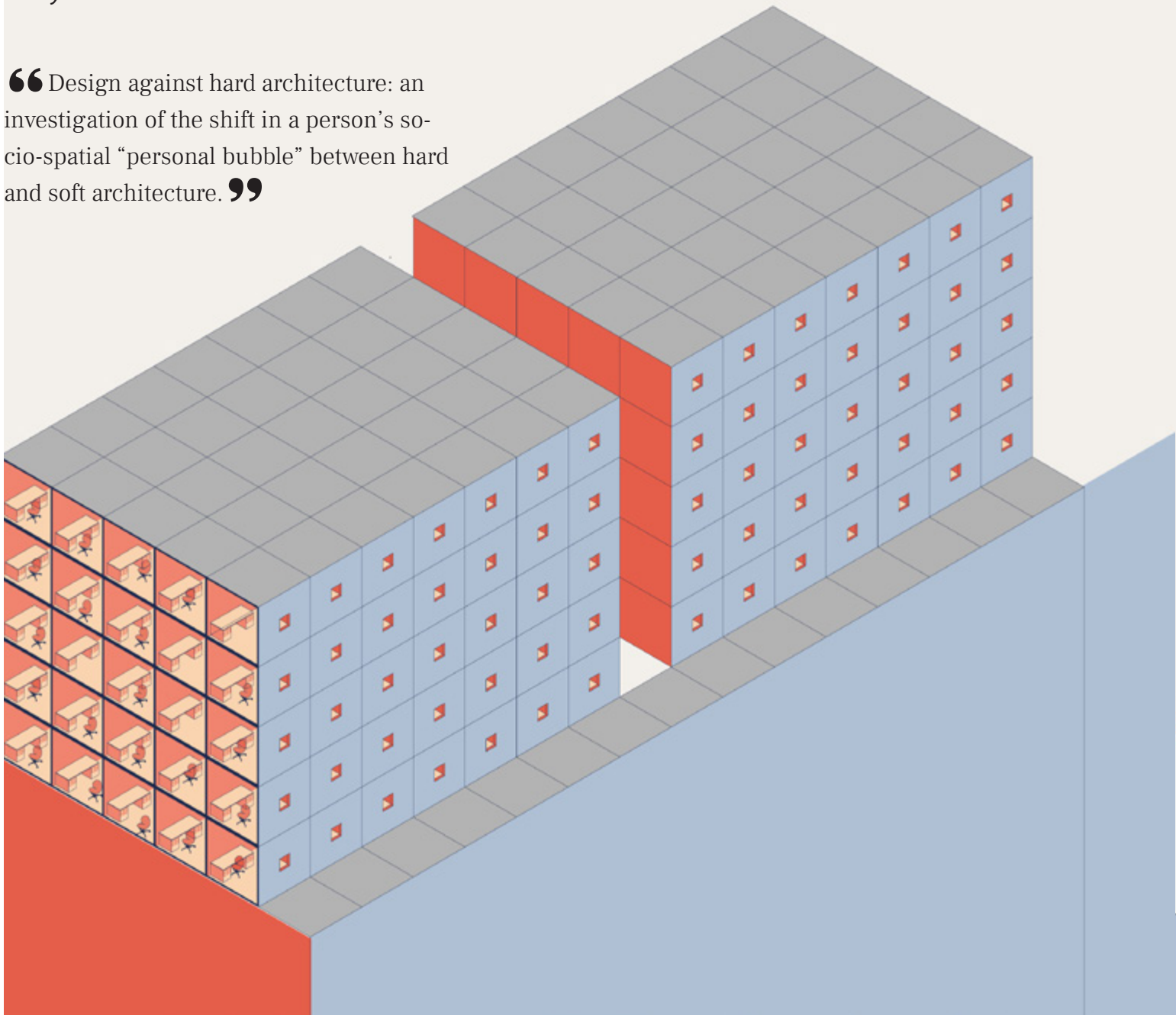


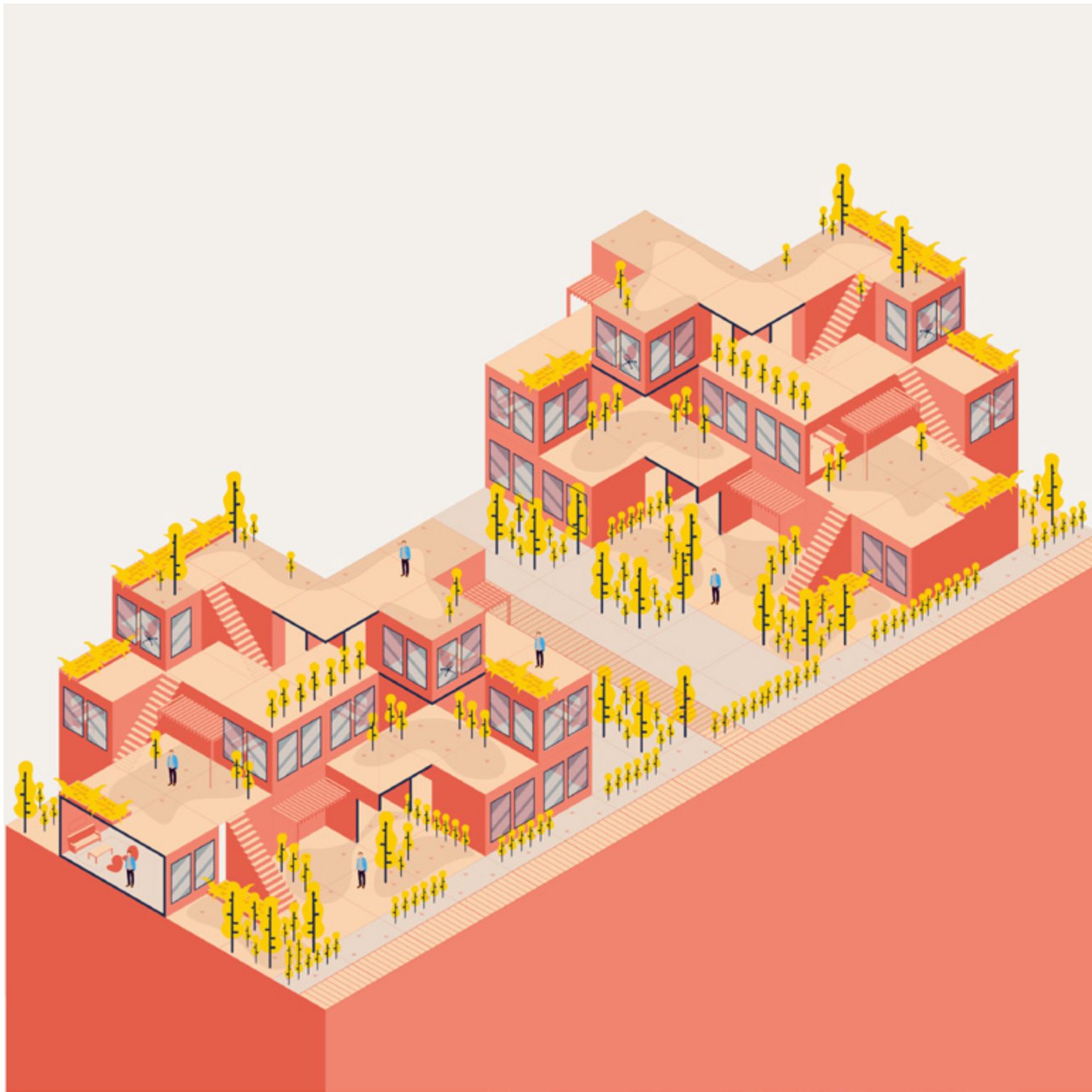
ARCHITECTURE FOR IMPRINT

Design Against Hard Architecture

Emily Homan

“Design against hard architecture: an investigation of the shift in a person’s socio-spatial “personal bubble” between hard and soft architecture.”







Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design was published in 1969 and became cherished as a classic text on user-centered design of public spaces.¹ The author, Robert Sommer, is arguably the grandfather of the phrase “You’re invading my personal space”, an expression which sparked a “verbal expedient for siblings of a certain generation.”² In this text, Sommer explores topics such as privacy, invasion of space, and small group ecology in designed environments.

Sommer held the Chair of the Psychology Department at the University of California, Davis as well as chairs in Environmental Design, Rhetoric and Communication, and Art. These accomplishments demonstrate his broad range of interests and are convincing reasons why his books capture readers from a range of disciplines. Alan Rapp, senior editor at Chronicle Books states, “The origins of this work are as curious as its arguments are intuitively rational.”²

Most people in the architecture field are drawn to his writings about the effects of the designed environment on people. Sommer states, “All people are builders, creators, and shapers of the environment; we are the environment.” He made observations of how people behave next to each other and was known to use himself and his students to provoke unsuspecting subjects in experiments. Many times his research involved judging reactions from people that are sitting too close and studying “invisible factors that regulate human proxemics.”¹

In his book published in 1974, Tight Spaces: Hard Architecture and How to Humanize It, Sommer examines what he calls “hard architecture.” At the time the book was written he was referring to Brutalism, which was just taking off. This trend imposed windowless concrete office buildings, barren public parks, and impersonal public architecture. He argues that these alienating environments produce subtle sickening psychological effects on the people that interact with them. “Airports where chairs are bolted to the floor to drive patrons into food and drink concessions . . . picnic tables cemented into the earth, making large parties - or even sitting in the shade - impossible . . . public toilets, advertised as indestructible



by manufacturers, that drive vandals to the use of dynamite in a desperate attempt at a human imprint” are just a few examples of what Sommer calls “hard architecture.”³ Brutalism is still a style used in the present architecture scene, but it has evolved; it is important to note that presently, not all Brutalism would still be considered hard architecture. Those responsible for hard architecture are at fault for designing without their occupants in mind, without thinking about how one might use the space, and without attention to detail.

The widely-acclaimed video by William Whyte, [Social Life of Small Urban Spaces](#), shown in architecture curricula around the country, is a critical perspective of already-existing architecture plazas and how the public engages with them.⁴ This documentation puts into action some of Sommer’s behavioral research and design thinking. Though Whyte never specifically uses the terms “hard/soft architecture,” it is unmistakably a nod to Sommer’s work.

In contrast to hard architecture, Sommer proposes a type of architecture that engages the public, allows for human imprint, and is responsive to its users - or “soft architecture.” This architecture is to “welcome

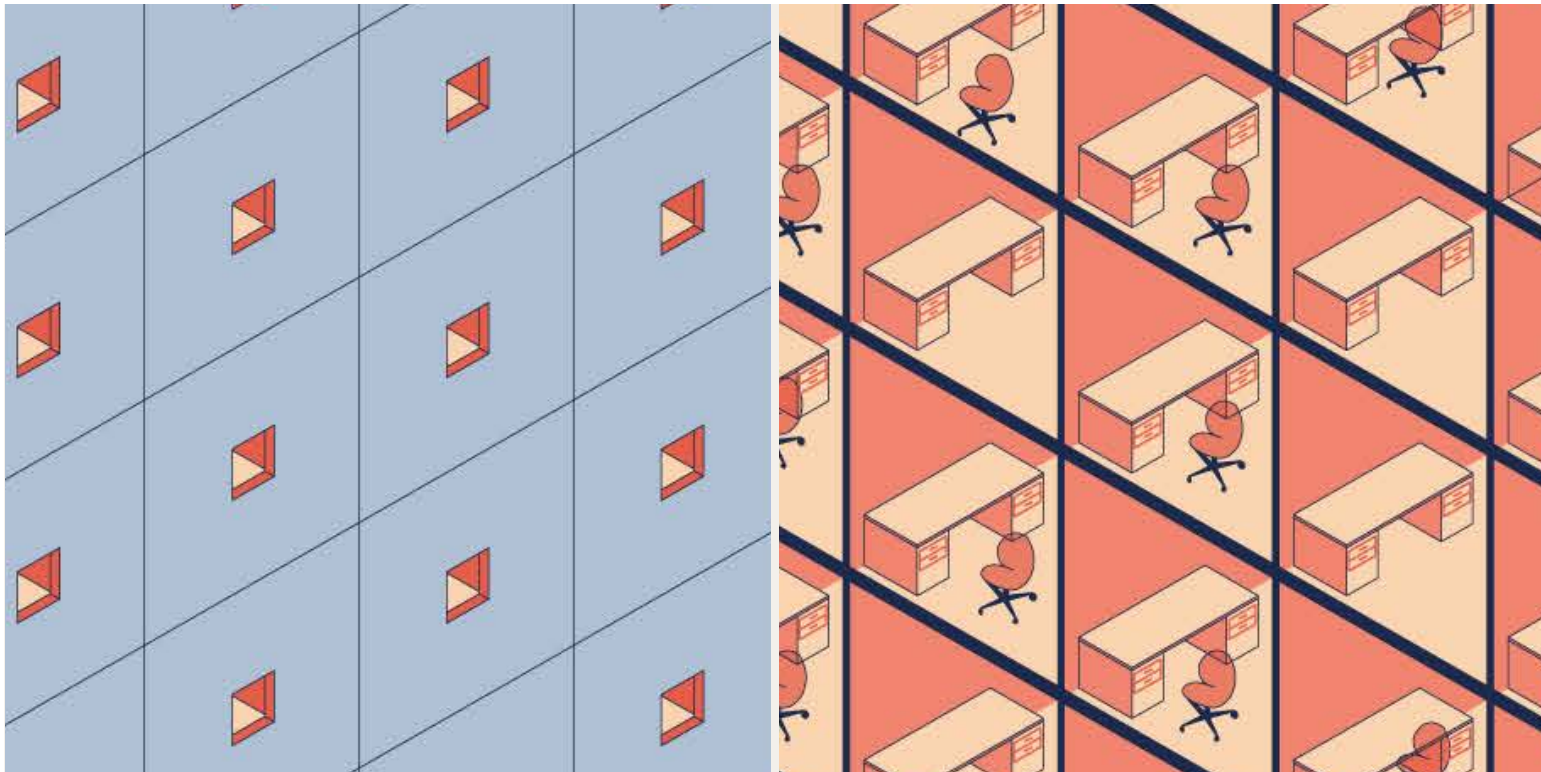
and reflect the prescence of human beings.”³ Along with flexibility, this architecture should also blur the barrier between the outdoors and indoors - bringing the outside in. Transparency, easily-manipulative furniture, and planting are key elements in the design of soft architecture.

It is important to note that not all instances of soft architecture have to be new buildings. Sometimes hard-labeled buildings could make minor adjustments to become more user-friendly. Sommer gives an example about the New York subway environment being drab and depressing. It is known for graffiti art and consequently authorities monitoring the graffiti situation. In cities with the same graffiti issue but less supervision, artists paint more than a “quick treatment” and create large-scale masterpieces. It is clear that these instances of human imprint brighten up any drab public spaces. He also gives an example of the student dormitories

at his university. The university had strict no-poster rules with regular checks by university officials and fined offenders. This rule continued for years and was constantly violated and fairly ineffective. The university also had costly repainting bills each year. Eventually the administration decided that it would be cheaper if they allowed the students to hang anything they wanted on their walls. They supplied paint at the beginning of the year so that students could choose their color and erase damage done by the previous occupants. The university discovered that students were much happier and their painting bill each year decreased significantly.³ It is clear that there are many ways to turn hard architecture to soft, but it would be beneficial for architects to think with soft architecture methodology in mind so that their clients and building occupants can perform at their best. Jane Fulton Suri, an accomplished partner at the design consulting firm, IDEO, states, “My experience is

that [Sommer’s work still isn’t integrated, in large part due to [architecture’s] business model. Anything beyond programmatic basics aren’t followed up on. We do remedial work by pointing out bad environments.”²

When it comes to evaluating these two types of architecture at a personal level, it’s important to think about the difference in environments that these two procure. Hard architecture is infamous for oversized, abandoned, concrete plaza spaces and a stiff transition between the indoors and out. As a visitor of these type of spaces, one might feel unsafe; as if they are on display or the opposite, completely alone. In this setting, one’s socio-spatial “personal bubble” is minimal. It lies close to oneself and keeps guard. In contrast, successful soft architecture allows a person to explore a range of environments ranging from public to private and manipulate their surroundings so that they can achieve a state of contentment. In this type of environment, one’s personal bubble is permitted to drift and relax. One’s mind should be at ease and should not feel insecurity. Sommer has demonstrated characteristics of successful and unsuccessful designed spaces for the public. The next step would be to take this research into present day and perform this type of research with today’s technology as an added variable.



1. Sommer, Robert. Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969.
2. Rapp, Alan. Personal Space. Design Observer. June 03, 2009. <https://designobserver.com/feature/personal-space/6597>
3. Sommer, Robert. Tight Spaces: Hand Architecture and How to Humanize It. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974.
4. Whyte, William. Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, 1980.

