

## Abstract of Dissertation

### ŚŪNYATĀ OF SPACE

[シュニヤタ (“空”) に関する研究]

Investigation into the Influence of "Emptiness" in Architectural Space

[建築空間における“空”概念の影響について]

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#### Abstract

This study is about *śūnyatā*.<sup>1</sup> Its intent is to investigate, understand and make use of this Buddhist notion. Its aspiration is to establish a holistic theory of interconnectedness that would contribute to architecture by inherently appending to the initiative perception of **space** (i.e., the combination of both matter and void) the **observer**. This study -enthused by emptiness- will be advocating the proposal that the existence of space is not -as it appears- innately autonomous from its perceiver. But in fact the appearance of space is the momentarily interconnection of all circumstances at play including the perceiver who -via his physiological apparatus and cognition- is actually an intrinsic ingredient for the manifestation of the space. Furthermore, due to the fact that the first stage in the extension of the common meaning of **emptiness** in early Buddhism refers to both the state of **meditation** and to the **empty place**,<sup>2</sup> this study will attempt to examine from an architectural point of view the monk's individual space of meditation. Then it will seek to retrieve adequate features that will be utilized for the performance of a spatial experimentation for the purpose of validating the theory of interconnectedness and eventually demonstrate that the objectivity of space can actually influence the subjectivity of the perceiver. Thus implying that both space and its perceiver are part of a same encompassing fabric wherein they determine one another in their mutual interactions.

**Keywords:** Emptiness; Meditation; Empty place; Monk's individual space; Interconnectedness, Intuitive Feelings

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#### Introduction

“...*there is no absolute space independent of the observer.*”<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the history of architecture, from ancient period to the twenty century trends, the human interpretation of architectural space was subject to perpetual changes. Alike science, that initiated with the study of the “material” and then progressively advanced to investigate the “invisible”, in architecture the observed evolutionary pattern has pointed toward a similar direction of the spatial perception that initiated with a focus on the material objects (i.e. what is experienced through the sense habit of perception) then later transferred toward the void space (i.e., what is non-substantial, imperceptible and hidden from the senses). This attitude towards space, which first emphasized on objects and indicates a lack of interest in the void space, has shifted afterward towards the space -in between- and thus an emphasis has been given to the “empty” space. However, this study -supported by the notion of emptiness- will attempt to expose a different perception of space, a *meontology*<sup>4</sup> of space (i.e., a space which does not exist in severance and autonomy from its perceiver) or as James Heisig express: “the point before *consciousness* decides it is a

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<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* is equivalent to the English term “emptiness.” It is known in Pali by *suññatā* and in Japanese by *kū*, [空].

<sup>2</sup> See Choong Mun-keat, *The Notion of Emptiness in Early Buddhism*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 8~10.

<sup>3</sup> See Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, (1984), 152.

<sup>4</sup> The term “meontology” is not necessary a negative or a counterpart for the study of existence or being. It is actually a fundamental backdrop and refers more to the meaning of what precedes or lies beyond ontology and existence.

**subject** looking at a world of **objects**.”<sup>5</sup> The implication that both space and its perceiver are interconnected and part of the same encompassing fabric is what *Nishida Kitarō* called the *absolute nothingness*. According to him it is the temporal and spatial “place” wherein individual persons and things determine one another in their mutual interactions. Therefore by attempting to evade the dichotomous extremes of materialism (i.e., material objects) and nihilism (i.e., nothingness), the notion of emptiness -in the middle- discloses an encompassing fabric (that is neither a thing nor a nothing) wherein space and perceiver determine each other through their perpetual interconnectedness.

The aspiration of this research does not pertain in demonstrating the credibility behind the notion of emptiness or to assure the “true” manifestation of space (i.e., whether space fundamentally is as it appears in separateness from its observer or is a unified whole). This study simply meant to investigate, understand and make use of the notion of emptiness to eventually establish the theory of interconnectedness and to demonstrate -via the experimentation- that architectural space can actually influence individuals. Hence the validation of a certain degree of interconnectedness that would provide the opportunity for future endeavors suggesting the use of space in altering the state-being of its perceiver.

### **Methodology and Description**

The research study was conducted following a chronology that basically revolves around the notion of emptiness. It consisted of (1)philosophical section (i.e., Emptiness and Buddhism), (2)theoretical section (i.e., Emptiness and Architecture) and (3)experimental section (i.e., Emptiness and Individuals):

(1) From the philosophical stance this section has attempted to elucidate and clarify the controversies that exist behind the notion of emptiness (e.g., its relation with the notion of “non-self” and “dependant origination” and the erroneous misinterpretation with nothingness...) thus providing an adequate review and philosophical background. Also this part has undertaken an investigation into the different interpretations, understandings and diverse expressions of this notion that has been expounded by many individuals, sects and cultures following the evolution and spread of Buddhism throughout at least three major areas: Central Asia, East and South-East Asia. Accordingly, emptiness can be found initiated in India as a logical system that was grasped negatively by relentless refutations. Then in China, it became practically expressed in a more substantial manner through specific rigid and static illustrations. However in Japan, the highly estimation of the phenomenal world has influenced the interpretations and expressions of emptiness by reflecting the emphasis on momentarily fluid representations and daily mundane actions.

(2) From the theoretical stance this section has attempted to elucidate the nature and understanding of the idea of “empty” space and how the notion of emptiness can in fact contribute and be compared with many contemporary scientific theories. In addition and since meditation is the way to experience emptiness and going to practice meditation was closely related to going to an empty place, this section has attempted -in relation with space/Individual correlation- to explore the monk’s individual space of meditation wherein the apprentices usually experience such state. Then later it has attempted to retrieve spatial characteristics (i.e.,

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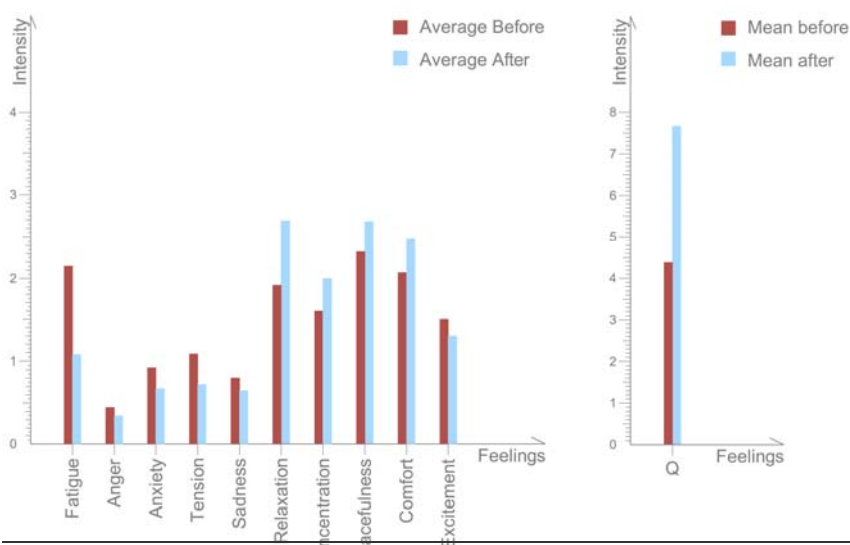
<sup>5</sup> See James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 45.

Isolation, Individuation, Nothingness, Impermanence and Mediation) in order to implement them on the subsequent spatial experimentation.

(3) From the experimental stance this section has interpreted and analyzed the results of a spatial experiment that was performed on 141 subjects (in relation to the required hypothesis).<sup>6</sup> The scheme of this experimentation relates to a simple method of survey which has requested from an apposite number of participants to experience spaces and while advancing point by point in space they were asked to provide a feedback of their feelings (i.e., referred to by intuitive feelings). Also among many inquiries they were asked to rate -according to their own assessment- their feelings prior to experiencing the spaces and after being isolated inside the secluded “empty” space. The outline of the subsequent observations was systemized in an overlapping subject(individual)/object(space) method. Basically two sets were illustrated; (I) portrayed all spaces per each feeling, (i.e., by fixing the subject and comparing it with the variation of objects) and (II) represented all feelings per each space (i.e., by fixing the object and compare it with the various subjects).

## Synthesis

Following the spatial assessment the described pattern of intuitive feelings has demonstrated a variety of comparable alterations in relation to the spaces. Obviously the external stimuli (i.e., the physical appearance of the space) have influenced the inner subjectivity and have caused the multiple alterations in all feelings. And although each individual had the autonomy to select from a large variety of feelings (i.e., numbered 15) the answers were not irrelevantly related or chaotic but followed a pattern that demonstrate a level of interconnectedness between the objectivity of the external spaces and the subjectivity of the internal self. Furthermore, participants have shown a **decrease** in the level of **fatigue**, **anxiety** and **tension** and they have revealed an **increase** in the level of **relaxation**, **comfort**, **peacefulness** in addition to an enhancement in their **concentration** ability. Also Concerning the before and after variable -conducted as a difference between (PJV) and the (NJV)-<sup>7</sup> results have shown a significant difference with a strong indicator of



**decreased negative psychological state and increase of positive psychological states.** Finally, individuals who walked through these spaces, according to their own assessment, felt **less fatigued, less anxious, less tense, more relaxed, more comfortable and more peaceful** and their **concentration** ability has **improved** as well.

<sup>6</sup> See conclusion of *part three: The Theory*, also space Automatization and space Intuitions of *part four: The Experimentation*.

<sup>7</sup> Q = PJV - NJV = Relaxation + Concentration+ Peacefulness + Comfort + Excitement - Fatigue - Anger - Anxiety - Tension - Sadness