

Experiential Learning in Design Education : The WHY.

Spatial Awareness

Design reaches its full potential when ideas move from classrooms into real spatial experience. Physical presence on site enhances observational skills related to proportions, materials, textures, light, and movement, understood as a combined spatial composition. Qualities often described informally as “vibe” are understood more clearly when these elements are experienced simultaneously rather than individually.

Layers of Context

Architectural visits reveal that context operates in layers. History is embedded in materials and construction methods, culture appears through patterns of use, and environmental forces such as sun, wind, terrain, and vegetation shape form and orientation. These relationships between design and place become evident on site. Spaces are shaped by interconnected factors including scale, proportion, materiality, light, sound, climate, movement, and occupancy. Physical presence allows designers to perceive how these variables influence one another and inform decisions in real conditions.

Dynamic Environments

Every place functions as a dynamic system. Sounds change, shadows shift, and people continuously redefine how spaces are used. These cues guide observation and critical analysis. Sketches, notes, and diagrams made on site are not merely records; these function as tools for inquiry and interpretation. Site analysis thus becomes a method of reading intent, constraints, and possibilities within the built and unbuilt environment.

Experience Over Information

Digital platforms and AI tools offer speed, access, and valuable reference. However, certain aspects of design remain inherently experiential - the warmth of sunlight, acoustic behaviour, material tactility, or thermal comfort. Physical presence allows assumptions to be tested, often revealing conditions overlooked in simulations or images. This balance between digital tools and physical observation strengthens design judgement.

Physical Connect

Design is spatial and bodily. Scale, enclosure, and movement are understood through walking, pausing, and inhabiting space. While digital media can communicate dimensions, it cannot replicate lived experience. Spatial memory enables designers to recall sensations rather than images and apply them intuitively during the design process.

Reality Over Time

Site visits reveal the realities of construction. Materials age, finishes wear, joints reveal their logic, and services become visible. These observations develop practical intelligence and an understanding of how design performs over time. The focus shifts from appearance to performance, durability, maintenance, and long-term usability.

Users and Behaviour

Architecture is completed by its users. Observing how people occupy, adapt, or avoid spaces provides direct feedback. Informal behaviours - gathering patterns, shortcuts, and modifications - reveal both successes and shortcomings. Such insights are fundamental to a user-centred design approach.

Shared Learning

Learning deepens through collective exploration. Visiting sites together, sharing observations, and discussing interpretations refine perception and build confidence. Conversations during and after visits often clarify abstract ideas, challenge assumptions, and strengthen critical thinking.

Experience Beyond Outcomes

Alongside measurable learning outcomes, the process itself holds value. Shared journeys, informal discussions, and moments of discovery foster engagement and professional connection.

Through such experiences, Designers do not merely conceptualise space, but understand how it performs, adapts, and endures over time.

Architect Paulomi Kanakia

Year 2026