

## ARCHITECTURE FOR ARCHITECTS? IS THERE A ‘DESIGN DISCONNECT’ BETWEEN MOST ARCHITECTS AND THE REST OF THE NON-SPECIALIST POPULATION?

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**Abstract.** This article reviews existing literature on the ‘design disconnect’ that appears to exist between architects and the general public. It examines sociological research undertaken in Concepción, Chile into the aesthetic tastes of people who have a relation to architecture or the arts and those with no relationship. The aim is to compare these groups in order to establish whether there is any difference in which house they aesthetically prefer and why. It must be noted that the sample was small and localized. Nor were all potentially significant elements beyond the façade perfectly controlled for (For example, the presence of grass or cars). Nevertheless, this study strongly supports previous research finding a measurable dissociation between the buildings most architects prefer aesthetically and those that the general public prefer. It suggests that such a ‘design disconnect’ is not just restricted to the UK or to Canada where it has previously been observed.

**Keywords:** *beauty, built form, place, data, urbanism, design.*

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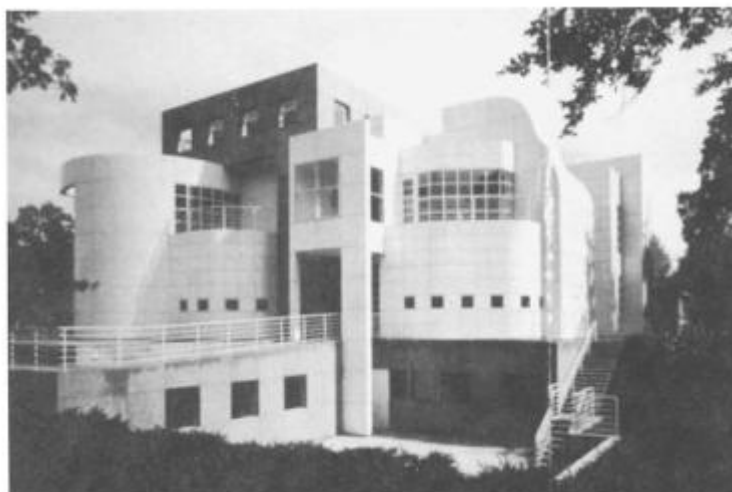
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### 1. Introduction

Is there a ‘design disconnect’ between the architecture that most architects prefer and the architecture that most non-designers prefer?

A measurable difference between how architects and non-architects respond to a building’s aesthetics was first noticed by psychologist David Halpern in an important 1987 study of students in the UK. A group of volunteer students were shown photographs of unfamiliar people and buildings. They were asked to rate them in terms of attractiveness. Some of the volunteers were architects and some were not. And as the experiment was ongoing a fascinating finding became clear. Whilst everyone had similar views on which people were attractive, the architecture and non-architecture students had diametrically opposed views on what was or was not an attractive building. The architecture students’ favourite building was everyone else’s least favourite and *vice versa*. The consistently least popular of 12 buildings shown to non-architect students proved to be the most and second most popular among two groups of architect students<sup>1</sup>. Correlations were ‘low or non-significant.’ The disconnect also got worse the longer architecture students had been studying. The longer students had been studying the more they disagreed with their peers on what was an attractive building. (Halpern, 1995).

<sup>1</sup>Halpern, D. (1995), *Mental Health and the Built Environment*, pp.161-2.



**Figure 1.** House preferred by architects and disliked by non-architects in 1987 study

Since 1987, at least two other studies have had similar findings. One 2001 Canadian study found that many architects are often unable to predict the public's real preference. They asked two groups, architects and non-architects, to rate 42 large urban structures of diverse styles that were constructed in the 1980s and 1990s in developed countries. They found that architects fail to recognize that their understanding of good housing may not be shared by residents, consistently disagreeing with the general public on matters of good versus bad design and are actually unable to predict the public's real preferences (Brown, 2001).

An indicative 2015 online survey by Create Streets found that the distinction between what non-design specialists and design specialists would like to see built found by David Halpern in 1987 appears still to exist. An online sample were shown four images and asked which they would most like to see built on an urban street near where they or a close friend lived. Respondents were also asked their profession<sup>2</sup>. In total, 87 per cent preferred the less innovative two options at the top of figure 2.25 per cent of supporters of the more popular two options worked in planning, architecture or creative arts. However, 46 per cent of supporters of the less popular two options worked in planning, architecture or creative arts<sup>3</sup>. Professional acclamation may also be misaligned with public taste. We are aware of nine architectural or planning prizes awarded to the two least popular two options. We are not aware of any architectural or planning awards garnered by the most popular option<sup>4</sup>.

This investigation provides further evidence that such a 'design disconnect' exists and is not just restricted to the UK or to Canada.

The study may also hint at wider themes. Until the twentieth century many, arguably most, important buildings were rich in symbolism and cultural meaning. The churches and cathedrals of Europe, Islamic cities and public buildings in pre-Hispanic America all suggest that the aesthetics of housing does not follow just theoretical

<sup>2</sup> There were 283 respondents between 1 April and 22 May 2015. In total 37% worked as architects, planners or in creative arts.

<sup>3</sup> Text adopted from summary in *Heart in the Right Street* (2016) by Nicholas Boys Smith, Create Streets.

<sup>4</sup> The second option has not been built so is not able to win awards.

aesthetic trends, but are influenced by historical models with symbolism acquired through time.

Q1: which of these would you most want to see built on an urban street very near to where you or a close friend live? (order randomised in Pop-up Poll)

**Create Streets**



\* Prize-winning. Total of nine awards for these two options

2

**Figure 2.** Options in Create Streets Pop-up poll

## 2. Hypotheses

1. *There is an aesthetic dissociation (a 'design disconnect') between most of the architecture community and most of the general public.*
2. *The aesthetics of housing does not follow just theoretical aesthetic trends, but are influenced by historical models with symbolism acquired through time.*
3. *The nature and method of creation can enhance the value of architecture.*

## 3. Method of sociological research

As a means for refining the scope of this study, middle class housing was chosen, with a value (in 2008) from US \$39,400 to US \$157,800. To generate a historical and economic framework for the sociological study, an investigation was made in the following subjects:

- History of the aesthetics of modern architecture in Chile.
- Analysis of the housing market in the Concepción region of Chile<sup>5</sup>.
- Interviews with influential players within the architecture and housing markets in Concepción.

<sup>5</sup>Metropolitan area of Chile measured by population, industry, and cultural influence.

A sectional social inquiry was used as the experimental approach. This method gives a vision of the subject at a specific time. The study's scope was a sample of a typical geographical area, in this case the comuna of Concepción, with a population of 226,897<sup>6</sup>. The sample considered adults from 18 to 80 years old of whom there were 155,739.

The sample taken was probabilistic, simple random, and was separated by city sectors. Finally, the required sample was 156 polled people. This research must be received with the obvious caveat that the sample size is limited, refers to a particular country and uses deliberately simple language and questions for the benefit of non-architecturally trained opinions.

A short poll was conducted (maximum 3 minutes), where we asked about the client's aesthetic taste, his/her opinion about several styles of houses, and also some filter questions about the respondent to enable us subsequently to structure the research.

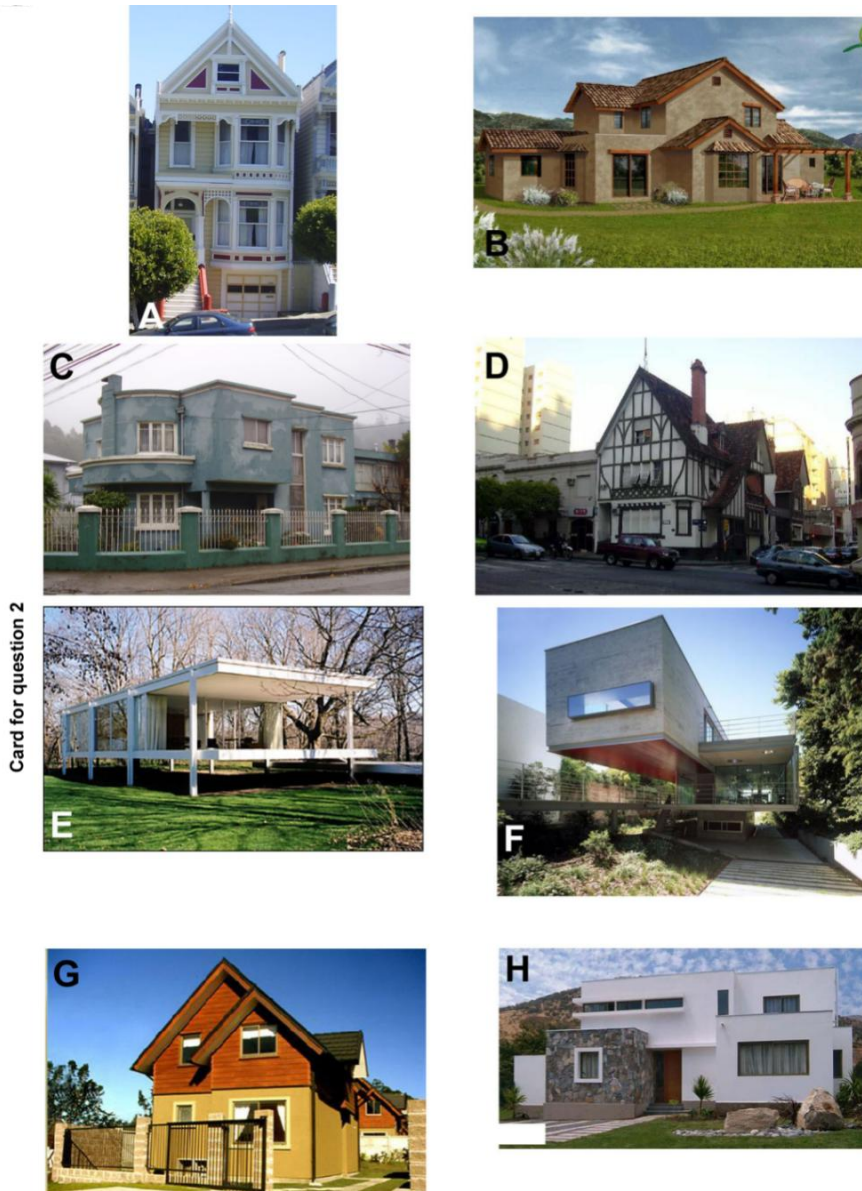
One of the questions used a form of simple visual preference survey to ask the user to choose, among several visualized options, the 'nicest' and the 'worst' house (see figure 1). These colloquial words (deliberately eschewed in most architectural academia) were used intentionally to ease comprehension by non-respondents. Another question was intended to discover whether the interviewee had some relation with architecture or the arts (AA), or not (NA). In total of our sample of 156 40 were in group AA and 106 were in group NA.

#### **4. Figure 3. House example card used in the indicative visual preference survey**

Each house type presented as an option was set out below and will henceforth be categorized by capital letters. Since conducting the visual preference survey it has become apparent that some non-façade elements also present in the images were not perfectly controlled for. For example, house B has grass in front of it. House D has tarmac and cars. Houses A, F and G have clear blue skies. Houses B and H have clouds. House D has other buildings behind it. House E has trees behind it. Images are not taken from consistent angles or distances. If the intent of the survey were to decide what is the most popular house type these limitations would be problematic. However, as the primary purpose is to compare the response of different segments, the limitations are less concerning. However, it is possible that non-experts might be more influenced by other matters (the presence of grass or trees for example). This should be kept in mind.

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<sup>6</sup>2002 census



**Figure 3.** House example card used in the indicative visual preference survey.

## 5. Results

The results of the poll are shown in the following charts:

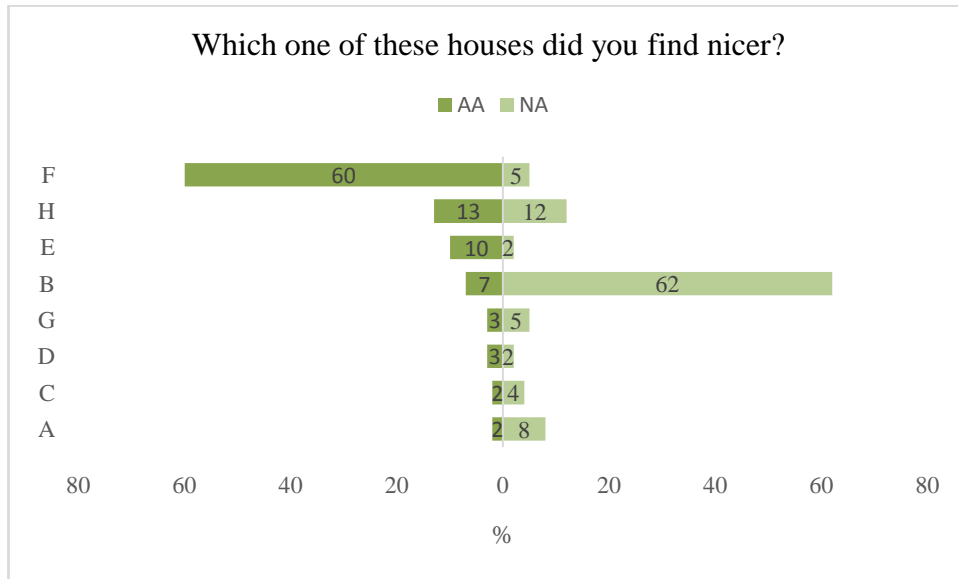


Figure 4. Divergence on preferred houses

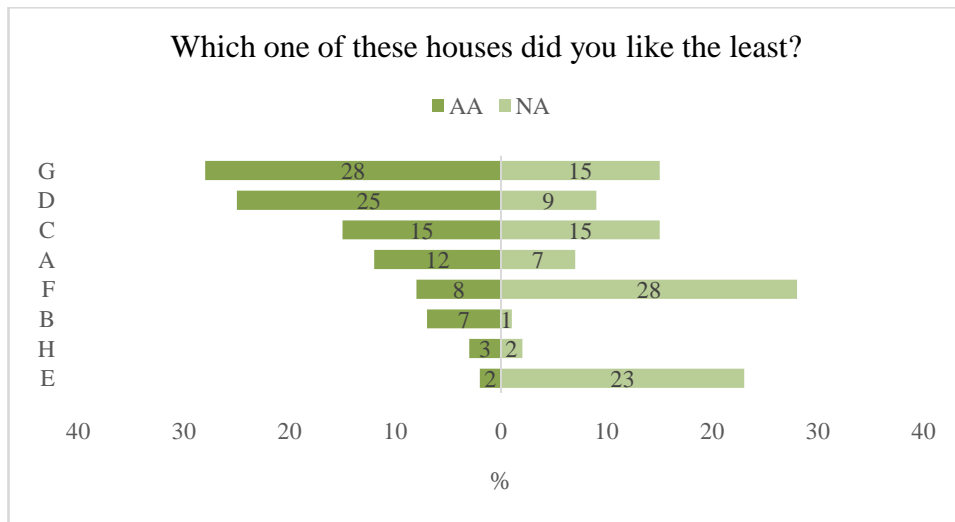
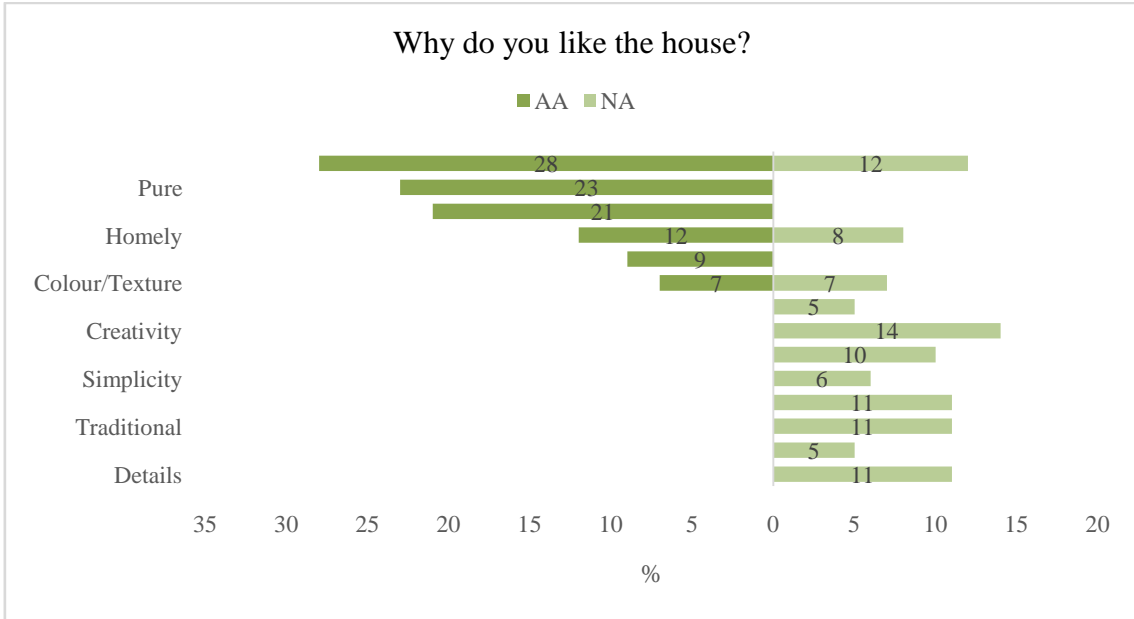
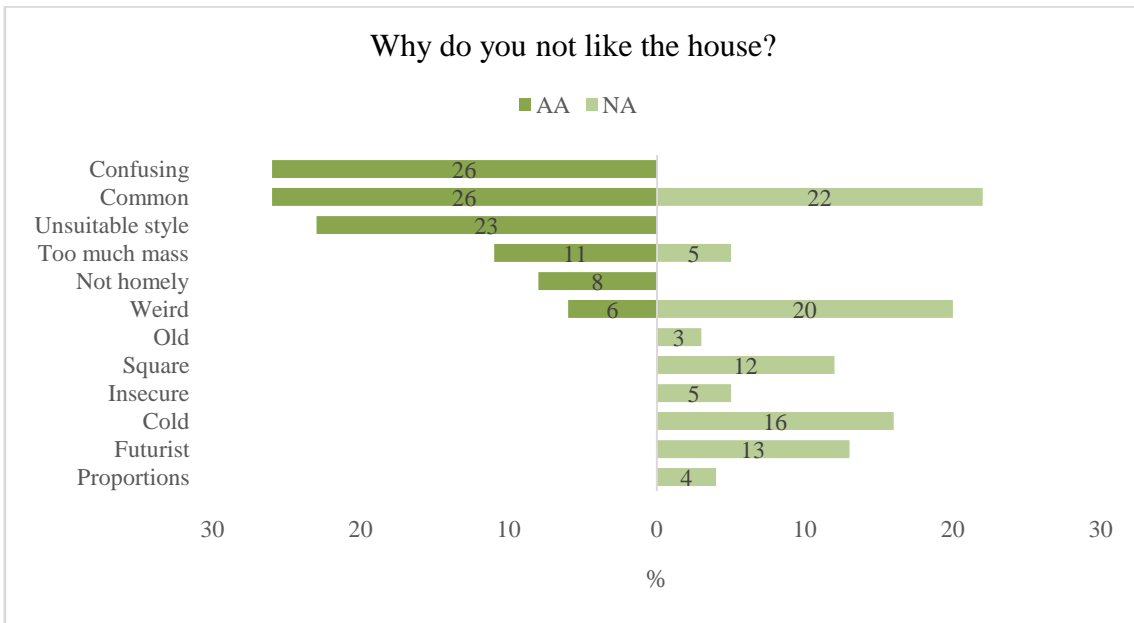


Figure 5. Divergence on disliked houses

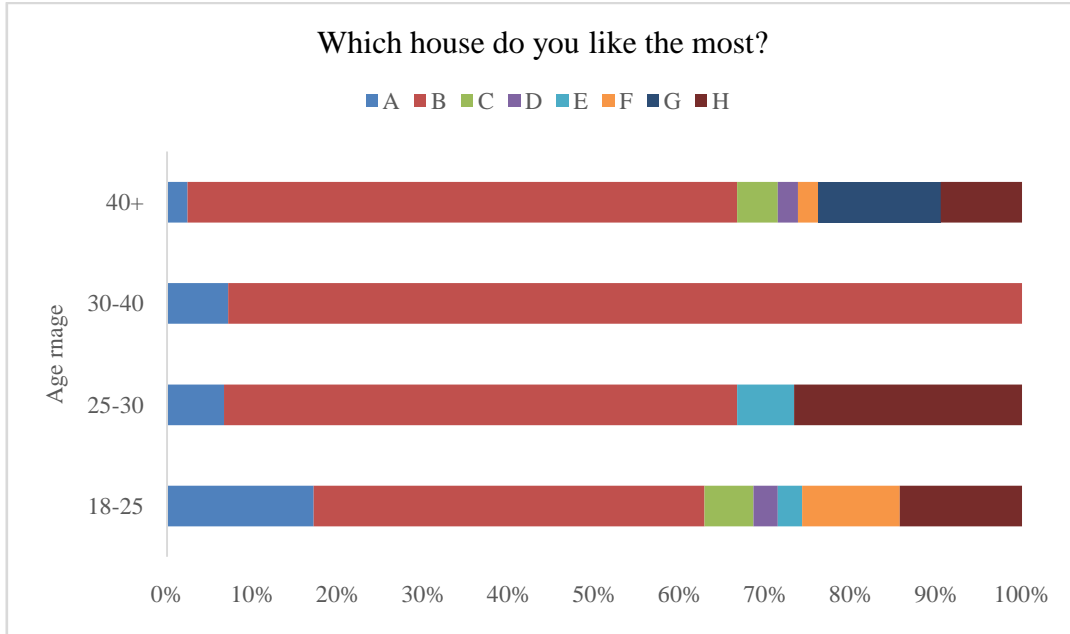




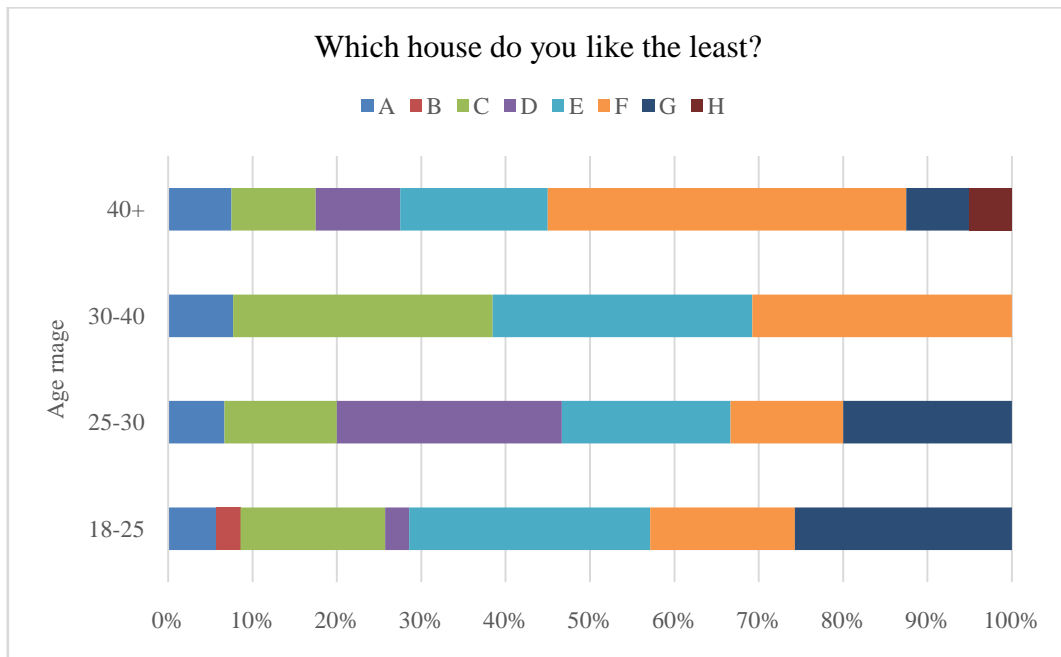
**Figure 6.** Divergence on reasons – preferred homes



**Figure 7.** Divergence on reasons – disliked homes

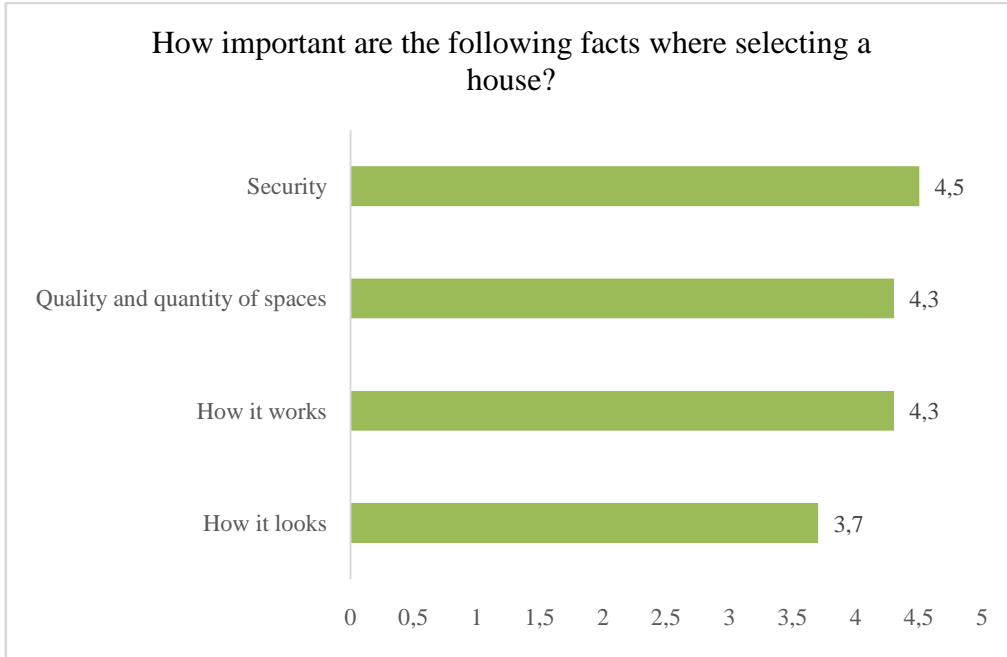


**Figure 8.** Age grouping – preferred homes

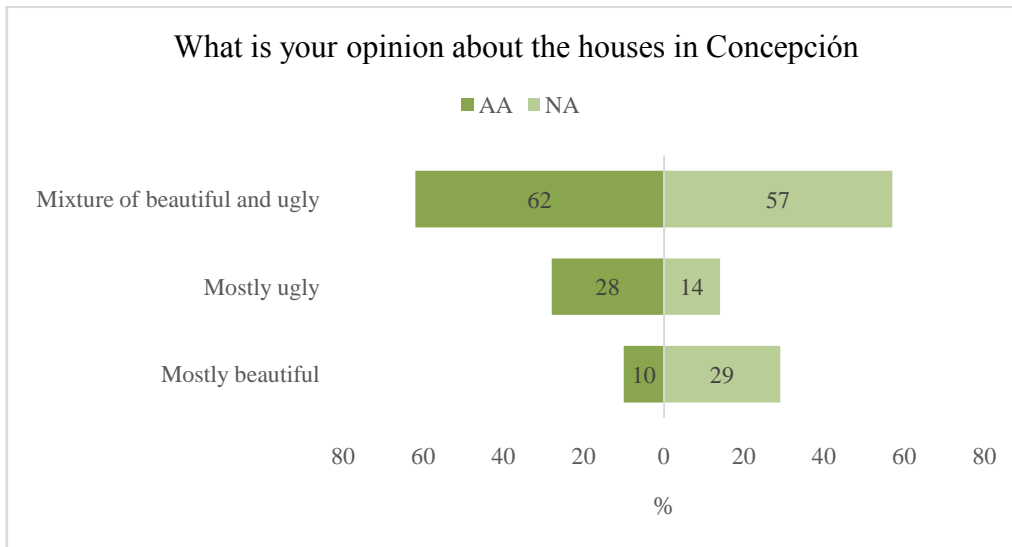


**Figure 9.** Age grouping – disliked homes





**Figure 10.** Home selection factors (scale, 0-5)



**Figure 11.** Divergence on opinion of beauty

## 6. Conclusion 1: the ‘design disconnect’

This study has found that, as with other studies in the UK and Canada, there appears to be a ‘design disconnect’ between the architecture that most architects prefer and the architecture that most non-designers prefer. Importantly, there is evidence for the design disconnect beyond the UK and Canada.

*Hypothesis 1: There is an aesthetic dissociation (a 'design disconnect') between most of the architecture community and most of the general public.*

As with David Halpern's study (Halpern, 1987) the most popular house with the AA group was also voted the worst by the NA group. The Casa Ponce (house F) (designed by Mathias Klotz in 2003), was the favorite house among 60% of the AA group but only 5% of the NA group. Conversely, the least favorite with the AA group (house G) was the third most popular with the NA group.

There two groups' decisions are also differently motivated. The AA group, with academic aesthetic training, base their judgments on matters of design purity, volumes, and composition. Conversely, the non-expert user seeks what might almost be termed 'traditional' characteristics that express security and familiarity (for example: country-like, homely and modern). The word 'modern' would appear to be used and understood differently by many interviewees in the different groups. For example, many tagged the Casa chilena (house B) as 'modern'. As most designers would not describe this design as stylistically modern, to many in the A group it would appear to mean something like well-built, or new.

Most of the NA group rejects too much experimentation. This may be due to the fact that a house is imbued with meanings that go far beyond mere design. When asked about the factors that influence choosing a house (on a scale from 1 to 5), the factors that received the highest scores were: security (4.5), spaces (4.3), functionality (4.3), and aesthetics (3.7). For most consumers, housing is not something to be left to chance. Certainty and stability would appear to be preferred perhaps because in most cases, it is the biggest and most important investment in their life, and the one that will shelter their family for years to come.

## **7. Conclusion 2: Design and meaning**

Houses have meaning beyond their specific aesthetics. For example, house C was an example of the type of houses built in Concepción after the lethal 1939 earthquake<sup>7</sup>. Although these houses have been found throughout the city centre for over 70 years, they appear to remain ubiquitously unpopular. House C was a typology that was equally rejected in the AA and NA groups. This supports our second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: The aesthetics of housing does not follow just theoretical aesthetic trends, but are influenced by historical models with symbolism acquired through time.*

It would seem that house is not just expressions of theoretical design ideas. They acquire and can sometimes find hard to lose a symbolism which reflects their creation and history.

## **8. Conclusion 3: The user's preference**

As was stated above, there are limitations in our ability to draw wider conclusions from the specific images chosen for the visual preference survey. Nevertheless, our findings can be said cautiously to indicate a fairly conventional aesthetic taste and a

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<sup>7</sup>The Chillán earthquake (1939) was the single deadliest seismic event in Chile (the most seismic country on earth). It caused the death of 28,000 people.

preference for what is already known and proven. Casa chilena (house B) was by some distance the most popular house. No doubt this image was flattered by the green grass and blue skies in the image. However, it is also a house imbued with the classic iconography of home, with traditional materials and colors, working well in the local climate and used by real humans for many years throughout the region. This conservatism can also be seen when we asked subjects for the house that they dislike the most. In that case, every most-voted house used a minimalist and less homely aesthetic (houses F, C, and E).

Experience is also an influential factor. The Casa chilena (house B) is liked by all ages. However, this preference was most marked in people aged from 30 to 40 years old (an age when many people buy or build their own house), when it is the most popular with over 90% of respondents in that age range. Conversely, younger users were more open to more innovative designs (houses F-H). Are young people more open to new ideas or, at any rate, to the appearance of novelty (modernism can hardly be said to be new after over a century)? Are older people more conservative? Or as people become more experienced are they better able to understand and evaluate the complexities of home management? We cannot say from the evidence in this study.

However, there certainly *is* a relationship between a home's creation and tenure and its popularity with residents. If we analyze the opinion of the users about their own house, those that appreciate their house the least are the AA group. Only 25% of them offered a positive opinion on their own house. People who have bought their own house had a more positive opinion (49% acceptance). However, the group with the highest opinion of their houses was the group of people who had built their homes themselves – self-builders (61% approval). This tends to support our third hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: The nature and method of creation can enhance the value of architecture.*

## **9. Comment from the corresponding author in 2019**

Since conducting this research in 2008, (The full version of the original thesis is available online<sup>8</sup>) I have become more aware of the work of researchers and architects using evidence better to understand what shapes and patterns prevalent in nature and traditional settlements create better environments for their residents as measured by their mental and physical wellbeing. This includes the work of, David Halpern, Graham Brown, Robert Gifford, Prof Matthew Carmona (*'Place value: place quality and its impact on health, social, economic and environmental outcomes'*), Jan Gehl (*Cities for People* among many others), Nikos Salingaros (*Principles of Urban Structure*), William Whyte (*City*), Charles Montgomery (*Happy City*) and Nicholas Boys Smith (*Heart in the Right Street*). Oscar Newman's 1972 book *Defensible Space* demonstrates that these are not new ideas though they are being studied anew. I would also like to thank David Milner and Nicholas Boys Smith at Create Streets for their advice on methodology and other matters.

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<sup>8</sup>Link to full version of the [thesis](#).

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