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Constructing Realities

a one day experiential workshop at the Dessau Institute of Architecture, Anhalt University of Applied Sciences, October, 18th, 2006.

The goal of this workshop was to facilitate experiential learning on how we construct realities. To achieve this, we conducted a series of experiments based the work of the early Gestalt Psychologists Wolfgang Köhler (1929), Max Wertheimer (1924) and Solomon Asch (1952). Wertheimer, one of the founders of Gestalt Psychology, formulated the key sentence of Gestalt Psychology: The whole is different from the sum of its parts.

In the experiments, the students experienced the mechanisms involved when they construct realities: projection, assimilation and contrast, perceptual organization (grouping), the formation of impressions, the suggestive power of prestige and social conformity. We went on to experiments on the deconstruction of realities and touched on the importance of narratives in the co-construction of realities. Students were familiarized with the idea that perception is not just about seeing what is there. Perception is always a creative process. Perception involves an act of making sense out of what we see: Reality is a construction, often a social construction.

In a final series of exercises, students were shown photographs of living rooms and were asked to state who they thought was living in these homes. One could have expected that these students who had come from very different parts of the world and who had been exposed to very different social environments, might have come up with greatly diverging interpretations. Surprisingly, they usually had a good sense of the kind of people who were living in the different homes: their interpretations were amazingly homogenous – and close to reality. Why?