

Spaces defined by objects

All photography and writing produced by William Van Nes



INTRODUCTION

When we think of spaces, we don't typically think about the specific objects that occupy the space, but rather, the feeling that the space evokes, or even how it may impact us on a personal level. Think about visiting the beach during sunset, there may be other people present, or animals, or beach umbrellas, or even garbage, but from a glance you may not be concerned with specifics. All of these objects, animals, and people, help bolster the location's atmosphere, but do not necessarily hold their own value by themselves. Our natural senses help us blend together a space or image into something grounded that we can comprehend. In no way could we take in every detail all at once without experiencing a sensory overload. This is why a space at first glance may evoke a specific feeling, but given time to soak in the atmosphere, we might notice things that previously were meshed together.

Objects and people

Both the objects and people occupying a space can have a serious impact on the setting and feel of the location they inhabit. As mentioned above, objects and people are not necessarily the sole component that creates a setting, but rather one of multiple elements. In reality, when most people enter a new space, they are not likely to be paying attention to specific objects and people within the space. That being said, one can easily remedy this by simply taking the time to observe their environment. What objects are present? Who are the people occupying this space? Picking up on these key elements can help us better understand why this space is evoking a specific emotion from us.

Mood and tone

People and things are not the only factor that creates the feel of a space. The actual mood and tone of the space also greatly influence how you may feel. This of course can involve people, what their mood may be, angry, happy, sad, but can also not involve anyone at all. Take the image below which I took at *Arches National Park*. You may get a feeling of heat or dryness when looking at this image, even though you are not present in the space. This is largely due to the actual tonal color and mood of the setting. Colors of red and orange, with little green vegetation, partnered with a big sky, instantly creates a desert feel. There is nobody here to tell you about the heat, nor are there any signs of civilization to hint it. This is not the kind of space a human could survive in for a long time, and so naturally our brains sound off an alarm. We receive an artificial warning telling us that this place is uninhabitable, and we do this through our observation of the surroundings. Is there any water? Are there any trees for shade? Are there any people to help if you get lost? These kinds of thoughts rush through our minds subconsciously, ultimately letting off a core feeling in the end, a feeling of heat.



The Outlier



Most settings we stumble upon tend to make sense to us. A forest is green, full of grass and trees, everything is exactly where it is supposed to be. Which explains why when something is out of place, we tend to notice it. This image above is simply of a forest, however, an oddly placed guitar completely changes the setting. No longer is the forest itself the focus of the space, but rather the guitar. This is because, as mentioned, there is now an unexpected object present in a space that does not belong. We might say that no longer is the space defining the objects that occupy it, but rather, the object itself is defining the space. When looking at this image, the many trees and

rocks and grass are not the focus, and almost blend into the background. The exteriors of the image become a sea of green and gray, and no longer claim the same attention and importance as they would without the guitar. We are drawn to this guitar, but why? I could simply answer this by saying that it is because the guitar stands in the center frame, and that its color contrasts the background. While these statements are true, they still leave one question, why? As humans, we are naturally curious, and therefore, when we observe something defying the natural order of the world, we question it. This may not always be the case, and sometimes there may in fact be a natural element that stands out within a space, which may catch our attention. Take the image below I took in Arizona of a saguaro cactus. These beautiful plants stand out, as they are the generic cactus that is often shown in film, specifically in cartoons. If you didn't grow up in Arizona, then you may immediately focus your attention on these specific plants when glancing over the desert landscape. This means that now a natural object has caught your attention, which is not foreign to the space, but rather, foreign to you.



Memories and spaces

As we have discovered, it is very difficult to define a space simply by the objects and people that inhabit it. A space can be far more meaningful for one person than it can for another, but why is this? As mentioned above, the Saguaro may be a unique plant for many who are unfamiliar with it, but may also be meaningless, or extremely meaningful to those who live among them. There is though one specific element that may trump all others when it comes to spaces, and that would be memory. Memories can allow us to form very unique connections with spaces, regardless of what, or whom may inhabit them. Take for example, the location at which your spouse proposed to you, or the place where you broke your arm, or maybe the location of a particularly memorable birthday party. None of these locations may hold anything within them of particular value or interest, but the power of your recollection of that space may be even more powerful than the space itself. Have you ever shopped at a particular business, and then possibly found yourself working for that business in the future? Did the space change in any notable way? Most likely not, but your perception of the space as an employee, rather than a customer, is radically different. You may know where every item is stored, have access to previously locked doors, or know what the break room looks like; none of these areas changed themselves, your perception of them did.

Conclusion

Spaces can take many forms, shapes, and sizes. We define the spaces we enter, whether that is through memory, natural perspective, physical or symbolic connection, or simple observation. As humans we are constantly making judgements and assumptions, which means we decide how we feel about the spaces we inhabit. Beauty is not always in the eye of the beholder, but often it is, and how a space makes one person feel, may have an entirely different impact on someone else. You may have already visited that space, or maybe you are a local, and the space is simply commonplace for you, these factors are important, and can radically change someone's perspective. Objects themselves can prescribe a completely different meaning to a space, if ordered in a specific way, but if the space or objects are not foreign to the individual experiencing them, then can we really say that they are actually impacting the space? Likewise, if a person is in fact unfamiliar with a specific object inhabiting the space, then is it the person's unfamiliarity with the object, or object itself that is defining the space? These are questions that don't have the easiest answer, but hopefully by addressing them, we can create a better understanding of how exactly we define spaces, and what it even means to define a space.

