

# LIMINALITY IN SPACE

Thresholds, transitions, and  
the in-between.

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‘There is a need to accord space, time and place for liminal feeling... there are two mistakes which all individuals do: ‘we provide no ritual space at all in our lives...or we stay in it too long.’

- Carl Jung

Bly, Robert. *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Dorset 1990)

# INTRODUCTION

The liminal state is a combination of different transitory experiences and explains how it relates to time, narrative and multiple. It is interesting to see how liminality can cause both fear and comfort in human beings. We are afraid of the unknown but we also see the beauty in change and contrast. How can we understand liminality when it is experienced different by individuals?

The purpose of this theory essay is to investigate the concept of liminality and how it is represented in architectural space and design. Additionally, aspects of liminality from the perspectives of philosophy and psychology as well as examples of liminality in art and architecture. It is an investigation on how architectural design of liminal spaces may improve spatial experiences and promote awareness of one's relationship to one's surroundings, time, and self. This research frames the discourse of liminality in various disciplines with the focus on the usage of the liminal concept in architecture.

According to Carl Jung, there are two mistakes which we as individuals do: either we don't create any ritual space in our lives at all, or we stay in it for too long. Jung states that there is a 'need to accord space, time and place for liminal feeling'; In order to acknowledge one's experienced changes. A "liminal emotion" is the recognition of one's being and awareness in relation to a situation, which offers clarity and affirmation to someone searching for their life's purpose.

# BACKGROUND

What do empty parking lots, waiting rooms and hallways all have in common? These areas are considered to as liminal spaces. The Latin word "limen," which means threshold, is where the term "liminal" gets its name. Liminality can refer to anthropology, psychology, or architecture, depending on the situation. Liminal environments have distinct, occasionally unpleasant characteristics, and are frequently described as places where reality feels altered.

I first dappled with liminal spaces after a late-night stop at the supermarket in my hometown. It was the our after the sun had set and the sky had a delicate color. As the pale light fell over the parking lot littered with nothing but shopping carts, the weak glow of the storefront sign wavered along to the sound of quite fuzz in the trees. Not a soul was left in sight, leaving the warm night air to focus its attention on me sitting in my car in the middle of the concrete desert. I found a peace in the stillness of the night, an indescribable feeling of precence. How could this abondency of a place filled with nothing but unsettling qualities have such a calm effect?

For a while, though, I had no idea that such places had a name. How on earth did I think I could describe these incomprehensible facets of the cosmos? Before I even realized what a liminal space was, I was able to appreciate its beauty. It was like opening a door to an other world or unlocking a brand-new level with a retro feel. Without the phrase "liminal space" in my vocabulary yet, I would just sit and stare and think "this seems like something out of a movie".

From there, I developed a more intuitive understanding of the settings and circumstances that allowed liminality to flourish. Since then, I have discovered several liminal zones and immersing myself in experiences that perfectly capture the sensory experience. With the addition of additional factors like dusk or rain, ordinary places like a parking lot, a waiting room, or a bus stop significantly change, giving the impression that it is 'after ours'. Your worldview is put to the test when your expectations of reality are reversed. By doing this, liminal spaces transform from strange locations that appear to be on the brink of different dimensions into imaginative havens intended to broaden your conception of what it is to be alive.

In reality, the power of liminal zones is essential to the majority of our ideal 'movie moments'. It's surprising how frequently liminal zones are seen outside of the cinema, especially when you take the time to study the subtleties of your surroundings. You will find that finding these areas is lot simpler than you anticipated if you really look for them. I thought only movies were reserved for fiction. But the locations I've gone a thousand times suddenly changed as the sun sets and the clouds parted, letting their liminal aspects to emerge.

## LIMINALITY; DEFINITION

The concept of liminality can be understood in a variety of situations, from the social and cultural to the physical. The basic term *liminality* literally means "being on a threshold" and is derived from the Latin word for "threshold". In all contexts, liminal refers to an intermediate state or condition; an in-between condition in which the liminal entity has characteristics of what it is between, but at the same time is separate and distinct from them. The liminal entity can be a person in cultural contexts or a location in architectural circumstances. The liminal stage is a state of unadulterated possibility where there is a lack of clarity in defining. The liminal, as defined by Fred Koetter, is the area between two objects where "memory, values, and intents meet" and "where things concrete and ideas are intertwined, taken apart and reconstructed" (Koetter 69). It is a transitional space or a space between fixed constants that is fundamentally confusing and, by definition, transient.

## LIMINALITY IN RITUALS AND THE BUILT

The concept of liminality was developed and is used most often in the science of anthropology (the study of human origins, behavior, and culture). The 'liminal state' was first defined by the ethnographer and anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 in 'Les Rites de Passage' (The Rites of Passage). He used the term to describe the midpoint of ritual passage as an anthropological idea.

According to his definition, the term "liminal state" describes "in-between situations and conditions that are characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes" (Horvath, 2009).

Van Gennep distinguishes between the sacred and the profane (secular) realms at the outset of his text (religious). He claims that although they are different worlds, they share similarities in that they both have transitional periods that everyone must experience at some point in their life. He emphasizes that this change is so significant that one "cannot travel from one [transition point] to the other without going through an intermediary stage," which complies with particular requirements, norms, and/or rules" (Gennep, 1960).

He concluded that each rite of passage consists of three major phases: separation, transition or liminality, and incorporation. In the first phase, people leave the group. From there, they start shifting from one location or status to another. In the third phase, they return to society, having completed the rite. Since the liminal state is a time of transition, one's sense of identity somewhat disappears at this time.

By applying this way of thinking to spatial experience, liminal spaces are seen as places where people in the Acropolis are changed from the profane to the sacred realm. The Propylaea (fig 1-2), which serves as the Acropolis' entrance, acts as a transitional area or "intermediary stage" between the city and the Gods' sanctuary. As the tenant passes through a number of thresholds or layers to rise to the sacred place, the area is obviously in transition. The building's two wings appear to reach outward and practically draw the resident inside, isolating them from the outside world. The occupants distance themselves from the city and the rest of Greece as they ascend the Propylaea stairs and are ready to enter a transition zone.

Additionally, the elevation change is used to raise awareness of this shift. To emphasize the threshold to the sacred space, the architect included steps between the zones of separation and transition and between the zones of transition and incorporation. These Propylaeian components demonstrate the zones of separation, transition, and incorporation that are important for the occupant to change as they pass from the profane to the sacred.

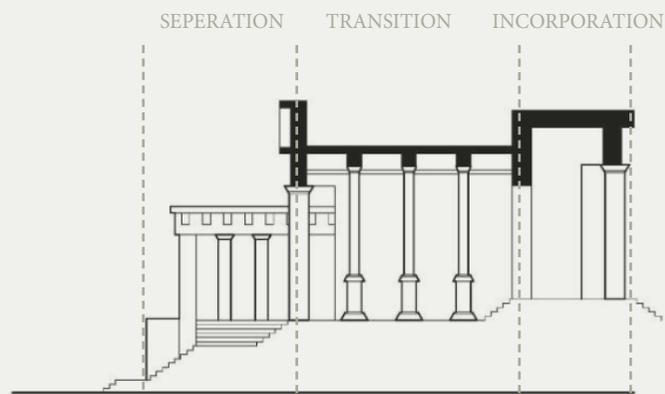


Fig 1: Zones of separation, transition, and incorporation in the section of the Propylaea (Source: Author)

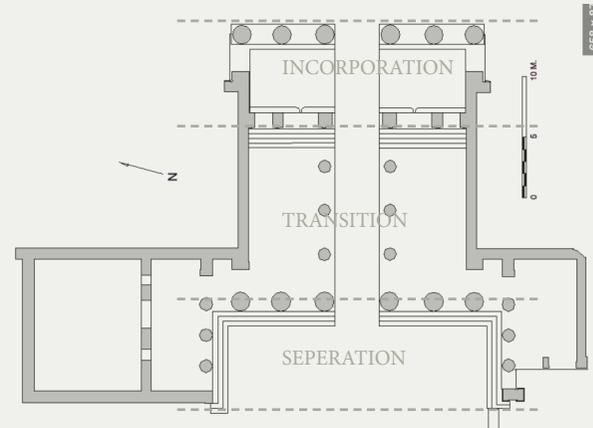


Fig 2: Zones of separation, transition, and incorporation in the plan of the Propylaea (Source: Author)

In a less obvious layout, these three zones are also present in Le Corbusier's Mill Owners' Association Building. The entire front façade, including the stairwell and the entry bridge, serves as the barrier separating the city from the office building. Instead of only being encountered once, as in the Propylaea, this zone is encountered several times as one moves through the structure. As they move between floors on the stairs, the occupant passes back and forth through this zone of separation. The transition zone is located behind the building's front façade. This fuzzy region, which is neither inside nor outside, will be explored in greater detail in the section that follows. This area serves as a zone of transition between the inside spaces of the office building, including the main assembly room on the top level, and the outdoor spaces of the city. The areas that permit access to the separate rooms are known as incorporation zones. The building's occupant frequently transitions between these three zones, constantly blurring the threshold and occupation of the building. In this way, Le Corbusier alters the experience of the worker by utilizing threshold and transition in the workplace.



Fig 4: Le Corbusier's Mill Owners' Association Building (source: Bruno Vanbesien)



Fig 3: Le Corbusier's Mill Owners' Association Building (source: Archdaily)

In the 1960s, Victor Turner developed further theories on rites of passage. He rediscovered the term 'liminal' and 'liminality' in 1967 in his book 'The Forest of Symbols', which includes an essay, entitled 'Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage. Turner introduced the concept of 'liminal space' in order to understand rituals in African tribes as: a space of transformation between phases of separation and reincorporation. It represents a period of ambiguity, of marginal and transitional state (Turner, 1967). In order to describe experiences that resemble liminal experiences but are unique and do not entail the resolution of a personal crisis, Turner invented the term "liminoid." A rock concert might be thought of as liminoid, while a graduation ceremony might be considered liminal. The liminoid is a break from society, whereas the liminal is a social or religious ritual.

According to Turner, liminoid experiences have largely supplanted liminal experiences in industrial civilizations, which have become rare and decreased. As van Gennep stated, all rites of passage follows the same universal patterns throughout all cultures. Turner emphasizes that the actual change itself is more significant than the transition itself. According to David E. Nye, who wrote about Turner's concept of liminality in his book *From Landscape to Cityscape: Recent Interdisciplinary Work* (E. Nye, 1997), "Oversimplifying his theory, in a liminal state the hierarchical order of society temporarily breaks down, people merge briefly into an undifferentiated mass, and emerge renewed from the experience."



Fig 5-9: Photographs taken by Victor Turner during his field work in Zambia with the Ndembu tribe. ( source: judithwesterveld.nl)

1. The lodge in which novices live during seclusion.

2. Naked novices confront adults across the fire in the lodge enclosure a few days after circumcision.

3. Novices decoratively disguised for the 'coming out' ritual.

4. The gateway between infancy and maturity. It is placed at the junction of an old and new path, the old clothes of the novices drape the crossbar.

5. Novices dressed in their new clothes ready to dance and be re-incorporated into their community.

## LIMINALITY IN ART AND EXPERIMENT

In one way, artists enter a liminal realm, a space of not knowing, when they choose to push themselves by joining a workshop or investigating new methods of creating. When you're lost and trying to find your way, it can be incredibly challenging and frustrating. I experience this very frequently as one series of work comes to an end and a new one begins to develop inside of me. Sitting in the unknown is a tough and uncomfortable situation. By playing in my studio, working small, experimenting with different materials, and learning new techniques, I strive to reduce that time. But I'm not sure if playing around and pushing things to happen is the right approach. Perhaps there is a moment to relax, perhaps the work has a rhythm or cycle that cannot be rushed. Agnes Martin, an American artist who bridged the gap between Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, discussed receiving "visions" for each painting in the documentary 'With My Back to the World'. She thought that seeing what she was supposed to paint next was sort of like receiving a command from a higher power. Martin gave in to the visions and painted each one exactly as it had been seen. And after finishing each, she would wait for another vision to direct her. As a professional I find this really intriguing; when thoughts do finally flow to me, they take the shape of blurry, undeveloped visual images. But even while they give me a starting point and a goal to aim for, they appear to evolve as I go. I wonder if trust is also a way of dealing with liminality.

### The artist, the viewer and the object

Some pieces of art contain mysterious features that are difficult to describe and don't always follow any kind of logic, but instead have the ability to link the viewer to a timeless paradigm. A person's inner self can be revealed through various types of art, exposing to them a dialogue of or with their "Self" (as defined by Jung). The french philosopher Merleau Ponty refers to the energy that moves between an artist, the viewer, and the art as the visible and the invisible, where there is a symbiotic relationship between the former and the latter. One of which illuminates and animates the other. He refers to the birth as a "hidden discovery" that promotes self-awareness and self-discovery, as well as a deeper appreciation of one's uniqueness (a process which Jung defines as essential to understanding oneself). In his description of two types of attention, Jung distinguishes between a narrowly willed, penetrating focus in which "things" and the self are grasped separately and a wider, unfocused, diffused attention that "brings remarkable changes in perception and enrichment of feeling," making the intense reality and significance of the world more approachable.

Liminality is also a visual quality that can be achieved using both conceptual and formal aspects. Formally by reducing the barriers between the real and perceived worlds. When an artist is aware of these limits and intentionally manipulates or removes them, the viewer and the artwork might enter a liminal area. Many of Claude Cahun's photographs reveal liminality. Her work has an unclear and dissociative feel because gender roles and nonlinear narratives are topics that are tackled in several of her pieces.

Her art includes a liminal quality that applies to both the concept of gender and the larger reality story. However, describing the concept of liminality as it relates to femininity might be confusing. Is it liminal because she is not occupying traditional gender roles within her photography? Although you could argue that Claude Cahun also explores the genders that exist in the gap between traditionally masculine and feminine. That it can be a transitional state between the two, as well as the combination of the two.



Fig 10: Photograph by Claude Cahun (source: artblart.com)

To explore further, a number of designers and architects look beyond the field of architecture to investigate how user experience is related to modern art practices. Architects and designers, in the opinion of C. Thomas Mitchell, can learn from modern installation art techniques that prioritize the user experience and design process over modernist conceptions of architectural form. With this contextual design, the experience and ambient setting take place over the architectural object. Jonathan Hill, an architect and educator, agrees that installation art practice is experiential. He refers to the way that humans use and occupy building as a liminal area.

However, the philosophical underpinnings of this approach and the exact methods for implementing this liminality in practice in response to user interaction are sometimes blurry. According to architects Paul Lewis, Marc Tsurumaki, and David Lewis, working within the gaps and slips of conventional thought and ordinary life patterns, strategies are the forms of creative possibility. Architectural practice can also enter into installation art, and reveal new perspectives on space and user experience, as a form of art in and of itself. What strategies do we employ to enter this liminal architectural practice?

As an interior architect i am trained to design spaces for other people to inhabit and use. In one of my latest project I constructed a social experiment.I was exploring how different shapes of tables and seating arrangements affects social interactions. And how my role as a designer affects these environments. A group of people were asked to sit around two tables of different shape. I observed their interactions with each other as well as the object and their physical presence in the space. I questioned whether architects might inspire people to not only live and occupy places, but to also create their own spaces.



Fig 11-12: (source: author)

Paradoxically, when we are unsure about how to occupy a space, architecture may be at its most provocative. We may be able to establish possibilities for a praxis of liminality between people and place if users are able to do more than simply inhabit architecture over time by creating their own spaces. In addition to that, In *Rethinking Architecture* (1997), Jonathan Hill and Gianni Vattino examined the idea of liminality, where building objects are designed to the user experience by referencing modern art. This approach helps examine various perspectives on architecture as a concept rather than a final result.



Fig 13: Photograph by Olafur Eliasson (source: olafureliasson.net)

Olafur Eliasson is an example of an artist who places a strong emphasis on sensory stimuli. Eliasson recontextualizes natural phenomena like light, water, ice, and mist to produce unique settings that change how viewers see themselves and their surroundings. He accomplishes this by merging nature with the built environment, creating a hybrid space. His art is produced with clear neutrality. His works have the appearance of being random, like found objects. Seeing the show itself becomes natural. As a result, the interaction between the user and the object is simply an interaction with a discovered object. (This is in accordance with Merleau Ponty's theory of perceived experience). His installations serve as a way to get viewers to consider what other objects, such as a room, a gallery, a fake sun (Figure 13), or a massive cascade falling over a bridge, might be made of. By building semi-totalitarian structures, he hopes to raise awareness, stimulate people's interest in the finding object itself as well as other "worldly" things that go beyond the object, and perhaps even evoke the question - what does it mean to be in this space and within this context?

Another great example, American sculptor Richard Serra, well known for his massive steel constructions. Most of his work on display seems out of place and invites viewers to interact physically with the architecture. Consequently, a stronger sense of oneself in space is produced. Serra claims he is “not interested in the notion that art serves something. Art is useless, not useful” (2016). Although this point of view contradicts the effect of his art, it playfully raises a fresh question about the meaning of art. Alternately, perhaps Serra meant this when he made this statement. Serra has redefined the function of art by saying that it is pointless if it does not engage in a physical relationship with its audience.

For example, in his sculpture collection, he investigated the issue of disorientation in relation to audience movement, ‘Torqued Ellipses’(fig 14). Movements through torqued ellipses might be seen as a transitional liminal phase, as moments of dissolution and confusion happen while traveling inside the structure. Serra’s main intention is for the audience to become separated from the previous spatial structure once they enter the sculptures, possibly emerging with a new perception, once their out.



Fig14: ‘Torqued Ellipses (source: artobserved.com)

In 2020 I did a project with the intention of exploring the need humans have to influence and modify their surroundings. It demonstrates an imaginative instrument for transformation. It represents a point in time when something is taking shape in thought (fig 15). Looking back, analysing the object it can also represent a transitioning in value between you and the tool.

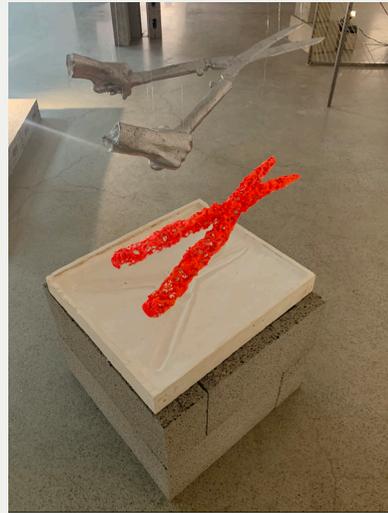


Fig15: (source: author)

The tool doesn't become useful until we put it to use. Without a connection to a fantasy, it is likewise useless. It is a static installation that does not seek to include the observer in a physical encounter, but rather stimulate the viewers reflections. I recall some of the criticism on the exhibition focused on the fact that it appeared to be a poor attempt to imitate art; this was said in the quiet with a superior undertone. It should also be added that none of them made an attempt to show interest. It fascinates me how people can dismiss something with such ease and passion, making me raise question about Serra's definition of pointless art; how can we define the word engaging?

## LIMINALITY IN ARCHITECTURE

### The waiting room

Most familiar as liminal spaces, waiting rooms, represent a particular frame of mind, characterized by introspection, anxiety, and boredom. I've recently spent a good amount of time in a waiting room during my visit to medical care. I watched as people went in and out and I listened as names were called while surfing through my phone. I barely glanced up, only when a sound or movement distracted me. The waiting room is a bizarre situation, a site of liminality, frozen time, and even containment. It is a space that is just meant to be temporary and function as an introduction to another location. The goal is to enter or exit the doctor's office. And in that space, a person becomes a patient. At one point during my visit, I decided to put my phone down. I observed how everyone was impatiently filling their time on their phones, exactly like I was doing seconds ago. The way it looked so sad struck me. A phone call is one thing, but now there is a kind of fractal compression of space occurring where moments between moments are filled with inbetween space. Our phone now contain a space, a virtual one.

It makes me reflect upon boredom. 'Reduced waiting time' is the motto of our time. We design for efficient and effective production of space. Reducing the time in material and people to optimize the ease of use and mobility in our every day life. I question if it interferes with our ability to handle discomfort and patience. Our needs must be satisfied right away. Waiting is negative, you can even get compensation if you have to wait too long. But in many circumstances, waiting is essential, so we need to make place for it. Reflect, letting go, preparing. Boredom can also be a critical resource that pushes us to seek the unfamiliar, to make way for fresh pursuits to be explored.

I personally strygggle to understand the argument that some architects use to defend the ineffectiveness of their transitional rooms. According to the argument, these areas are good for meeting new individuals. But really, your staircase does not qualify as the grand escalier of the Palais Garnier just because it reverses direction three times when ascending a floor. Yet, I know deep down that they are attempting to show the occupants that their time is not necessarily best spent in their private residential units, workplaces, or schools, etc. I will agree on that. In some cases, perhaps we shouldn't be afraid to deal with transitional areas for what they are, spaces between entrance and exhits. Just like the waiting room. A place that encourage a bodily dialog with time, in other word, boredom.

## People and spaces

In the 1960s, the term Liminality was related into spatial contexts through writings in the disciplines of art, urban design and architecture. The concept of liminality was brought to light into architecture by Aldo van Eyck. The unpublished print, "The Child, the City and the Artist," describes Eyck's conceptual views (Van Eyck, 1962). His concept of the threshold or in-between addressed the need for architecture to eliminate spatial divides like the concept of inside-outside. If we go back to the 20th century, the architect Herman Hertzberger was one of the major influences, who challenged the early modernist belief that 'form follows function' . Hertzberger believed that a building's primary purpose should only serve as a framework for its occupants to interpret and define how they use the space, and not the entire solution for how to use the space. In other words, a building's purpose extends beyond its structural role to include the life that its users define and interpret inside it. Hertzberger defined liminality as a state of transition where doors and thresholds serve as a point of entry and a point of connection between places with various uses, thereby establishing rules for social interaction and gathering.

Although, In the late 1960s, Hertzberger developed his own perspective on the term liminality in architecture as a spatial condition of inside and outside. The role of liminality in architecture in general still remained unclear. Catherine Smith (2001) made a connection between architectural acts and liminal ideas and practices in her paper, Looking for liminality in architectural space. Although the idea of liminality was being used in architecture, she claimed that whether it was intentionally or accidentally built, there was a lack of understanding of the concept.

Peter Zumthor discussed in Atmospheres (Zumthor, 2006), the interest with how architects might create a new intersection, new entity, or new transition that divides a space into two parts, particularly internal-external and private-public. Zumthor expressed his fascination with how architects are able to realize their ideas, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to develop their spaces on a site and instantly create an inside outside. In this way of thinking design, new thresholds, entities, transitions, and intersections can be created anywhere. There are several theories and publications on liminality in architecture, but did this actually happen based on their own design philosophies, so that the spaces they produced were linked with the concept of liminality? and If so, are there any architectural concepts that should be established when creating liminal spaces in architecture?

Although the idea of liminality is implemented in architecture, according to Catherine Smith, there is a lack of understanding of the concept, whether it is intentional or unintentional.

In short, transitional spaces in general are spaces that allow passage between other, hypothetically more important, spaces. They suggest to us, not to stay too long in them. Not because they're unwelcoming, but rather because they accept a lower status than the adjoining spaces. A transitional space is for example a corridor in an apartment building. It implies that the individual housing units are more important. What is interesting is that Tadao Ando, the well known Japanese architect, often reverses this hierarchy, making his transitional spaces into the most significant areas in his buildings. These transitional spaces are more important because they show a particular set of potential interactions to the world around us, despite the fact that they are still functionally transitory in the sense that we still aren't expected to inhabit them more than we would in the living room or bedroom.

In Ando's transitional spaces, he also serves the task of introducing and abstracting elements. In 2017, I visited one of his buildings, the Conference Pavilion, based in Weil am Rhein. The building is done with a minimal amount of abstraction. By just being exposed to nature's various desires. Allowing the nature to express itself in an abstract form. I found the building to be a moving experience, following the footpath leading to the structure, surrounded by cherry trees, a subtle tribute to the symbolism of sakura in Japanese culture. The transition between the elements reinforced the atmosphere of calm and concentration exuded by the building. It is sometimes challenging to articulate the feeling of being in such crafted space. Simply 'presence' is the emotion that keeps coming to me constantly.



Fig 16: The Conference Pavilion (source: author)

Words such as atmosphere and mood come to mind when faced with Zumpthor's architecture. Liminality can be understood through a poetic perspective. Zumpthor's design philosophy is philosophical and focuses on how a person experiences space and how a building's materials may be used to narrate the story of a space. He compares poetic architecture to the emotional response one has to music, where the melodies transfer one to a particular reaction and experience. Peter Zumpthor is known to practice the aspects of liminality into design explorations of architecture. No matter whether it is used intentionally or unintentionally in his works, it suggests a poetic side to the discipline.

Zumpthor views architecture as a conceptual work of art. Quoting from *Thinking Architecture* by Zumpthor, "I am convinced that a good building must be capable of absorbing the traces of human life and taking on a specific richness...of innumerable small scratches on surfaces, of varnish that has grown dull and brittle. At these moments, architecture's aesthetic and practical values, stylistic and historical significance are of secondary importance. What matters now is this feeling of deep melancholy. Architecture is exposed to life." (Zumpthor 2003). The moment when spatial experiences are created, is when it is captured by the experiences that engulf a person's spontaneous emotional reaction. And that I think, is the beauty of architecture.

## TO BE CONTINUED

Circling back, It is clear that liminality in architecture is related to perspectives of liminality in anthropology, philosophy, design and art, that alludes to ideas of thresholds, transitions, and in-between. Architects like Aldo van Eyck, Herman Hertzberger, and Peter Zumthor has conducted great studies on the connections between liminality and architecture. However, despite the fact that the term "liminality" has often been used in written materials since the early 20th century, there is a lack of link between theorization and design praxis of liminality in architecture. As practicing designers, it may require that we need to explore this conceptual zone of blending between people and space. What we can learn, is that an in-between space cannot exist in a space that has not been divided. Therefore, using spatial division that establishes a relationship between elements, interaction and movement patterns are able to breathe life into places and buildings. The liminal spaces in architecture are therefore enhanced by spatial experiences as a result of buildings being created with people's lives in mind. The liminal behaviors surrounding it give the structures brief moments of life. Nevertheless, with this in mind, it assist us to discover further the mysterious and blurry zone of liminality.

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