulates creativity, generating wonder and pleasure.

Hence the importance of the **Enriched Environment**, a concept focused on through some laboratory research about the brain damage produced by the continuous perception of bare and

insignificant environments, the borderline case of which is the White Box used, not by chance, as an instrument of torture. An 'enriched' environment is such if it allows the possibility of using elements and forms of space that can **stimulate interactions with the user**. To create a healthy architecture, Farrow also suggests some **keywords: Generosity, Variety and Vitality, Authenticity, Hope, Nature, Silence, Firmness and Solidity**.

The second part of the book presents some projects in which, following the salutogenic approach, **the use of the theoretical corpus as a design tool is made clear**. While in some cases, the architectural translation of certain metaphorical elements may be too literal, especially considering the given significance of perceptive ambiguity, the most exciting results emerge in cases where the theoretical principle is not condensed in specific architectural elements but in the founding structure of the entire intervention.

Regarding the RVTR design for the **Prince Edward Viaduct anti-suicidal barrier in Toronto**, Farrow writes: "… the Luminous Veil was a great design response to the wrong question. The design competition asked the pathogenic question of how to stop deaths, versus the salutogenic question of how to cause health". (Farrow, 2023, p.130) Farrow's proposal, on the other hand, applies **the model of the inhabited bridge** in which commercial activities, pedestrian and cycle paths create a real place in the city that people could regain.

In **residential projects** there are interesting attempts to establish a contact with the external environment and nature. Skylights and façade screens are thought to produce shadows that vary depending on the external light, so whoever is inside can perceive the flow of time and the seasons.

In **school buildings** the attempt is to propose places with the right balance in the presence of stimuli to "enhance our capacity for thinking, creating, concentrating, and engaging with others." (Farrow, 2023, p.160) Positive ambiguity and enriched environment principles are translated into linear and curved overlapped wooden elements that evoke fractal geometries and encourage physical and mental exploration of space.

Lastly, considerable space is dedicated to **healthcare buildings**. Emphasizing the contemporary healthcare culture's rapprochement to a more holistic view, the proposed buildings do not just solve functional issues but become places where the whole person is taken care of. Great importance is given to the emotional experience, the need to lower the stress level and evoke the feeling of hope.

Exemplary are the **Thunder Bay Regional Hospital Cancer Radiation Treatment Rooms**.

Thanks to an in-depth study on radiation decay, it was possible to remove the bunkers' steel door and **open a skylight** through which the sun's rays illuminate an underlined plant basin. In addition, the treatment machine was flipped around in order not to block the view of the plants while entering the room. Little but effective design choices that reveal a deep intent for change.

- READ THE ARTICLE IN ITALIAN LANGUAGE

Antonovsky, Health, Stress and Coping, 1979, Jossey-Bass Inc Pub

Farrow, Constructing Health, 2023