

Symposium Abstract:
Affordances and architecture: Towards an ecological approach

At a symposium on perception in architecture in 1976, Gibson made the bold statement that “architecture and design do not have a satisfactory theoretical basis” (in Reed & Jones, 1982, p. 413). Moreover, he suggested that ecological psychology in general and the concept of affordances in particular can provide this basis. Over the last decades, several designers and architects indeed found inspiration in the concept of affordances. Unfortunately, the vast majority of them were mainly inspired not by Gibson’s conception but by Norman’s. In his influential book *The psychology of every day things* (1988), Norman conceived of affordances as mental representations that rely on computational processes and memory. Hence, paradoxically architects and designers who were inspired by the concept of affordances often followed cognitivist lines.

In this symposium we aim at taking a genuine ecological approach to architecture, evaluating Gibson’s provocative claim. What is the value of the Gibsonian concept of affordances in understanding and designing buildings and places? Verity Faith will discuss the effects of architectural affordances on those with dementia in long-term care settings. Erik Rietveld will present work by an architectural design practice that uses an affordance-based approach. Rachel Harkness considers the value of the concept of affordances whilst drawing upon an anthropological study of sustainable building materials and the buildings and places that result from their interweaving. And Rob Withagen, Bjorn Prieske, Joanne Smith, and Frank Zaal will present recent work on affordances and playgrounds, exploring the relation between the invitational potential of affordances and the action capabilities of the body.

Affordances in architectural practice

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RAAAF [Rietveld Architecture-Art-Affordances] makes site-specific work at the crossroads of architecture, art and science. RAAAF (www.raaaf.com) was Dutch Architect of the Year in 2013. What can we learn from this practice about the potential of the concept of affordances for architecture? I will present several projects that show RAAAF’s affordance-based approach. At the Venice Architecture Biennale 2010 the exhibition ‘Vacant NL’ made a call for temporary reuse of 10.000 vacant government-owned buildings for innovation. Awareness of the richness of *already available affordances* (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014) is a good way to get grip on the enormous potential of vacancy. Architects are not only open to available affordances, but also *create* new affordances. A project that shows this clearly is the design of a healthy living environment, Fortress Werk aan ‘t Spoel, which creates new affordances that, for instance, invite children to climb and run.

Reference

Rietveld, E. & Kiverstein, J. (forthcoming) **A Rich Landscape of Affordances**. *Ecological Psychology*, pp. xxx-xxx. Link:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10407413.2014.958035>