

Shadows, Reflections and Light in a Glass Hallway

Vanessa Simmonds, Kristen Braun, Tara Burr,

Joanna Lee, Caitlin Bilesky, Rachel Yang

Affiliation: Capilano University

*E-mails: : vsimmonds25@gmail.com, braun.kristen@gmail.com,
tara_p21@hotmail.com. leejoanna718@gmail.com, c_bilesky@hotmail.com,
rachel4630@hotmail.com*

Abstract

In this paper and film we tell of our inquiry into a particular place, a location on campus that drew us in because of its alluring structure and elusive light. We intend to make visible our individual and collective explorations. Inspired by an image of the teacher as researcher, we channeled our potential to be innovative teachers capable of discovering newness. We embarked on a journey that invited us to build a meaningful relationship with our environment over a period of five weeks. Engaging with moments of tension and wonderment with the group of student researchers, here we provide the insight into the observations and recordings of our single and shared interpretations. Our attentiveness to our relations with place, time, surroundings, materials and ourselves is demonstrated. Through reflective writing and visual expression, we entered into a dialogue with place, coming to the sensorial connections that exist, or have the potential to exist, between people and place. Using photography, video and art as tools to capture traces of our process, we situated ourselves as teacher- researchers. Revisiting our pedagogical documentation provoked continuous critical reflection. Our multiple perspectives allowed us to encounter the transformative qualities of place and to witness their capacity to be creators and holders of memory. Practicing this narrative approach to pedagogy has brought forth an awareness of the value of the relationships that exist in our everyday lives.

Keywords: *inquiry, place, reflection, awareness, dialogue, encounter, relationship, multiple perspectives, memory.*

Our research began as we crossed over the threshold of our classroom to go beyond and explore the buildings on the Capilano University's North Vancouver



campus. Our first stop was the Birch building. Seemingly well known to us as students, we were surprised by its invitation to develop a more meaningful relationship with us. Curious about unfamiliar spaces, we were drawn to venture up the stairs instead of following the well known passageway to the cafeteria. Arriving on the fourth floor, we encountered a quiet, dark hallway. The junction at the end of the hallway greeted us with a flood of natural light streaming in through several panels of glass, creating a large wall of windows that curled down the next hallway. We were reminded of the words of Preziosi (1979):

The ‘vocabulary’ of the built environment consists of elements formed by perceptually palpable edges, boundaries and other discontinuities in formation. Such elements acquire significance less in terms of their inherent properties and more in terms of their relationship to other items in multidimensional arrays. (Preziosi, 1979, p. 91)

Our attention was captured by the uniqueness of the architectural structure of the building and the shadows created by large windows. The interplay between the light entering the building, the shadows and reflections of our bodies, and the structure of the building itself provoked our curiosities for further exploration. As we walked down the hallway, we noticed that our reflections in the glass disappeared and reappeared like a game of hide and seek. In this way it seemed as if the building had its own personality, one that was encouraging us to engage playfully with it. Others discovered a different effect of the light, using their hands to create shadows, exclaiming “it looks like a kaleidoscope.” The way the shapes of the shadows on the wall changed as group members moved their hands—a reminder of the way colors and shapes within a kaleidoscope change as the tube of the instrument rotates. Being in this space made us feel as though we were inside a kaleidoscope.

Excitement filled the room as though a switch had been flipped on, and each group member began to shout out their interpretations, responding to being in the kaleidoscope. Our high energy caught the attention of a custodian passing by who commented that there were students in a space which is usually deserted. The feeling of being inside a kaleidoscope mirrored our realization that we could position ourselves in a variety of places, bringing multiple perspectives to our experience.

While expressing these diverse viewpoints, the area expressed an illusion of motion. The intersecting of horizontal windows, steel bars, and concrete walls echoed our relationship with the shadows and light. That night, as the evening light quickly faded, the playful shadows left us and our bodies seemed to wind down with the sun. Our dancing thoughts slowly decelerated and our minds were pulled outward, drawn to look at the distant view of our city. Sitting by the large windows, we collectively contemplated our encounters with this welcoming place thus far. Giamminuti's (2013) thoughts come to mind:

A context of 'overall softness' is amiable and welcoming, with spaces for solitary reflection and calm as well as places for social interactions: a space in which a 'strategy of attention' exists, an attitude of listening. A 'relational' space creates connections and its aesthetic quality is dependent on the quality of the connections. (Giamminuti, 2013, p. 27)

With autumn's time change we were met with the darkness of night during our next visit to the glass hallway. This was in stark contrast to our earlier experience of being bathed in the natural light that illuminated the space. We wondered how we could recreate that same light and make our shadows reappear. Deciding to embrace this new perspective, we discovered that the fluorescent ceiling lights projected our reflections onto the big glass windows. We quickly realized that there were countless opportunities for encounters. We could make impossible things possible, such as being inside a kaleidoscope, because of all the affordances the space gifted us with. Reflecting back on that particular night Rachel wrote, "Inside that window, there is a place, always a place, with a different dimension, opening the possibility for encounters. Inside that glass, we could 'touch' the untouchable; inside that glass, we could 'walk' on the un-walkable. Inside that glass, impossible became possible."

Entering the space again for a third visit, we experienced an array of emotions. This time, we brought with us a collection of materials with the hopes that they might enrich our dialogue with the glass hallway. Each of us brought a material that spoke personally of our relationship with the building. Tara brought glass jars to hold the rain that we had observed bouncing off the windows and trickling down a gutter a week earlier. We also brought food colouring to mix in the water to mimic the colours of the setting sun from our first exploration. Caitlin and Joanna brought flashlights to represent the sun that formerly filled our space and



aluminium foil to recreate reflections, and also wooden frames that reminded her of the window panels. Vanessa offered pastels and watercolors to represent the shadows, reflections, colours, and layers discovered in the space. Rachel brought string to play with the intersecting lines found in the building's architecture.

The array of materials were set out, and everything from excitement to wonder to anxiousness ensued. We wondered: what responses would be brought forth? What would these materials afford us? What would the materials afford the building? Would the materials work together?

Our night-time explorations began as separate, individual inquiries with each group member at first drawn to the materials they had provided. As we began to observe one another, however, each of our projects slowly came together. They became intertwined. As the evening progressed we co-constructed a piece of art for the space. A small model expressing the memories of our previous experiences within the glass hallway was created from our combined pieces. We described it as a "place within a place." The words of De Botton (2006) echoed our experience: "when buildings talk, it is never with a single voice. Buildings are choirs rather than soloists" (De Botton, 2006, p. 217).



At another time we visited the glass hallway we again set out our material offerings. We discussed how this project asked us to be more receptive to the interconnectedness between ourselves and the building. Looking at our materials,

we began to question whether we were truly interacting with the building or solely interacting with the materials. We were lost. This caused us to pause and come together to dialogue. We reflected on our previous experiences to gain a better understanding of why we had chosen to bring in the particular materials that we had. Through conversation, we realized that many of our materials were brought in as tools to help us rediscover the shadows and effects that the building had originally revealed to us. We wanted to bring lights to our space to create our own reflections to make a kaleidoscope. As we manipulated the lights to dance on the ceiling above us, Caitlin looked up and realized that we had had a basis for a kaleidoscope the entire time: it was just hidden from us. We discovered, along with Silvia Kind (2013) – our professor - that:

Everything can change and so we welcome the unexpected, it is also part of what you propose to do with children, part of what the learning experience can offer; the extraordinaries of daily life lies in the unexpected [...] when we document, we hope in the obstacle, in the unexpected in the extraordinary, because in fact that is what gives you back so much.” (Kind, cited in Giamminuti, 2013, p. 99)

Our first visit to this particular place left a very powerful mark on us. Subsequent visits to the space began with a doubt that we would ever return to as strong of a connection as our first encounter. By the end of each exploratory visit our collective laughter and willingness to embrace imaginative play pushed the boundaries of our respective comfort zones, creating a trusting environment which facilitated dialogue, erasing many of the doubts we entered the space with. In paying attention to the intra-actions we observed between space, materials, and ourselves, we were provoked to a deeper awareness of how the building was speaking to us, and how we communicated in turn. The glass hallway, once foreign to us, was transformed from an anonymous space to a place full of memory: our memories of creating meaningful relationships.

See our encounters here:



19-83-1-SP.mp4

References

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Authors:

Caitlin Bilesky, Kristen Braun, Tara Burr, Joanna Lee, Vanessa Simmonds and Rachel Yang are currently enrolled in Early Childhood Care and Education programs at Capilano University. Coming from a variety of different backgrounds, each of the authors brought forth their individual strengths, bringing their unique natures to this project while studying the “pedagogy of place.”