

COOP
DESIGN
RESEARCH

—
M SC.
PROGRAM

DEFINING THE 'USER'

ARCHITECTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF THE USER AND
ITS IMPACT ON DESIGN PROCESSES

—
Author: Elisha Cohen

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to critique the relationship between architects and their conception of 'users'—the people they imagine will someday inhabit their designs. At times these are real people and other times they are imagined, living only in the architect's mind. This thesis explores the complexities of how architects conceptualize people, compared with the reality of who will interact with a building over its lifetime. These concepts are critical because they inform architects' priorities and approach to the design process. Without careful attention to these social processes, design quickly becomes abstracted and exclusionary.

Emphasis on the user has had historically contradictory roles—to support determinism and to subvert it. My study uses the term 'user' to track architectural attitudes towards people over time and critique the current state of practice. It is not an all-encompassing history but an analysis of the diverse modes in which architects engage with the people they design for. This historical overview, combined with studies of the profession by sociologists, and my own empirical research provides context for the term's use today.

Architects are found to have a limited understanding of use and user experience. They think users are important to the meaning of architecture, but user-needs seldom inform practice. Often, the beliefs architects hold about users are in contradiction with the actions that they take.

These findings highlight a blind spot of practice, with the hope that clearly defining the problem will be a first step towards changing architectural approaches to users and design.