# "Points of View"

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**Abstract**

The author's beginning design studio adopts Felice Varini's artistic language in order to investigate critical architectural issues. This paper discusses the architectural significance implied in Varini's work and argues that the process of the exploration, rather than the final product, validates such a project in beginning design studios. In this paper, projects and processes are analyzed in terms of situations and events, spatial conditions and concepts, and embodied experiences.

**Architectural Significance**

*Points of View* is a book of Swiss-born artist Felice Varini's work. Varini uses geometric shapes to visually flatten architectural and urban spaces. In his work, a point of view is carefully defined as a point in space so that it becomes the only moment when one sees a complete and flattened shape overlapping space of various depths (Fig. 1).

One may ask, what is the purpose of adopting an existing artistic language to describe beginning design studios? The product of such effort will only be a copy of Varini's original ideas, so it does not possess conceptual originality. To answer this question one has to understand the significance of Varini's work from an architectural point of view.

Varini's approach embeds fundamental architectural meanings in that it is both contextual and experiential. Geometric shapes are created in a given context. The shapes respond to geometric conditions, such as edges, corners, angles, dimensions, and foreshortenings in perspective. Shapes are created to command the existing space, while, at the same time, they must adopt a certain logic from that space and emphasize it. More importantly, Varini's projects are always site-specific, which provides the basis to test, not only the geometries of the space, but also people's changing views within the space. As a result, the site must be studied as a complex of spatial phenomena. Further, by inserting a shape into an existing space one is making a statement about the space. The statement goes beyond the literal shapes and how the shapes fit into the spatial context, becoming a conceptual highlight of the transformed space. The understanding of the space is therefore pushed towards abstraction.

Varini's approach raises the question between distanced optical experiences and embodied visual experiences, and between interiority and exteriority. The geometric shapes form an interactive mechanism that is not merely visual but also, more importantly, spatial and temporal. To view the shapes is a discovery process, the purpose of which is not simply to view the flattened complete shape. In countless cases, the experiential excitement

Fig.1. A work from Felice Varini

derives from the impact that the fragments of shapes make on the existing space and the energy that these fragments inject into the almost neglected space. Moreover, a complete and perfect shape has to be viewed from a distance where the viewer is external to the artifact. When the viewer is physically wrapped within the space defined by the artifact, he or she only sees fragments of the shapes. The purely optical experience is transformed from external to internal and turns into a complex of embodied experiences carried by movements. The path of movements usually starts as a normal traffic routine and evolves into a series of curious exploration. As the viewer moves around, the path is imbued with temporal factors, such as duration, rhythm, and sequence, which affect the discovery process.

Therefore, the purpose in adopting an existing artistic language in foundation year design studios is not the final installation products, but the process within which explorations of architectural concepts can be carried out. The process of the project, instead of the product, leads to unavoidable encounters with important architectural issues, which validates the project in an architectural studio.

**Situations and Events**

From a designer-viewer's point of view, adopting Varini's artistic language in architectural design studio is about setting up a framework for discovery. There is an object of discovery and a process of discovery. Superficially, the object is a complete shape. The process is to look for the complete shape. On a deeper level, the object is more of a situation than a shape. That is to say, through positioning a shape in a specific space and in a specific way, the shape becomes a visual statement of the space and an engagement of the viewers' movement within the space. The process is not only to look for the complete shape but also to go through embodied experiences along the way of discovery and finally achieve an understanding of spatial concepts.

In terms of visual statement, the author's foundation year studio focuses on everyday spaces – spaces that are so familiar to the students that they almost become invisible. The overall site of the project is the space within and around our architecture building. Stairs, corridors, and atria are the popular sites for the students because these situations exhibit inherent fluidity of spatial transition. The chosen space can be highly occupied or neglected. In both cases, forced attention is created as part of the visual statement through insertion of the appearance of flat geometric shapes.

In terms of the engagement of movement, the project inserts a discovering event into the existing events, which is essentially passing through, within, or around the building. The moment of seeing the flattened shape is a significant point in space. The point is bound to be a spatial and temporal pause. Depending on the existing spatial condition, the pause can be an interruption of a high traffic route or an injected attention to a neglected route. Spatial tension is created in both cases.

A sequence of movement is created in space. One may be struck with the complete shape first before merging into the fragmented experiences. One may walk along the way and suddenly perceive the visual signal of an inserted shape by turning his or her head aside, up, or down. One may also be choreographed to act in the mode of hide-and-seek until the moment of discovery. The possibilities go on, but a rhythm, such as fast, slow, and pause, is always present. On the route one may keep moving at a constant speed. One may also encounter chances to slow down and stay. The designer may demand that one position his or her body in a specific way, such as kneeing down, to perceive the complete shape.

The engagement of movement also creates situations of internal seeing versus external seeing. By internal seeing we mean the viewer is situated within the space enclosed by the shapes. By external seeing we mean the viewer's body is completely outside the shapes. In both cases, one may perceive fragments of the shapes, but only through external seeing can he or she perceive the complete flat shapes. When one is surrounded by fragmented shapes, the space does not facilitate literal seeing or comprehending what the surroundings are. The experience is then heightened on the level of immediate encounters with details and textures and becomes a non-hierarchical visual experience for the body. The internal seeing raises the suspense of the external seeing. The external seeing informs the internal seeing and creates an interesting interplay in the viewers' minds between the fragments and the whole.

The engagement of movement initiates a negotiation between is the location of the body and the focus of the eye. The body movement and the eye focus may or may not be in the same direction. One may continue to approach the moment of discovering the complete shape so that the direction of movement is identical to the direction of the eye focus. One may also turn away from the shape and turn back towards it. On a smaller scale, the engagement of movement is related to specific actions and even body positions. One may be put in a situation of negotiating between the desire of the eye and the security of the feet. For example, a black circle was constructed at the corner of an atrium in a looking-up view above the stairs. To discover the moment of the flat shape one has to keep looking up while climbing the stairs, or turning one's head back while descending the stairs. The relationship between the movement of the feet and the desire of the eyes is separated and disconnected (Fig. 2).

**Spatial Conditions and Concepts**

A flat shape is designed to have impact on the space of interest and to either enhance or contrast the spatial qualities of this space. Where the shape is, what the shape is, and how the shape responds to the spatial setting become the key elements that are used to make a statement of spatial concepts.

*Tangent Condition*

A circle appears to be a popular choice for this project because of its geometric simplicity. Students usually use a tangent mechanism to set a circle in space so the perspectival lines of architectural edges become tilted lines in a flat plane that is defined by the circle. The way a circle is constructed in space highlights the importance of architectural edges. In one student project, a red circle is placed so as to set the focus to the side entrance of the building. The shape attains a certain relevance to its surroundings by adopting and exaggerating the globe shape of the lights. The size of the circle is determined by its adjacent architectural edges. Coincidentally, the circle crosses one of the lights. In another project, a blue circle is constructed in a similar manner. The students, however, take into account the

Fig. 2. Black circle above stairs

thickness of the shape and use the inner edge of the circle as the tangent agent to establish geometric relationships to the architectural edges. This specific treatment adds a level of detail to the project (Fig. 3).

*Corner Negotiation*

A corner is another typical architectural condition. Usually happening in rectangular space, the diagonal line not only connects the opposite corners, but also stretches the space, flattens it, and forms an edge in the middle of it. The line is also created to contrast the existing orthogonal system of architectural forms. A blue line is created from a view of looking down a secondary atrium. The original space is understated. The downward view is almost neglected. Undoubtedly, the insertion of the blue line energizes the space (Fig. 4).

*Vertical Negotiation*

A shape visually connects spaces that it crosses. When specific shapes are used the connecting effect is more pronounced. For example, the hypotenuses of a diamond shape emphasize the horizontal and the vertical axes of the space. Setting such a shape across two levels of architectural space heightens the tension between the above and the below. In one case, the above space is the main entrance of the architectural building with high traffic. The below space happens to be the opposite: a sunken garden that is less occupied. The contrast of spatial qualities that is generated by the positioning of the diamond shape becomes more dominant than the visual effect of flattening the three-dimensional space (Fig. 5).

Fig. 3. Tangent condition

Fig. 4. Corner condition

Fig. 5. Vertical condition

*Warp Space*

A shape becomes warped when the surfaces that it projects upon are, to certain extent, enclosed and continuous. The warped impression becomes obvious when the viewer looks at the shape from the side but not from the frontal perfect point of view. The depth of space is articulated literally. The spatial situation becomes more interesting when the shape itself functions as a frame. Therefore, from the perfect point of view, a flat frame is formed. From a side point of view, the frame is stretched in spatial depth, which becomes a volume wrapped by its invisible envelope. A green frame is created underneath a bridge walkway that connects the three architecture buildings. The space is highly occupied, however the spatial quality seems to be under-attended. The architectural surfaces surrounding the existing space allow the green frame to be contained in a tunnel volume so the warp condition is foregrounded (Fig. 6).

**Embodied Experience**

As it was emphasized earlier, spatial conditions and concepts do not stand alone. They make sense in combination with embodied experiences in temporal durations, the experiences from within the spatial conditions. Two elements are heavily involved in the experiences: body positions and routes. In two student projects, body positions are particularly emphasized. The viewer has to squat down in one case and bend in the other. By deliberately manipulating the viewer's body the designer challenges the action of viewing so the viewer is alerted and becomes more involved in the space defined.

A route involves experiential factors such as distance, speed and rhythm. In fact, a flat shape is designed to be viewed via various routes, each of which provides different modes of experiences. For example, the red circle is situated at the atrium of the architecture building (Fig. 7). From many angles the viewer can see a hint of it. Entering from the side entrance of the building, the viewer is immediately surrounded by fragments of red shapes. If he or she never turned his or her head back the red shape would disappear from the sight within seconds. If the viewer enters from the lower floor entrance a hint of distorted shape will be perceived. This hint remains present to the viewer if he or she walks around the atrium area on different

Fig. 6. Warp space

Fig. 7. Embodied experience within and around the shape

floors. The drama of viewing the shape happens along the core stairs within the atrium. Architecturally, the stairs form a centerpiece within the atrium. They are positioned in such a way that one alternates between moving towards and moving away from the center of the atrium while climbing the stairs. This specific spatial configuration plays a unique role in the choreography of discovering the red circle. The distorted red shape keeps appearing and disappearing on one's route up the stairs until the landing between the third and fourth floors. Suddenly, the landing becomes a balcony in a theater for people to stop and enjoy the grand view. At the same time, they are being viewed from every angle in the atrium space.

Needless to say, viewing the fragments of shapes is as intriguing as viewing the complete shapes. There is no intentional design of these fragments. They happen as a byproduct of placing the complete shapes. Infinite possibilities of interesting optical and spatial relationships are, however, embedded in these fragments that are not fully controlled.

**Future Exploration**

Although only spatial issues are the focus of this paper, the project has gone through a process that covers site analyses, installation, and documentation phases. Students observe people's movements in space, document their observations, and synthesize the information by visual means. They also examine forms of space and define a shape that can be uniquely situated within the space. Students then use projectors and painter's tapes to realize their shapes on site. They use video to document the installation process and to depict possible ways to experience the installations. Finally, video editing becomes the medium through which students further explore spatial experiences in framing, juxtaposition, and rhythm. When the project concludes, the idea of "points of view" has evolved beyond literal viewpoints in space and become multiple ways to understand space.

Materiality is the missing element in this project that has not been explored. What materials can be used, besides tapes, to realize the shapes? How could details be put together at meeting surfaces between the installation and the existing architecture? How could the existing space inform the materiality and tectonics of the design? As the choreography of the project moves forward, architectural issues will gradually take over the original artistic intentions of Felice Varini.

**References:**

Varini, Felice, Fabiola LÓpez-Durán, Lars Müller. *Felice Varini: Points of View*. Baden/Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers, 2004.