

Built Environment and Mind's Health: An Unbreakable Bond
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Syllabus

Whether consciously stated or unconsciously perceived, the tight connection between the spaces we inhabit and their impact on our mind's health is undeniable. Our response is calibrated to a series of external material arrangements that fundamentally affect our human experience. The recent pandemic only brought to the collective attention how the quality of the built environment influences us profoundly at a psychological level. A growing body of literature on this theme bears witness to its increasing relevance to our day-to-day life. This class will explore this foundational topic of timeless relevance.

Lesson 1. PHYSICAL SETTINGS AND MENTAL HEALTH

As we enter space for the first time, we apprehend it sensorially. That exposure prompts an emotional reaction in us far greater than the sheer assessment of the performance of physical clearance, clarity of planning, and functional allocation in space. It affects our mental health in the long run. While interiors would appear to have a primary role in this understanding, this intuitive response to real-world conditions applies to all environments, interiors and exteriors alike. This first introductory talk will illustrate architectural examples that elicited varied responses over time in the general public.

Lesson 2. DIETER RAMS' THE 10 PRINCIPLES OF GOOD DESIGN.

In the late 1970s, noted German industrial designer Dieter Rams wrote a seminal article where he enucleated a series of essential attributes design of all scales needs to exhibit to attend to the complex needs of individuals. While he acknowledged the importance of utility of what is designed, its psychological impact on the user was reiterated again and again. This delivery examines all those 10 principles, how they were implemented into his works, and how relevant they remain today in the shaping of healthy environments.

Lesson 3. ORGANIZED LANDSCAPE AND MENTAL HEALTH.

We live in a material world experienced through our bodies in all their layered dimensions. When it comes to the built environment, the focus appears to be buildings over settings. Yet, our conditioning takes place already through the experience of the landscape, inclusive of all aspects of the hardscape and softscape. While a tradition of landscape architecture is built upon the notion of greenery as an escape from the city, our well-being is dependent on the qualitative character of all spaces, indoor and outdoor alike, lived on a daily basis. This talk explores the link between landscape and mental health.

Lesson 4. MODERN ARCHITECTURE AND MENTAL HEALTH.

Emphasis on health was at the basis of many claims in Modern architecture to sanitize the environment through a de-cluttering of urban and architectural space. In clearing settings, the assumption was that cleanness was a form of order directly impacting the mental health of the inhabitants of the Modern city. If some of these ideas were directly applied to the design of health-care related facilities, the underlying principles of this design philosophy touched every building type. This lesson will illustrate the before and after of interventions in urban settlements and housing designed during the rise of Modernity in Europe and the United States.

Lesson 5. LIGHT AND MENTAL HEALTH.

Master architect Louis Kahn stated that “A Room Is Not A Room Without Natural Light.” In that statement, the authoritative role of light in establishing the basic conditions for human inhabitation took on unusual conceptual clarity for generations of architects. Natural light, as well as artificial light, creates a mood evocative of countless associations in the mind of individuals. The same space under different light conditions throughout the day and the cycle of seasons throughout the year, as well as in diverse weather, assumes a radically different character impinging on our mental health. Understanding that direct link is the object of this talk.

Lesson 6. DESIGNING TO IMPROVE MENTAL HEALTH.

The history of the built environment is filled with examples of deleterious projects that marred the quality of human life all over the world. In reflecting on how much agency architects do have in shaping our surroundings for the betterment of humanity, an ethic approach to the process of development becomes imperative. The reciprocity between well-designed environments and what keeps the mind healthy calls for a constant questioning of how mental health and well-being are structurally connected. The modalities on how architects can intervene to achieve this required synthesis is the object of this last talk.