Designing with daylight; the relationship between daylight and health

Daylight is not only fundamental for architecture and renovations, modernizations and transformations of cities and buildings – it is fundamental for people’s well-being. Daylight is scalable and may be used strategically in all types of buildings, and particularly in the so-called ‘health architecture’ which focuses on how to increase the solar influx when designing and building houses (Hobday 1999, 2007). But daylight is also complicated because it is measured and valued quantitatively and qualitatively and, furthermore, has seasonal variations, creating challenges when building living areas aiming at as much daylight as possible through the year. Those responsible for designing and building the home, architects and engineers, rely on quantifiable ways of allowing enough daylight into buildings (or reducing too much); yet people living in the homes may have entirely different perceptions and the significance of daylight. This paper describes the views and significance of daylight to people in their everyday lives. Based on a qualitative research project in Denmark about the use of windows, performed from May to August 2012 among 13 families, using in-depth interviews, observations, photos and postcards for storytelling, I will show how daylight is perceived, used, coped with, and negotiated by these people in their homes, thus exploring the social character of a natural phenomenon. A metaphor will be used from biomimetics (Benyus 1997), claiming that the Danish people, like plants, need daylight. With the concept of ‘dwelling’ (Ingold 2000), which implies that people engage in their environment and create possibilities for dwelling at home to feel comfortable and at home in the world, I illustrate people’s day-to-day entanglements with daylight and highlight the social qualities of daylight. The paper concludes that access to daylight is vital for existential reasons (health, social reasons and to feel connected to one’s natural environment), showing the window as much more than a technical artefact. Based on this I argue for the window to be acknowledged as vital for creating dwelling and for its inclusion in bio-inspired design and biophilic architecture that commonly focus on nature and views to greenery, less on daylight.

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