

Materials Story of Sir John Soane's Life



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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Aimed to investigate the semantic aspect of materials and how can it serve the

museum experience, several building materials were used, trying to deliver the different emotions in Sir John Soane's life through the sense of touch in Sir John Soane's Museum.

Sir John Soane's Museum was formerly the home of the neo-classical architect Sir John Soane. The museum was established in 1837 and it's located in No.13 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London.

"Being able to touch, feel and manipulate objects in an environment, in addition to seeing them, provides a sense of immersion in the environment that is otherwise not possible." (Srinivasan and Basdogan 1997:393)¹ Sir John Soane's Museum is a space with complex interior design and hundreds of exhibits. What's more, as an architect, Sir John Soane designed the whole space and stories are everywhere. That is the reason why a handling object is designed to inform the visitors the narrative lies behind.



Figure 01. *A visitor holding a piece of brick*, 2014, Photo by Xinglin Sun

LITERATE AND PRACTICE REVIEW

Quote from Susan Stewart, "In museum today, when we turn quickly from the untouchable art work to the written account or explanation placed beside it, we pursue a connection no longer available to us - the opportunity to press against the work of art or valued object. As public museums and forms of

¹ Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, (Oxford: BERG, 2007), p.133.

collective memory supersede devotion and private manipulation, the contagious magic of touch is replaced by the sympathetic magic of visual representation.”²

This argument states the dilemma of the role of touch plays in the museum experience in most cases. However, the activity of touch is an active behavior in cognition and is most linked to emotion and feeling which are corresponding the topics constantly brought up in modern museum curate and design such as having more interactive engagement and narratives in museums.

One of the theoretical statements that might be able to provide a approachable solution for this dilemma is from Juhani Pallasmaa’s book *The Eyes of The Skin*, in which he argues that “All the senses, including vision, an be regarded as extensions of the sense of touch...Vision reveals what the touch already knows. We could think of the sense of touch as the unconscious of vision.” What Pallasmaa suggests is the sensation of visual and touch are closely connected in our cognition process unconsciously and in order to prove this argument in museum context, he quote from Bernard Berenson’s theory: “When experiencing an artistic work, we imagine a genuine physical encounter through ‘ideated sensations’. The most important of these he called ‘tactile values’. In his view, the work of authentic art stimulates our ideated sensations of touch, and this stimulation is life-enhancing.”³ We may able to say that the visual perception can become a perception of touch when our eyes “scan” the surfaces or “place upon” objects.

Moreover, there is evidence that haptic perception is enhanced when combined with visual data, particularly in navigation. Comments in *Town and Square* by Paul Zucker, “Space is perceived by the visualization of its limits and by kinesthetic (The sensation of movement of the body) experience, i.e.,

² Susan Stewart, “Prologue: From the Museum of Touch”, in *Material Memories*, ed. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward and Jeremy Aynsley, (Oxford: BERG, 1999), p.30.

³ Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of The Skin*, (Chichester: Wiley, 2012), p.46-48.

by the sensation of our movements. In the state of 'visual tension,' kinesthetic sensation and visual perception fuse more intensely."⁴

PROJECT DETAILS

This project aimed to investigate the semantic aspect of materials – expressing emotion through space and form. Material as medium – for example, cold black marble reflects the sorrow of the tragic death of Sir John Soane's wife. In the other term, when touching certain material, a past sensation memory is evoked and an emotional connection is made.

This piece was acquired by the museum for its handling collection, and there is follow-up research being conducted about visitors' experience using the piece, in order to understand the relationship between Soane's life and the museum architecture.

Overall speaking, the piece is a wooden box with five different pieces of building materials in it. The visitors could hand-hold the piece when visiting the museum and when the box is opened, the visitors will find five pieces of materials lying in a line with the name of rooms in the museum on top and the life periods of Sir John Soane's on the bottom. The building materials are place from left to right in a chronological order of Sir John Soane's life and also corresponding to the visiting order from the ground floor to the basement of the museum. The design of the piece encourages the visitors to lift up one piece of a material at a time and when the visitors are in a specific room, the relevant story could be revealed from the engraved slot of the piece of material.

⁴ Paul Zucker, *Town and Square*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1970), p.06.



Figure 02. *A story revealed beneath a piece of brick*, 2014, Photo by Xinglin Sun

The piece uses materials relevant to different periods of Sir John Soane's life, as follows:

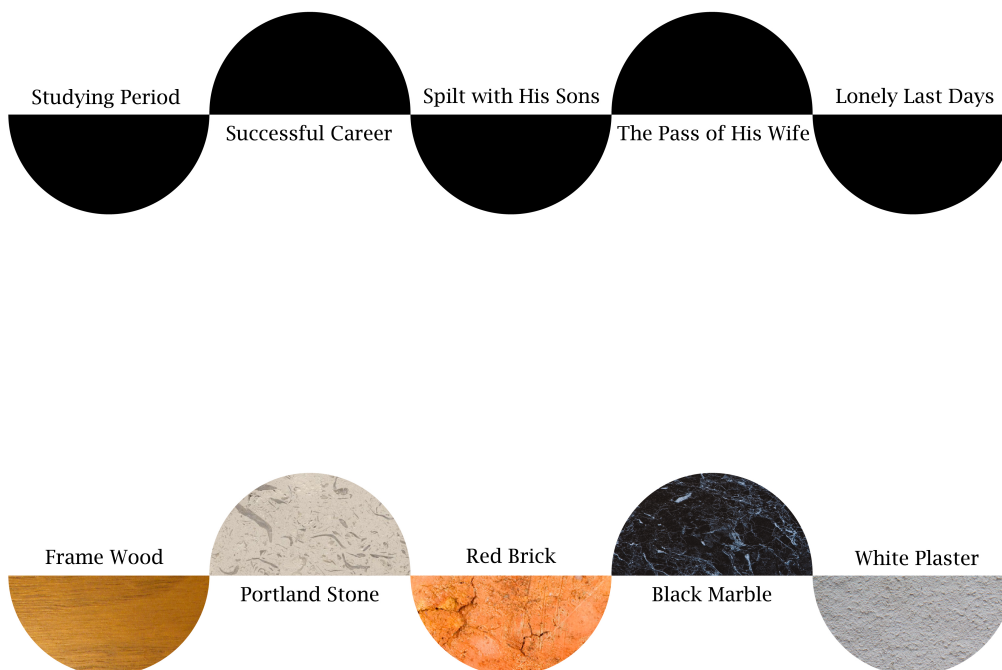


Figure 03. *Sir John Soane's life periods mapped to building materials*, 2014, Illustration by Xinglin Sun

STUDYING PERIOD - FRAME WOOD - PICTURE ROOM

During his studies in the Royal Academy, Soane was awarded the Academy's gold medal for his drawing of a Triumphal Bridge, and awarded a travelling scholarship afterwards.

SUCCESSFUL CAREER - PORTLAND STONE - DINING ROOM

Portland stone was Soane's favoured building material. He used this stone, quarried on the Isle of Portland, for the verandah on the front of his home.

SPLIT WITH HIS SONS - RED BRICK - MONK'S PARLOUR

Soane wanted his sons to become successful architects like their father, but this was against his sons' will and finally caused their irreparable split.

THE PASSING OF HIS WIFE - BLACK MARBLE - THE CRYPT

George Soane, Sir John Soane's youngest son, wrote an article in *The Champion* which personally attacked his father in public; this directly caused the death of Mrs. Soane.

LONELY LAST DAYS - WHITE PLASTER - MONK'S YARD

After the death of his wife and elder son, Soane's last days were lonely and he devoted a lot of time to his grandson Fred, who also let him down in the end.

CONCLUSION

The project reveals the potential that by empower the visitors to touch, feel and manipulate objects corresponding to museum environments while seeing them helps the visitors to gain better understanding about the environments.

FOSTERING EXPLORATIONS

One interesting perspective would be what kind of experience can be produced when museum designers and curators attend to haptic perceptions in museum interaction design and if it could enhance visitor's cognition experience. Another perspective emerged from this project is how to embed narrative into museum experience through haptic experience and hopefully, the follow-up research of the project could provide an insight that has been

tested in actual practice.

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

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