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Architecture and the Limits of Experience: Spatial Apparatuses of Knowledge, Power, and the Self

Deneyimin Sınırları ve Mimarlık: Bilgi, İktidar ve Kendiliğin Mekânsal Düzenekleri

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the problem of experience in architectural discourse by proposing a historico-critical framework that reconceptualizes architecture as a technology of framing. Drawing on Bernard Cache's approach to architecture as a generative system of frames and Michel Foucault's analyses of technologies of knowledge, power, and the self, the study examines how spatial configurations produce historically specific fields of experience rather than merely accommodate them. Methodologically, the authors use Foucault's tripartite framework of archaeology, genealogy, and problematization to develop a comparative analytical matrix applied to three spatial *dispositifs*: camera obscura, concentration camp, and confessional booth. Each case is analyzed through a six-part schema addressing their historical specificity, architectural diagram, regime of truth, subject formation, primary relational structure, and experiential output, followed by their micro-operational logic. Findings show that, despite their historical and functional differences, these *dispositifs* share a common diagrammatic structure in that they all isolate bodies, regulate regimes of contact, and generate distinct corporeal repertoires that organize perception, domination, and self-relation. By foregrounding architecture's role in materializing the "historical a priori of possible experience," the article argues for a shift in architectural historiography from typological and representational analyses toward a focus on spatial diagrams and operative mechanisms. The study concludes by emphasizing architecture's dual capacity to stabilize existing experiential regimes and to open possibilities for their transformation through critical inquiry and design practice.

Keywords: Experience, dispositif, Foucault, spatial diagram, subject formation.

ÖZ

Bu makale, mimarlığı bir çerçeveleme teknolojisi olarak kavramsallaştıran tarihsel-eleştirel bir çerçeve vasıtasıyla, mimarlık söyleminde deneyim sorununu ele almaktadır. Bernard Cache'nin mimarlığı üretken bir çerçeveleme sistemi olarak ele alan yaklaşımından ve Michel Foucault'nun bilgi, iktidar ve kendilik teknolojilerine ilişkin analizlerinden hareketle çalışma, mekânsal konfigürasyonların deneyime yalnızca ev sahipliği yapmakla kalmayıp nasıl farklı tarihsel katmanlara özgü deneyim alanları ürettiğini inceler. Yöntem itibarıyla yazarlar Foucault'nun arkeoloji, soykütük ve sorunsallaştırma başlıklı üçlü yöntembiliminden faydalanarak karşılaştırmalı bir analiz matrisi geliştir ve bu matrisi üç mekânsal düzeneğe uygular: karanlık oda, toplama kampı ve günah çıkarma odası. Her örnek, tarihsel özgüllüğü, mimari diyagramı, hakikat rejimi, özne oluşumu, ilişkisel yapısı ve deneyimsel çıktıları olmak üzere altılı bir şema vasıtasıyla analiz edilmekte ve nihayet mikro-operasyonları itibarıyla incelenmektedir. Bulgular, bütün tarihsel ve işlevsel farklılıklarına rağmen bu düzeneklerin ortak bir diyagramatik yapıda birleştiğini; üçünün de kendi bağlamlarında bedenleri çevrelerinden yalıtan, bedenler arası temas rejimlerini düzenleyen ve algıyı, tahakkümü ve öznenin kendisiyle ilişkisini organize eden özgül bedensel repertuarlar teşkil ettiğini göstermektedir. Mimarlığın "olası deneyimin tarihsel önkoşullarına" cisim kazandırmaktaki rolünü öne çıkaran makale, mimarlık tarihyazımında tipolojik ve temsilî analizlerden uzaklaşıp mekânsal diyagramlara ve işleyiş mekanizmalarına odaklanan bir yaklaşıma geçmeyi savunur. Çalışma, mimarlığın hem mevcut deneyim rejimlerini kurup sabitleme hem de (eleştirel sorgulama ve tasarım pratikleri vasıtasıyla) bu rejimlerin dönüşümüne önayak olma yönündeki ikili kapasitesini vurgulayarak sonlanır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Deneyim, dispositif, Foucault, mekânsal diyagram, özne oluşumu.

Introduction

Architecture undoubtedly is a discipline concerned with the shaping of space, form, and environment. Yet beyond its structural, functional, formal, and aesthetic dimensions, architecture also participates in the structuring of human experience. Despite the centrality of this relationship, architectural historiography has often treated experience either as a secondary by-product of design or as a largely universal condition of human perception. In response, this article proposes to examine architecture as a technology of framing that directly participates in the historical organization of experience.

One half of this proposition is motivated by Bernard Cache's reflections on architecture as an art of framing that operates in a world characterized by shifting relations between "images" – understood not as representations but as generated variations of form within a continuous field of possibilities (Cache, 1995). Accordingly, architectural practice appropriates the interstitial spaces between images through a series of operations (i.e., isolation, selection, and arrangement) and transforms these intervals into sites where novel modes of life may emerge. The other half of this proposition derives from Michel Foucault's suggestion that the analysis of architecture should begin with the Greek notion of *techne* – not in the narrow, modern sense of a technological device but in its broader, classical meaning as a form of "practical rationality governed by a conscious goal" (Foucault, 1984, p.256). From this perspective, writing the history of architecture implies situating it within a wider history of rationalities whereby architecture is examined as a technology through which historically specific effects are produced. Together, Cache's view of architecture as a generative system of frames and Foucault's understanding of it as a constructive apparatus allow us to ask how architectural frames shape human experience. In sum, this study aims to develop a historico-critical framework for understanding architecture as a constructive framing technology that gives material form to broader (and otherwise invisible) socio-cultural structures of experience, through which processes of subject formation and transformation occur.

Accordingly, architectural frames isolate bodies from their surroundings; establish non-preexistent relationships between bodies and their (inner and outer) environments; and structure the spatial conditions under which particular forms of perception, action, and self-reflection become possible. To explore this proposition, the article offers close readings of three spatial "apparatuses" (Agamben, 2009b): the camera obscura, the concentration camp, and the confessional. These configurations are not treated as architectural typologies or canonical objects. Instead, they are read as spatial "*dispositifs*" (Deleuze, 1992) through which historically distinct regimes of perception, domination, and self-relation are materially organized. The selection of these three cases is therefore based on a deliberately comparative logic rather than on typological, chronological, or functional similarity. Each case condenses one primary dimension of Foucault's broader analysis of experience: the camera obscura foregrounds the spatial organization of knowledge and perception; the concentration camp foregrounds the spatial organization of power and bodily subjection; and the confessional foregrounds the spatial organization of ethical self-relation. At the same time, all three cases share a minimal architectural grammar: They frame bodies, regulate forms of contact, and produce specific subject positions. This shared grammar makes it possible to compare otherwise heterogeneous spatial configurations without treating them as equivalent architectural types.

Emerging as an optical device in early modern visual culture (Jay, 1994), the camera obscura, for instance, isolates the observer within a darkened chamber and projects an image of the external world onto an interior surface (Ihde, 2000). It constructs a specific configuration of perception based on a detached representation of reality (Crary, 1992) and thus establishes a model of epistemological distance that became deeply embedded in early modern conceptions of objectivity and truth (Daston & Galison, 2007). Finding its most crystallized form in mid-twentieth century modernity as an assemblage of fences, surveillance towers, barrack grids, and internal zoning (Sofsky, 1997), the camp relies on the complete suspension of the normal juridical order (Agamben, 2005). It produces a system of profound asymmetry between subjects and objects of power (Carter-White & Minca, 2025), while reducing human life to a state of extreme vulnerability and exposure (Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2003). Finally, emerging during the Counter-Reformation and becoming a central element of Catholic church interiors (Anson, 1948), the confessional booth separates the penitent and the priest through partitions (Bossy, 1975), while situating the ritual within the public space of the church (De Boer, 2000). It thus materializes a technology of self-examination by establishing the conditions in which individuals articulate the truth about themselves through structured speech (Foucault, 1988). The authors compare these diverse spatial technologies to identify a deeper structural continuity in how architecture regulates experience. Despite their differences in historical setting, period, scale, and function, the three cases each organize the subject's relation to a potential limit: error in the field of knowledge, resistance in the field of power, and opacity in the field of the self. The aim of this comparison ultimately is to address the problem of experience in a way that is both comprehensive and sensitive to variation. To be able to do this, the study combines a meta-analytical approach, focused on method, with a critical investigation that advances its own conclusions.

To avoid conceptual slippage, the study adopts a restricted vocabulary centered on the notions of *dispositif*/apparatus, diagram, and frame. The term *dispositif*, following Foucault, designates a dynamic heterogeneous ensemble composed of discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, and modes of subjectivation (Agamben, 2009b; Deleuze, 1992). Used interchangeably with the English term "apparatus" in this article, it is not a static structure but a relational network, in the actualization and modulation of which architecture plays an active part. The term diagram is employed in a specifically Foucauldian/Deleuzian sense: not as a representational schema, but as a map of relations, forces, and potentialities that underlies and conditions concrete institutional and spatial formations (Deleuze, 1988). As the diagram does not simply depict architecture but rather expresses the abstract relational logic that is embodied by it, the term is used in a non-representational sense throughout the article to distinguish it from architectural drawings or typological schemas. Finally, the notion of frame is articulated across three interrelated registers: (1) the architectural frame, which delimits and structures spatial relations (walls, apertures, thresholds); (2) the technical frame, which channels perception and interaction through specific *dispositifs* (optical, disciplinary, or ritual mechanisms); and (3) the epistemic frame, which conditions what can be seen, said, and experienced within a given historical formation. Taken together, *the frame operates as the material interface through which diagrams are actualized, and dispositifs become effective*. By maintaining these distinctions, the authors intend to avoid reducing architecture to metaphor, instead situating it as a concrete and operative medium in the historical production of experience.

The Problem of Experience in Architectural Theory

The problem of experience has been a persistent yet unstable subject of inquiry throughout the history of architectural theory. Several intellectual traditions, each based on a different understanding of experience, have attempted to understand whether and how the built environment shapes, structures, mediates, or produces the ways in which humans encounter and inhabit the world. Although these approaches clarify important aspects of the relationship between architecture and lived reality, they also reveal a fragmented historiography.

One of the earliest efforts to theorize architectural experience leads back to debates around the maxim "form follows function" within late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century architectural modernism (Greenough, 1947; Sullivan, 1896). Architects and theorists of the period increasingly interpreted architecture as a rational instrument for organizing human activity through an alignment between form, use, and structure (Behne, 1996; Meyer, 1970). Within this framework, experience was largely equated with functional performance, while architectural success was measured by the efficient accommodation of everyday activities (Pevsner, 2005). A second precursor emerged from developments in psychology and perceptual theory. Gestalt psychologists of the early twentieth century proposed that human perception does not operate through a collection of isolated sensations, but rather through organized wholes (Koffka, 1935; Köhler, 1929; Wertheimer, 1923). Principles such as figure-ground differentiation, closure, and continuity were used to explain how individuals interpret visual and spatial environments (Arnheim, 1977; Rowe & Slutzky, 1963). These ideas later entered architectural and urban discourse in the 1960s, particularly through studies on environmental cognition and spatial legibility. Urban theorists emphasized the importance of mental mapping, orientation, and "imageability" in shaping how individuals navigate complex environments (Downs & Stea, 1973; Kaplan, 1973; Lynch, 1960).

Beginning in the 1950s through the 1960s, architectural discourse increasingly drew upon phenomenology and existentialism. Influenced by thinkers such as Heidegger (1971), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Bachelard (1994), this line of thought emphasized the lived, embodied, and temporal dimensions of spatial experience (Rasmussen, 1964). Architecture was interpreted as a medium through which individuals inhabit and make sense of the world (Norberg-Schulz, 1974). Concepts such as genius loci, place, dwelling, and haptic perception became central themes (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Relph, 1976; Seamon & Mugerauer, 1985), emphasizing the sensory and poetic richness of architecture (Holl et al., 2006; Pérez-Gómez, 2006). In parallel, from the late 1960s into the 1970s, postmodern and semiotic approaches conceptualized architectural experience through systems of signs and cultural codes (Barthes, 1997; Jencks & Baird, 1969). Drawing on structuralism and linguistic models of meaning, theorists treated architecture as a communicative system within which buildings function as signs capable of conveying historical references, social values, or ideological positions (Jencks, 1977; Venturi et al., 1977). From this perspective, architectural experience was understood as an interpretative process through which individuals decode the symbolic meanings embedded in the built environment (Broadbent et al., 1980; Eco, 1997).

From the late twentieth century onward, architectural theory increasingly focused on affect, mood, and atmosphere as key dimensions of experience. (Pallasmaa, 2005; Wigley, 1998). These approaches examined how spaces feel – that is, how they create immersive and often subtle fields of mood, intensity, and bodily engagement that precede our conscious recognition (Anderson 2009; Böhme, 2017; Zumthor, 2006). Parallel developments in multisensory architecture and embodied cognition further expanded this perspective by emphasizing the interaction between bodily movement, sensory perception, and environmental context (Mallgrave, 2013; Robinson & Pallasmaa, 2015). More recently, research on experience has become more empirical and technologically oriented. Fields such as environment–behavior studies (Gibson, 1979; Proshansky, et al., 1970; Rapoport, 1977; Zeisel, 1981), post-occupancy evaluation (Preiser et al., 1988; Preiser & Vischer, 2004; Vischer, 2001), and evidence-based design (Hamilton & Watkins, 2009; Pati, 2011; Ulrich et al., 2008) have sought to assess spatial experience through measurable indicators such as user satisfaction, behavior, health, and performance. Meanwhile, immersive digital technologies such as virtual and augmented reality have made it possible to simulate spatial environments (Paranandi & Sarawgi, 2002; Schnabel & Kvan, 2003; Whyte, 2002) even prior to construction (Davila Delgado et al., 2020; Moloney et al., 2018), thereby introducing new experimental methods to test and evaluate spatial experience (Lee et al., 2020; Portman et al., 2015). In these contexts, experience is increasingly treated as a variable that can be modeled, measured, and optimized through technological systems (Rivière et al., 2024).

While Table 1 demonstrates the enduring presence of the problem of experience within architectural discourse, it also shows that several shortcomings remain unresolved. Modernist environments were frequently criticized for producing monotony, alienation, and social fragmentation rather than the improved quality of life they promised (Banham, 1980; Colquhoun, 1981; Jacobs, 1961). Perceptual approaches often privileged visual cognition while remaining limited to questions of spatial clarity and orientation (Lefebvre, 1991). Phenomenological approaches were problematized for treating experience as a universal or transhistorical condition while underplaying the social and institutional structures within which architectural environments operate (Otero-Pailos, 2010; Shirazi, 2014). Semiotic approaches were frequently accused of reducing spatial experience to acts of reading and systems of representation while neglecting tectonic and ideological dimensions of spatial practice (Frampton, 1995; Tafuri, 1987). Meanwhile, affective and atmospheric approaches raise methodological challenges because experiential atmospheres often resist clear conceptualization or empirical measurement (Griffero, 2017; Sumartojo & Pink, 2018). Finally, contemporary empirical paradigms introduce tensions between qualitative and quantitative approaches to experience (Hadjri & Crozier, 2009; Hay, et al., 2018), raising questions about the relationship between lived spatial depth and measurable behavioral outcomes (Azarby & Rice, 2022).

Taken together, the limitations of these traditions can be grouped into three main clusters. First, they often treat architectural experience as a matter of perception, affect, or cognition, without sufficiently examining the cultural, political, and historical structures that organize it. Second, the historical emergence of experiential categories themselves (such as "user," "comfort," "well-being," or "presence") often remains insufficiently analyzed. Third, they rarely provide a systematic account of the actual spatial techniques through which environments shape various experiential registers of the body. As a result, architectural experience is often studied through separate conceptual frameworks rather than through integrated historical analysis.

Table 1.
Distribution of Conceptualizations of Experience in Architectural Discourse.

Approach	Emergence Period	Understanding of Experience	Key Contributions	Limitations/Critiques
Modernist Functionalism	1890s-1950s	Experience as rational organization of activity through function, program, and efficiency	Introduces systematic planning and functional analysis; connects spatial form to social organization	Reduces experience to performance and efficiency; often produces monotony, alienation, and social fragmentation
Gestalt & Perceptual Psychology	Early 20th century	Experience as perceptual organization through visual pattern recognition (figure-ground, closure, continuity)	Demonstrates cognitive structuring of spatial perception; informs architectural composition and visual organization	Overemphasis on visual cognition; limited attention to social, political, or historical context
Environmental Cognition & Urban Legibility	1960s	Experience as mental mapping and spatial orientation	Introduces concepts of imageability, legibility, and cognitive mapping	Reduction of experience to spatial intelligibility; neglect of affective, embodied, and institutional dimensions
Architectural Phenomenology (Early)	1950s-60s	Experience as embodied and sensory engagement with architectural space	Shifts attention toward lived experience and bodily perception	Often assumes universal experience; limited engagement with historical or political structures
Existential / Place Phenomenology	1970s-80s	Experience as dwelling, belonging, and existential orientation within place	Emphasizes meaning, atmosphere, and human attachment to place	Romanticization of place; neglect of conflict, power, and exclusion
Semiotics & Postmodern Meaning	1960s-70s	Experience as interpretation of symbolic codes and cultural meanings	Expands architecture into cultural and communicative analysis	Reduces experience to acts of reading and representation; neglects embodied practice
Multisensory / Haptic Architecture	1990s	Experience as multisensory engagement between body and environment	Critique of visual dominance; emphasis on touch, movement, and sensory perception	Sometimes universalizes sensory experience; less attentive to historical variation
Atmospheres & Affective Spatiality	1990s-2000s	Experience as affective and atmospheric field emerging between subject and environment	Introduces affect theory into architecture; foregrounds mood and intensity	Conceptual vagueness; difficulty of empirical verification
POE & Evidence-Based Design	1980s-present	Experience as measurable behavioral and physiological outcome	Introduces empirical measurement into architectural evaluation	Reduction of experience to quantifiable metrics; limited cultural sensitivity
VR/XR & Immersive Simulation	2010s-present	Experience as simulated presence in virtual environments	Enables experimental evaluation of spatial experience prior to construction	Epistemological issues of simulation; ethical concerns regarding experiential manipulation

The authors argue that Foucault's work offers a theoretical and methodological basis for addressing many of these gaps at once. Rather than treating experience as an immediate encounter between subject and world, he conceives of experience as a historically produced field shaped by relations among discourses, institutions, spatial techniques, and forms of subject formation. In this sense, a Foucauldian perspective offers three tools: a method for historicizing the subject, a vocabulary for analyzing architecture as apparatus, and a framework for linking space to knowledge, power, and ethics.

No doubt, a substantial body of scholarship has already explored the relevance of Foucauldian concepts for architecture, urbanism, and spatial analysis, particularly around questions of *dispositif*, institutional space, surveillance, and the relationship between built form and regimes of governance. In urban and spatial theory, the concept of *dispositif* has been mobilized to analyze how heterogeneous spatial formations organize conduct and produce political effects (Pløger, 2008). In architectural theory, related discussions have asked whether buildings themselves may be understood as apparatuses or whether architecture should instead be read as one component within broader strategic assemblages (Daly & Smith, 2011). Studies on modern building types and power have further shown how institutions materialize social control through architectural organization (Markus, 1993), while studies of modernity, normativity, and environmental rationality have clarified the links among architecture, administration, and forms of knowledge (Rabinow, 1989). This study does not primarily ask whether a building can function as an apparatus. Instead, it develops a comparative framework for analyzing how spatial dispositifs operate diagrammatically across different cases. In this sense, the article seeks to extend Foucault-informed architectural scholarship from the analysis of institutional power or spatial governance toward a broader historiography of experience. This shift clarifies the article's methodological difference: While existing studies have often focused on using *dispositif* as a descriptive concept (in explaining single institutional types, specific technologies of surveillance, or the politics of spatial ordering within modernity), the present study makes use of *dispositif* as a historiographical method (in comparing three historically and formally heterogeneous configurations at the level of diagrammatic relations and micro-operational logics).

Methodological Framework: A Comparative Matrix

At first glance, Foucault may appear to be an unlikely methodological reference for a study concerned with experience. Indeed, Foucault criticized phenomenological accounts of lived experience, especially those associated with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, because they gave too much importance to the intentional subject and grounded knowledge in transcendental consciousness (Gutting, 2002). Yet there is also substantial evidence that Foucault's own work remains deeply concerned with the historical formation of experience (Heiner, 2003; Rayner, 2003). Rather than treating experience as the immediate content of consciousness, he investigates the historical conditions that make certain experiences possible. His studies of madness, punishment, and sexuality each reveal how discourses, institutions, and practices all together produce specific experiential structures (O'Leary, 2008).

A crucial distinction in Foucault's thought lies between *experience as structure* and *experience as experiment*. The first (i.e., "experience of the limit") refers to historically established configurations that organize perception, knowledge, and subjectivity. The second (i.e., "limit-experience") refers to experiences that destabilize or transform established subjectivities and epistemic frameworks (O'Leary, 2008). This problematization appears explicitly in a relatively late, 1978-dated interview (Foucault, 1991) in which Foucault describes his books as attempts to produce transformative experiences for both author and reader. Rather than simply describing historical phenomena, such works aim to provoke a rupture in the subject's relation to knowledge, thereby enabling new modes of thought (Heiner, 2003). Limit-experience therefore functions as a process of desubjectivation, displacing the subject from stable identities and opening the possibility of transformation (Deleuze, 1988). This dual conception of experience as both structural and transformative allows us both to analyze historically specific experiential formations and to consider how they may be destabilized through critical inquiry.

Foucault's early archaeological works introduce the concept of the "episteme," which names the historical structures that determine which sensitivities become available within a given cultural context (Foucault, 1970). These structures are not timeless universals but historically contingent formations that emerge from the intersection of three domains (i.e., knowledge, power, subjectivity), which later correspond to the three analytical orientations developed through Foucault's entire oeuvre (i.e., archaeology, genealogy, problematization) (Deleuze, 1988; Rabinow, 1984). Archaeology, elaborated primarily in the 1960s, seeks to identify the historical conditions under which particular forms of knowledge become possible by analyzing the discursive formations that govern what can be said, thought, and known within a given period (Agamben, 2009a; Foucault, 1970, 1972; Gutting, 1989). Genealogy, developed in the 1970s, examines the emergence of institutional practices and techniques through which power operates upon bodies through surveillance, normalization, and discipline (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Foucault, 1977; Koopman, 2013). Problematization, which becomes central in Foucault's later work of the 1980s, refers to the process through which aspects of the self and social life come to be seen as problems that require thought, regulation, or intervention (Deleuze, 1988; Foucault, 1997). Together, these three domains form what Foucault later called "the historical a priori of a possible experience," while explaining how experiential structures emerge from the intersection of epistemic orders, institutional practices, and processes of subject formation (Foucault, 1972).

The methodological framework developed in this study builds upon this tripartite model. Archaeological enquiry examines how spatial arrangements define which particular objects become visible, perceptible, and intelligible within specific epistemic regimes (Crary, 1992; Ihde, 2000). Genealogical enquiry shows how architecture organizes relations between those who exercise power and those who are subjected to it through spatial techniques that regulate movement, proximity, and segmentation (Agamben, 2005; Sofsky, 1997). Problematization focuses on how spatial configurations materialize technologies of the self through which individuals relate to themselves (Bossy, 1975; De Boer, 2000). Together, these three dimensions form a comprehensive methodological matrix for analyzing architectural frames as technologies that translate abstract relations (such as epistemological orders, institutional hierarchies, or ethical imperatives) into concrete spatial arrangements.

In the sections that follow, this analytic framework is applied to three architectural frames: the camera obscura, the camp, and the confessional. These "paradigmatic examples" (Agamben, 2009a) were selected because each foregrounds one of the three domains through which Foucault analyzes the historical formation of experience: knowledge, power, and ethical self-relation. The camera obscura is examined as a spatial apparatus of perception and knowledge; the camp as a spatial apparatus of domination, exposure, and administrative control; and the confessional as a spatial apparatus of self-examination and veridiction. Their comparison does not depend on formal resemblance, shared scale, or common program. Rather, it depends on their common diagrammatic operation: In each case, architecture isolates bodies, organizes contact, and produces a specific subject position. For this reason, each case is analyzed through the same six-part template. **Historical specificity** identifies the historical formation in which the *dispositif* becomes intelligible. **Architectural diagram** describes the spatial arrangement through which it operates. **Regime of truth** clarifies the form of knowledge, verification, or disclosure that it produces. **Subject produced** names the figure constituted by the apparatus. **Primary relation** identifies whether the apparatus principally organizes the subject's relation to the world, to others, or to the self. Finally, **form of experience** specifies the experiential field generated by these relations. This template is intended to make the three heterogeneous cases comparable at the level of spatial-relational logic, while preserving their historical and functional differences. Each analysis is then followed by a systematic exposition of the **micro-operations** embodied by the frame in question, such as enclosure, aperture, surveillance, segmentation, partition, or ritualized speech (Table 2).

Each case study is based on a triangulated reading of primary texts, secondary historiography, and spatial/visual analysis. For the camera obscura, primary sources include early modern philosophical and optical writings, complemented by historical reconstructions of optical devices and diagrams. For the camp, the study makes use of administrative regulations, camp plans, and visual documentation, alongside testimonies and institutional archives. For the confessional, the analysis draws on doctrinal and ecclesiastical texts, pastoral manuals, and architectural typologies of the confessional booth. Across all cases, these research materials are not treated as isolated or exhaustive evidentiary documents but as selective components within a broader discursive field, enabling a meta-analytical cross-reading between various textual prescriptions, spatial narratives, and visual illustrations. The micro-operations were identified wherever recurring patterns could be observed across textual, spatial, and visual references.

Table 2.
A Six-Part Comparative Analytical Matrix.

Architectural Frame	Camera Obscura	Concentration Camp	Confessional Booth
Foucauldian Methodology	Archaeology	Genealogy	Problematization
Experiential Domain	Knowledge formations	Power relations	Ethical relation-to-self
1.Historical Specificity	Classical episteme (17th-18th century representational order)	Modern disciplinary-biopolitical regime (19th-20th century techniques of power)	Pastoral governance and technologies of the self (early modern Christianity onward)
2.Architectural Diagram	Sealed chamber + aperture projecting external image	Enclosed territory organized by surveillance and zoning	Partitioned booth enabling speech between penitent and confessor
3.Regime of Truth	Visual correspondence via representation	Administrative verification	Veridiction via verbal disclosure
4.Subject Produced	Observer	Prisoner / Muselmann	Penitent
5.Primary Relation	Subject-environment	Subject-others	Subject-self
6.Form of Experience	Detached observation of an exteriorized world	Life under continuous audit, exposure, and relational asymmetry	Self experienced as narratable interiority and cyclical audit
Micro-Operations	Enclosure, darkness, aperture, projection, inversion, fixity, separation	Boundary, gate, segmentation, roll-call, surveillance, circulation, depletion	Partition, grille, kneeling, acoustic focus, ritual time, partial anonymity, prescriptive exit

The comparative framework proposed above does not operate at the level of typology, scale, or program. It therefore does not treat the camera obscura, the camp, and the confessional as equivalent architectural objects. Rather, the object of comparison is the spatial-relational diagram that underlies each case. In this sense, comparability is established not through formal similarity or functional analogy, but through the identification of a shared minimum architectural grammar composed of relational operators – which recur across different scales and historical contexts yet are assembled into distinct *dispositifs* that produce divergent regimes of experience. The camera obscura condenses this grammar within an optical chamber; the camp expands it into a territorial system of surveillance and control; and the confessional articulates it through a liturgical interface regulating speech and anonymity. By foregrounding these diagrammatic constants, the analysis shifts comparison from architectural type to relational logic, which allows heterogeneous cases to be read within a common analytical matrix without collapsing their historical specificity.

The Camera Obscura

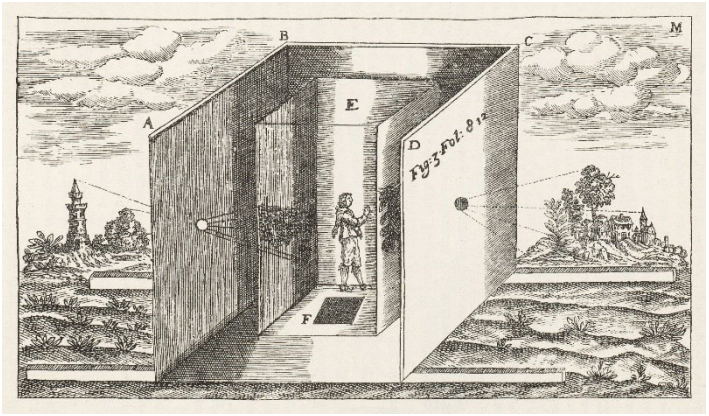
The principle underlying the camera obscura – the projection of an inverted image through a small aperture into a darkened enclosure – has been known since antiquity. In the fifth century BCE, the Chinese philosopher Mo Ti described the phenomenon as occurring within a "collecting place" or enclosed chamber (Hammond, 1981). In *Problems*, Aristotle (2011) similarly talks about projection of images through small openings for the purpose of safely observing solar eclipses. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen) brought a scientific explanation to these observations by demonstrating the rectilinear propagation of light through small apertures, also introducing the influential analogy between the camera obscura and the human eye (Sabra, 2007). Similar descriptions, which linked the camera obscura's optical mechanism to the physiology of vision, appeared throughout the Renaissance in the writings of Leonardo da Vinci (Eder, 1945), Cesare Cesariano's translation of Vitruvius (1914), and Gemma Frisius (Fiorentini, 2006). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Girolamo Cardano introduced the use of a convex lens to improve image clarity; Daniele Barbaro added a diaphragm to control light intensity; and Johannes Kepler developed portable versions (Gorman, 2007). By the late seventeenth century, these developments gradually transformed the camera from a large architectural chamber into a portable instrument widely used by artists, scientists, and travelers for drawing, mapping, and scientific observation (Lindberg, 1976). In the nineteenth century, large public installations of the camera obscura appeared in resorts and amusement parks, projecting moving scenes onto viewing tables and offering spectators a proto-cinematic experience that foreshadowed later developments in visual entertainment (Stafford, 1994).

Despite this long technological history, the camera obscura should not be understood only as an evolving optical instrument, since it took many forms and served many functions (i.e., scientific model, artistic device, popular entertainment). Its historical significance lies in the model of vision that crystallized around it during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Figure 1). InOptics (2001), for instance, Descartes compares the eye to a camera obscura but suggests that its aperture be covered with the eye of a dead animal – in a way relocating vision within a mechanical device that operates independently of the body and analogous to the mind (Judovitz, 1993). By isolating the observer from sensory interference, the apparatus promises a purified representation of the external world from which the observer is doubly detached. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1979), John Locke also uses the same camera model of the mind flooded by sensory information, but this time as a metaphor for introspection, to explain how knowledge is formed within the subject. However, Locke's account introduces an additional dimension of authority, attributing to the observer the role of an inspector who evaluates the correspondence between representation and reality. Here reflective introspection becomes intertwined with a regime of self-discipline in which the subject regulates its own perceptions.

Across these different, and sometimes competing, philosophical discourses, the camera obscura becomes a recurring model for an individualized observer and a disembodied form of vision (Crary, 1992). According to this spatial metaphor that characterizes the epistemological structure of the classical age

(Ihde, 2000), knowledge depends on the taxonomic organization and systematic comparison of representations within a unified field in which the observer encounters the world as an ordered projection (Daston & Galison, 2007). Within this broader context, the camera obscura can be understood as a spatial technology that condenses representational logic and reorganizes vision – which was later described by Heidegger (1977) as the "world picture" (in the sense of world becoming available for calculation, control, and mastery) and by Foucault (1970) as a "table" (in the sense of a system for arranging and comparing objects according to relations of similarity and difference).

Figure 1.
Naturae pictricis operae. From *Ars magna lucis et umbrae* by A. Kircher (URL-1).



The Camera Obscura as a Spatial Apparatus

The camera obscura first isolates the observer within a controlled, darkened enclosure that removes the body from direct engagement with the external world. This arrangement establishes a strict division between observer and environment – the world appears as an image inside the chamber, while the observer remains outside the field of representation. Because the observer's body is absent from the image, the scene appears to exist independently of the observer, prefiguring the modern notion of a detached, objective spectator.

A second defining feature is the apparatus's translation of the external world into an optical representation. Light entering through the aperture produces a bounded projection of the external world, converting a continuous environment into a contained image. This analogy helped establish a theory of knowledge grounded in a one-to-one correspondence between image and object, whereby truth was understood as the accurate reproduction of the world in a visual form, available for inspection, rather than direct sensory involvement.

Crucially, however, the reliability of this process depends on specific architectural conditions: Darkness eliminates competing visual stimuli; enclosure isolates the observer; and controlled light ensures clarity – making the architectural frame an essential component in the production of visual knowledge. The aperture further functions as a framing device that selects and delimits a portion of reality, transforming an unbounded environment into a discrete visual field. The chamber therefore does more than house the act of seeing; it structures the relation between the observer, the image, and the world.

The camera obscura produces a distinctive corporeal repertory defined by stillness, visual concentration, and sensory hierarchy. Positioned within a darkened chamber, the Observer (Crary, 1992) remains fixed before a projected image, with the body's movement minimized and perception confined to the visual field. This arrangement elevates vision to the status of the primary source of knowledge while the rest of the body recedes into the background. The Observer thus becomes a reader of images rather than a participant within spatial depth, marking the emergence of a subject defined by detached observation. Various early modern spaces, such as laboratories, observatories, and anatomy theaters, similarly isolated observers and regulated conditions of exchange to stabilize perception. Within this context, the camera obscura functions as a generative matrix for all architectures that structure how the world is seen and known. As a spatial *dispositif*, its logic extends far beyond the optical device itself and informs varied environments that frame the external world as a visual field (e.g. scientific institutions, bourgeois domestic interiors). In doing so, it participates in the emergence of modern interiority and in a form of knowledge grounded in representation and distance.

Micro-Operations of the Camera Obscura

The first micro-operation through which the Observer is assembled is **enclosure**, materialized by the dark chamber that isolates the observer from the surrounding environment. This enclosure subtracts the observer from the surrounding environment by removing all uncontrolled sensory stimuli in a way that links knowledge with controlled interiority. A second operation involves **darkness**, which functions as a filtering mechanism that eliminates competing visual inputs. Only the projected image remains visible within the chamber, establishing a hierarchy of visibility in which an authorized representation replaces the sensory multiplicity of the world. The **aperture** regulates the entry of light into the chamber. By restricting the passage through which the world becomes visible, it demonstrates that perception depends upon mediation rather than immediacy. The **projection surface** converts the world into an image by flattening depth into a plane. Landscapes become surfaces that can be analyzed and measured, anticipating broader representational practices such as perspectival painting, cartography, and the coordinate systems of modern science. The **inversion** of the projected image introduces a reflexive dimension to perception. Because the image appears upside down, the observer must mentally correct the projection in order to interpret it. Knowledge therefore depends on rational interpretation rather than immediate sensory impression. The apparatus also imposes positional **fixity**. The observer must maintain a stable vantage point within the chamber in order to perceive the image clearly. This spatial constraint anticipates the perspectival logic characteristic of early modern visual culture. Finally, the thick boundary between the chamber and the world establishes a decisive **interior-exterior separation.** The interior becomes the site of knowing consciousness, while the exterior becomes the object-field to be represented. Together, these micro-operations show how architecture can organize the conditions under which the world becomes visible and intelligible.

The Camp

Among the three spatial configurations examined here, the camp is the most difficult to analyze because of both the scale of its violence and the risk of reducing that violence through explanation. It is at once a concrete institutional system, a site of extreme violence that resists conventional explanations, and a limit-phenomenon beyond which any explanation risks trivialization (Lyotard, 1988). Yet, this limit condition does not suspend analysis; it makes careful inquiry all the more necessary. With these concerns in mind, this section approaches the camp

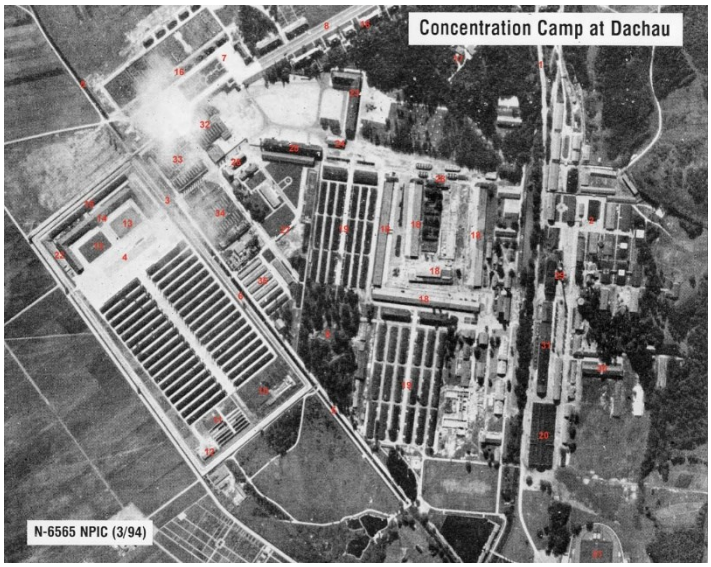
not as an isolated historical event, but as a socio-spatial configuration that enabled organized violence. While the camps were undoubtedly products of deliberate human organization, their functioning cannot be reduced to individual intention alone. Rather, they reveal a mediated field in which violence became routine through spatial, administrative, and procedural mechanisms that produced a disjunction between action and actor. It is precisely this structural and relational perspective that provides the basis for analyzing the camp as a spatial *dispositif*.

The Nazi concentration camp network developed between 1933 and 1945 through a complex and evolving process defined by administrative competition, institutional experimentation, and rapid expansion (Wachsmann, 2015). Early detention sites were improvised facilities, temporarily converting various spaces into imprisonment centers (Feig, 1981). Following its establishment in 1933, Dachau gradually became the organizational model for subsequent camps. The appointment of Himmler as police commander of Bavaria, the subsequent integration of the SS and the secret police in 1933, Eicke's standardization of the camps in 1934, and the creation of the *KZ-Inspektion* in 1935 were all gradual steps in the consolidation of the camp system and the centralization of their administrative structure (Bauman, 1989). In the meantime, the composition of the prisoners changed dramatically – from political opponents of the regime to prisoners categorized as "asocials" (*Asoziale*) and "pests detrimental to the people" (*Volksschädlinge*), finally to foreign prisoners from occupied territories, resistance fighters, and victims of the "Night and Fog" operations (Hilberg, 2003; Sofsky, 1997). From 1942 onward, the camps became part of a vast network that combined incarceration, forced labor, and industrialized annihilation – with a population reaching more than 700,000 prisoners distributed across nineteen main camps and over six hundred satellite facilities (Wachsmann, 2015).

Despite its scale, the camp system did not produce a stable architectural typology; it prioritized efficiency, economy, and rapid assembly (Van Pelt, 1994). Camps were usually located in remote or undesirable environments, often near raw materials or industrial complexes accessible by railway (Jaskot, 2000). Building materials were basic (e.g. wood, brick, and stone) and designs were frequently improvised due to shortages of labor, materials, and technical expertise (Feig, 1981). Existing structures (e.g. factories, castles, monasteries, and industrial complexes) were frequently repurposed. Administrative rivalries, secrecy requirements, and rapidly changing operational goals exacerbated a continual process of spatial experimentation (Carter-White & Minca, 2025). As a result, the camps showed little architectural uniformity. Nevertheless, a degree of spatial regularity emerged during the consolidation period of 1934-1936 based on the Dachau model – such as total enclosure through fences and guarded boundaries; internal segmentation through barracks, work zones, and administrative sectors; centralized verification spaces such as roll-call squares; surveillance structures including watchtowers and elevated observation lines; regimented circulation routes that choreograph movement between zones; and administrative infrastructures that link spatial placement to documentation (Sofsky 1997). These elements formed the minimal architectural grammar of what might be called "Nazi camp architecture" (Dwork & Van Pelt, 1996), the significance of which lay not in formal design but in the spatial articulation of power (Figure 2).

The key to understanding the camp lies in its juridical status. Establishment of the camps relied on the mechanism of *Schutzhaft* (protective custody), which is a legal instrument that allowed detaining of individuals without judicial procedure if they were deemed threats to public security. The 1933-dated "Decree for the Protection of the People and the State" extended this measure indefinitely, turning what had once been a temporary emergency provision (i.e., state of exception) into the permanent mode of operation of the state (Agamben, 2005). The camp therefore occupied a paradoxical spatial position as a delimited territory outside the normal juridical order, yet remaining fully integrated into the political system that created it. The law was neither absent nor fully present, creating a "zone of indistinction" within which conventional categories such as legality, crime, and responsibility lost all meaning (Agamben, 1998; Arendt, 1973). Prisoners entering the camp effectively lost their political identity and were reduced to "bare life," stripped of all juridical protection. In this way, power confronted the body directly, without mediation by rights or legal norms (Agamben, 1998; Hilberg, 2003). The camp thus reveals how architecture can operate within a twentieth-century historical formation that condenses and radicalizes the disciplinary mechanisms and modern techniques of power (Foucault, 1977) into a spatial diagram in which architecture becomes an instrument for producing administrative legibility, behavioral regulation, and asymmetrical visibility (Bauman, 1989; Mbembe, 2003).

Figure 2.
Concentration Camp Dachau Aerial View. From Wikimedia Commons, by Wiggum (URL-2). In the public domain.



The Camp as a Spatial Apparatus

The camp is first defined by its radical separation from the surrounding world. Enclosed by fences, walls, electrified barriers, or guarded perimeters, it forms a distinct spatial domain where ordinary social and legal frameworks no longer apply. This boundary is juridical as well as physical; crossing it means entering a space where prior civic identity is suspended. Within this enclosure, individuals are removed from the norms that typically structure human interaction and are subjected instead to a system of control defined by the camp itself.

Visibility is a second defining feature and operates as a tool of domination. Surveillance structures such as watchtowers and elevated observation platforms enable guards to oversee large areas simultaneously, while the arrangement of barracks, open spaces, and circulation routes keeps prisoners within a continuous field of observation. Constant exposure enables authorities to regulate behavior, suppress resistance, and maintain control.

A third key feature is the camp's hierarchical spatial organization. Distinct zones such as administrative buildings, guard quarters, prisoner barracks, work areas, and punishment sites structure both movement and authority. Prisoners are housed in dense, regimented barracks that reduce them to interchangeable units within a collective mass. Administrative areas remain spatially removed, reinforcing the asymmetry between those who govern and those subjected to control.

The camp operates through a distinct regime of truth-production grounded in verification. Identification numbers, registration systems, classification categories, roll-calls, and periodic inspections function as ritualized practices that repeatedly establish who exists within the system. Prisoners become "real" only insofar as they are documented, counted, and assigned a place within administrative records (Des Pres, 1980). This verification regime also produces a specific "corporeal repertoire" in which bodily existence is tightly regulated by institutional rhythms. Movement, posture, labor, and rest are all subject to control, reducing autonomy to a minimum. The resulting subject (i.e., the Prisoner) is constituted through processes of administrative inscription, spatial classification, and constant surveillance. At the extreme, this process produces the figure of *Muselmann* – the name given in camp slang to inmates who reached the final stage of physical and psychological collapse – characterized by extreme apathy, loss of self-awareness, and near-total withdrawal from social interaction (Agamben, 1999; Fraser, 1999; Levi, 1988; Norris, 2000).

Reading the camp as a spatial *dispositif* clarifies how all of these elements work together to organize the conditions of domination. Enclosure, surveillance, segmentation, and verification form an integrated system through which authority acts continuously upon confined bodies. This system also restructures social relations – not only those between individuals and authority but also relations among prisoners themselves. Administrative classifications divide prisoners into hierarchical categories, resulting in unequal access to resources, which fragments solidarity and turns intersubjective relations into channels through which power circulates. The result is a tightly controlled relational ecology in which experience is shaped by exposure, vulnerability, and constant regulation.

Micro-Operations of the Camp

The first micro-operation through which the Prisoner is assembled is the **boundary**, typically materialized through fences or walls with guarded thresholds. This boundary establishes a radical separation from the outside world, producing a condition of isolation from prior social networks. The **gate** functions as the point of transformation where individuals become administratively legible bodies. Personal belongings are confiscated, names are replaced with numbers, and the individual is inserted into documentary systems that assign spatial placement within the camp. A third operation consists of **segmentation**, the partitioning of the camp into barracks, work zones, and administrative sectors. This spatial division organizes proximity, hierarchy, and access to resources while fragmenting solidarity among prisoners. The **roll-call square** functions as a theater of verification in which prisoners are assembled and counted against administrative records. Through this ritual the apparatus continuously produces and reaffirms its knowledge about the population it governs. Watchtowers and clear sight lines create a regime of **surveillance** based on vertical asymmetry, which allows guards to observe prisoners who remain permanently exposed. The operation of **circulation** choreographs movement through prescribed routes connecting barracks, work areas, and verification spaces. Space becomes a sequence of enforced transitions rather than a field of free movement. Finally, the camp operates as an infrastructure of **depletion**. Minimal shelter, overcrowding, and environmental exposure contribute to the systematic exhaustion of bodies, producing limit-figures such as the *Muselmann* in whom agency and relational capacities completely erode. Taken together, these micro-operations reveal a fundamental capacity of architecture to organize the relations between bodies within regimes of power.

This analysis of the camp draws largely on Agamben's influential formulation of the camp as the paradigmatic space of modernity, where the state of exception is normalized and life is reduced to its bare biological substrate. Although this framework has been productive in foregrounding juridical suspension and ontological exposure, recent scholarship has warned that treating the camp as a universal paradigm can flatten historical specificity and obscure the differentiated administrative, spatial, and operational logics of particular camps (Humphreys, 2006; Kalyvas, 2005). Others also raise ethical concerns about the abstraction of Nazi violence and the experience of victims, including the reduction of historically situated subjects to the figure of "bare life" (Laclau, 2007). For this reason, the present study draws on Agamben's framework while also staying away from treating the camp as a singular ontological condition. Instead, it traces the camp's operations as a historically situated *dispositif* with its own specific, concrete arrangements, techniques, and routines. It is the authors' conviction that this approach retains the critical insights of the state of exception perspective while grounding it in materially and historically verifiable practices.

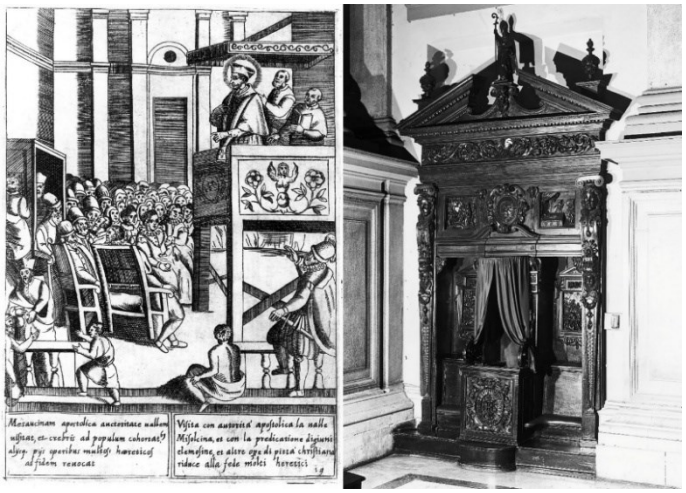
The Confessional

In classical antiquity, practices of self-disclosure were organized around the Delphic injunction to "know oneself" and, more centrally, the philosophical imperative to "care for oneself" (Foucault, 1988). These practices included reflective exercises such as meditation, writing, and daily review of one's actions through which individuals evaluated their own conduct against ethical principles. Crucially, this form of self-examination focused on actions rather than hidden intentions and aimed at cultivating rational self-mastery. The goal was not to renounce the self but to strengthen it, enabling individuals to act more effectively and ethically within the world (A. C. Besley, 2005). Early Christianity radically reconfigured this framework by introducing a salvational logic based on inner transformation. Truth about the self was no longer a matter of rational reflection on conduct but of uncovering and renouncing sin (Delumeau, 1990). This shift was embodied in two complementary practices. The first of these, *exomologesis*, involved visible acts of humility, suffering, and ritualized self-abasement, emphasizing the penitent's dramatic acknowledgment of their status as a sinner and the community's active recognition of the sinner as someone undergoing purification (Dunn, 2004; Rapp, 2005). Developed in monastic settings, the second practice of *exagoreusis* required continuous verbal disclosure of thoughts to a spiritual authority, emphasizing the need to scrutinize and expose one's inner impulses in order to eliminate hidden temptations (Brown, 1988; Cassian, 1997; Firey, 2008). Together, these practices established a new ethical regime that Foucault later called Christian "hermeneutics of the self" (Foucault, 1988) – in which self-knowledge depended on confession and entailed the renunciation of autonomy, pride, and will.

However, the architectural form of the confessional booth emerged only in the sixteenth century as part of the Counter-Reformation, particularly through the reforms associated with the Council of Trent and the work of Carlo Borromeo, archbishop of

Milan (Bossy, 1975). Borromeo's 1577-dated *Instructions for Church Fabrics and Furnishings* provided the first systematic design for the confessional booth. It effectively standardized the confessional as a wooden structure that separates a seated priest and a kneeling penitent with a perforated screen (i.e., grille), thus translating confessional practice into a stable spatial arrangement (Anson, 1948). Typically positioned within a visible part of the church, the confessional created a controlled environment that allowed speech to pass through, while preventing physical contact and direct visual exchange to take place (De Boer, 2000).

Figure 3.
Illustration (left) by Cesare Bonino from Nonnulla praeclara gesta B. Caroli Borromaei, courtesy Biblioteca Trivulziana, Milan; *confessional in S. Fedele (right)*, courtesy S. Fedele, Milan. Both images from De Boer (2000, pp. xxvi-xxvii).



The confessional therefore embodied a structural paradox: it isolated the participants while also exposing the act of confession. The partitions and screens ensured the confessor and the penitent to be separated, while the placement of the booth within the church exposed the act of confession to the gaze of the congregation (Figure 3). According to some, this configuration privatized and psychologized confession by highlighting individual conscience (Bossy, 1975; Lea, 1968); for others, this arrangement intensified surveillance by embedding individual disclosure within a communal field of observation (De Boer, 2000). In doing so, it synthesized earlier Christian practices by combining public penitential display (i.e., *exomologesis*) with the continuous verbalization of inner life (i.e., *exagoreusis*). The confessional booth thus represents the spatial consolidation of a long historical transformation in how truth, subjectivity, and authority are organized (Delumeau, 1990). It becomes analytically central within the historical formation that Foucault associates with the emergence of pastoral governance and technologies of the self, while condensing a regime of veridiction in which subjects are required to articulate truths about their own interior lives (Foucault, 2014).

The Confessional as a Spatial Apparatus

The confessional is first defined by its production of a controlled interior space through partial isolation. Located within a small, partitioned compartment, the penitent is separated from the congregation and placed in a condition conducive to self-examination. This spatial frame enables reflection on actions, intentions, and desires, fostering an interiorized relation to the self in which hidden aspects of experience are brought to awareness.

Within this space, architecture also regulates speech as the medium of truth. The partition between priest and penitent permits verbal exchange while limiting physical and visual contact, establishing a setting in which speaking becomes the central act. The penitent must not only recount deeds but also articulate the intentions and desires behind them, transforming inner experience into a narratable discourse.

The confessional also establishes a specific regime of visibility and hierarchy. The screen or grille limits direct sight, allowing the penitent to remain partially unseen while being heard. This careful balance between concealment and exposure reduces shame and facilitates disclosure, while maintaining the hierarchical asymmetry of the relationship. Positioned as a listener, interpreter, and arbiter of absolution, the priest occupies a structurally privileged and central role that mediates between individual conscience and doctrinal authority. Finally, the confessional's placement within the visible space of the church integrates private and public dimensions. While the content of confession remains secret, the act itself is observable, embedding personal introspection within the collective life of the religious community.

The confessional produces a corporeal repertory that begins with the kneeling posture of the penitent within a narrow compartment. The body adopts a position of humility and submission that anticipates the moral structure of the ritual. It thus becomes an initial site of ethical inscription, signaling vulnerability even before speech occurs. Within this setting, the Penitent is formed as a subject defined by interiority in that the confessional requires individuals to turn inward. However, this process is not autonomous and remains dependent on the presence of an authorized listener, the confessor, who evaluates and guides the penitent's account. Subjectivation therefore operates through a double movement: the individual becomes subject to authority while also participating in ethical self-reflection. The ritual unfolds through a sequence of operations: disclosure, in which the subject speaks; specification, in which acts and desires are named; interpretation, in which the confessor evaluates the statements; prescription, in which penance or guidance is assigned; and internalization, through which the subject carries the interpretive framework into daily life. Through this process, interior life becomes something that can be spoken, analyzed, and regulated. Individuals come to monitor themselves using the moral frameworks acquired through confession, turning self-examination into an ongoing practice even outside the confessional (Foucault, 2014). The confessional thus reveals how architecture participates in broader technologies of self-formation and organizes the relationship between subject and self.

Micro-Operations of the Confessional

The first micro-operation through which the Penitent is assembled is the **partition**, a solid barrier between priest and penitent. This boundary establishes proximity without equality and spatializes the principle that self-knowledge must pass through the mediation of authority. The **grille** allows speech to pass while restricting visual contact. This device privileges voice over sight, transforming the subject into a speaking figure whose conscience becomes narratable. The **kneeling posture** of the penitent inscribes humility and submission into the encounter. Bodily position becomes a spatial prefiguration of moral judgment. The confessional also works as an **acoustic machine** that contains and focuses speech. The enclosed space privileges verbal articulation while suppressing external noise, reinforcing the idea that truth emerges through the naming of acts and

intentions. Another operation is **ritual time**: confession occurs at periodic intervals defined by the liturgical calendar. It thus produces a cyclical structure of moral examination in which individuals repeatedly monitor, disclose, interpret, and correct their conduct. The confessional further establishes a regime of **partial anonymity** that balances concealment and exposure. The penitent is not fully visible but remains audibly present before authority, encouraging disclosure while maintaining hierarchical asymmetry. Finally, the apparatus extends beyond its physical boundaries through the operation of **prescriptive exit.** After confession, the penitent departs with an assigned penance and a series of interpretive categories that guide one's subsequent conduct and help internalization of authority as conscience. Together, these micro-operations show how architecture participates in the formation of ethical life.

Discussion: Architecture and Experience of the Limit

The preceding sections examined the camera obscura, the camp, and the confessional as spatial *dispositifs* that organize distinct regimes of perception, power, and subjectivity. The purpose of this discussion is to synthesize these case studies by situating them within a broader conceptual framework concerning the relationship between architecture, experience, and subject formation.

Three fundamental propositions underlie this framework. First, every experiential field is structured by historically specific configurations that precede and condition the subject, operating across the domains of knowledge, power, and ethics. Second, architecture gives material expression to these otherwise immaterial structures by organizing regimes of contact that define how subjects relate to the world, to others, and to themselves. Third, these regimes generate distinct corporeal repertories, producing specific modes of subjectivity. Architectural frames therefore do not simply represent social structures; they actualize them by organizing possible forms of experience – even if without fully determining them.

Across the three *dispositifs*, the first common feature is the use of **boundaries** to turn undifferentiated environments into structured fields of interaction. In the camera obscura, a darkened chamber separates the observer from the world, producing a mediated image of reality. In the camp; fences, grids, and watchtowers organize a field of surveillance and control. In the confessional, partitions and screens isolate penitent and priest while enabling regulated communication. A second common feature is related with how architecture organizes **regimes of contact**: the ways bodies encounter one another and engage external forces. In the camera obscura, contact between observer and world is mediated through representation, producing a form of knowledge grounded in distance and projection. In the camp, contact is structured through hierarchical relations of domination and subordination, exposing bodies to continuous surveillance and control. In the confessional, contact occurs through ritualized speech, transforming interiority into a field of verbalized truth. Third, these regimes of contact generate distinct **corporeal repertories**, or patterned forms of bodily behavior and perception, associated with specific environments. The Observer of the camera obscura adopts a posture of stillness and visual concentration; the Prisoner in the camp embodies exposure, constraint, and deprivation; the Penitent in the confessional kneels, speaks, and submits to self-examination. These bodily patterns show that architecture shapes not only spatial relations but also how subjects inhabit their own bodies.

These findings allow us to return to the problems and gaps identified in the introductory sections. Existing approaches to architectural experience – whether grounded in function, perception, phenomenology, semiotics, affect, or empirical performance – have often isolated particular dimensions of spatial engagement while leaving the broader conditions of experience undertheorized. The present study extends this body of work by repositioning architecture within a wider historico-critical framework. Rather than treating experience as immediate or universal, it approaches it as historically structured and spatially mediated. The article therefore argues for a shift in architectural historiography: from form, typology, or representation toward spatial diagrams as operators in the historical constitution of experiential fields.

Taken together, the three cases reveal a conceptual symmetry: each *dispositif* produces a subject by regulating its relation to something "outside" the limits of the experiential field in question (Foucault, 1991; Rayner, 2003). The camera obscura establishes a regime of knowledge in which **error** is excluded through the isolation of the observer; the camp produces a regime of power in which **resistance** is eliminated through absolute domination; the confessional generates a regime of ethical self-relation in which **the self** is renunciated through continuous disclosure. These are not simply thematic variations. They are structurally comparable configurations through which architecture mediates the relation between subject and truth. They show that the stability of a given historical experiential structure can be sustained only insofar as these foreign elements – which are simultaneously excluded by the system and indispensable to its operation – are kept at bay (O'Leary, 2008). The architectural diagram thus functions by organizing the subject's encounter with these elements in ways that neutralize their disruptive potential.

To further clarify architecture's historical and critical role, it may be helpful to recall Foucault's two modalities of experience. Accordingly, the *experience of the limit* refers to forms of experience that unfold within the boundaries of a given epoch, reproducing its structures of perception and conduct. By contrast, *limit-experiences* challenge those boundaries and open the possibility of transforming the historical field itself. These two modes are mutually constitutive – in that moments of rupture generate new configurations, which in turn establish new limits. Architecture participates in both of these dimensions by materializing existing experiential structures and creating conditions under which new forms of encounter may emerge. Through critique, which functions as a mediating movement between these two poles, individuals can detach from historically given structures and recognize their contingency (Han, 2002). Architectural history can support this process by showing how spatial arrangements stabilize experiential regimes while also exposing their tensions.

A final implication is that architecture's efficacy lies less in formal expression than in its micro-operational logic. Across all three cases, architecture operates through recurring procedures that shape lived experience at a granular level. The camera obscura depends on calibrated darkness, controlled aperture, and the stabilization of the observer's position; the camp operates through segmentation, boundary enforcement, repetitive enumeration, and the management of visibility; and the confessional relies on spatial partition, acoustic focus, bodily posture, and ritual repetition. These micro-operations also form lateral clusters according to the layer of framing they support. That is: Although belonging to different diagrams, the micro-operations of enclosure, darkness, separation, and boundary all serve the purpose of isolation. Similarly, micro-operations such as inversion, segmentation, surveillance, partial anonymity, and

acoustic focus – despite being embodied by different *dispositifs* – all serve the establishment of particular regimes of contact. And micro-operations such as fixity, circulation, depletion, and kneeling all constitute various bodily repertories. Such a granular reading challenges architectural histories that privilege form, authorship, or typology. Instead, it foregrounds the infrastructural, procedural, and diagrammatic readings of spatial assemblages as well as underlining the intersections between them (despite apparent incongruities).

These findings also have implications for contemporary architectural discourse. Current concerns with atmosphere, user experience, well-being, immersion, and simulation often assume that experience can be enhanced, optimized, or measured as a quasi-neutral domain. The present study suggests instead that the very categories through which experience is understood are themselves historically contingent, shaped by specific configurations of knowledge, power, and ethics. A critical architectural practice must therefore move beyond optimization toward an interrogation of the conditions under which various experiential qualities are produced and valued. This requires asking not only how spaces perform, but also what kinds of subject they assume and cultivate.

Conclusion: Architecture and Limit-Experience

This study examined the proposition that architecture does not merely accommodate experience but actively participates in its historical production. To substantiate this claim, the article developed a comparative meta-analysis of the camera obscura, the camp, and the confessional. Despite their differences in historical context, function, and implication (i.e., early modern regimes of representation, twentieth-century systems of biopolitical control, and Christian pastoral practices of confession), these three configurations converge at the level of operative logic. In each case, architecture emerges as a diagrammatic arrangement that isolates bodies, regulates encounters, and structures the procedures through which truth is articulated and verified. This convergence reveals architecture's capacity to materialize historically specific regimes of experience.

The comparative framework also made it possible to account for differences among these historical formations. Although the camera obscura, the camp, and the confessional share a common diagrammatic logic, each amplifies a different primary relation: subject to world, subject to subject, and subject to self. Through recurring spatial procedures (e.g. enclosure, separation, segmentation, fixity), they all generate distinct corporeal repertories and their corresponding subject positions. The analysis has thus shown that architecture contributes not only to the stabilization of experiential regimes but also to the differentiation of their epistemic, political, and ethical expressions. In this sense, architecture emerges as a key site through which the "historical a priori of possible experience" (Foucault, 1972) becomes spatially articulated and variated.

The study also offers a methodological contribution. By applying archaeology, genealogy, and problematization to architectural diagrams, the study connects architectural history with critical accounts of how experience is formed. (In this regard, the authors have deliberately and temporarily avoided Foucault's already architectural and well-known analyses – such as those based on the Panopticon, the asylum, the clinic, or the prison – to instead examine the broader methodological foundations of his work from a fresh perspective.) The six-part analytical template – linking historical context, architectural frame, regime of truth, subject produced, primary relation, and experiential output – offers a replicable model for studying other spatial configurations.

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations. First, the selection of three paradigmatic *dispositifs* necessarily simplifies a broader and more heterogeneous field of architectural practices. The camera obscura, the camp, and the confessional are treated as condensed diagrams rather than as exhaustive representations of their respective historical contexts. Second, the Foucauldian framework foregrounds relations of knowledge, power, and subjectivity, but may underrepresent other dimensions of architectural experience (such as material agency, ecological processes, or non-discursive affective intensities). Third, the comparative method emphasizes structural alignment, which may weaken the specificity and internal complexity of each case.

These limitations point toward several directions for future research. One avenue would be to extend the framework to additional spatial configurations in order to test its generalizability. A second direction would be to integrate complementary theoretical perspectives (including post-phenomenological, post-humanist, ecological, or media-theoretical approaches) to examine how architectural frames interact with non-human actors, broader ecosystems, and technological infrastructures. A third line of inquiry would examine spatial practices that disrupt or transform established experiential regimes rather than stabilizing them. Finally, empirical studies could examine how contemporary architectural environments – particularly those shaped by digital simulation, surveillance technologies, and data-driven design – reconfigure the conditions of experience in ways that both extend and depart from the historical configurations analyzed here.

Beyond these directions, the study also opens a broader critical horizon for architectural practice. If architecture participates in the structuring of experiential conditions, then it also becomes implicated in the reproduction or transformation of those conditions. This raises questions about how architecture might operate differently, and calls upon designers to engage more reflexively with the experiential regimes their work participates in sustaining or transforming. *What forms of spatial organization might enable alternative relations between subjects, environments, and institutions? How might architectural practices contribute to reconfiguring regimes of visibility, authority, or self-relation in ways that expand rather than constrain the field of possible experience?* Although these questions extend beyond the scope of this study, they show the critical potential of architecture as a technology of experiential conditioning. Architectural research (i.e., research by design) thus becomes part of a broader inquiry into the historical conditions that shape what individuals can know, what they can do, and what they can become. Within this expanded understanding, architecture assumes its full theoretical, historical, and critical significance.

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