AN ARCHITECTURE OF HUMILITY: The Need for Haptic Spaces in an Age of Simulation

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Figure 1

INTRODUCTION

The image above is a photograph of a skin impression left on my arm from direct pressure and contact with the material environment over time, temporarily fossilizing an unmediated event that took place in our natural world. To me, it communicates the feeling of something medical, scientific, and almost diagrammatic in its abstraction, but without the often associated sterility. The waffle-like texture of the impression on my flesh beckons to be touched, to be understood, and to be filed away as one of our bil-

lions of 'fingertip memories'¹. If we are to learn from life, and to use these experiences to empathize with others, we must first experience life-- with all of our senses, through our flesh, unmediated and raw.²

If you are able look at this photograph and know what the bumpy texture of these delicate and strange impressions feel like, its not because you saw a movie about it, or read about it in a blog, it's because you have physically had a real life touch experience similar to this one. Perhaps you remember this experience... did you just awaken from an afternoon nap? Or perhaps you were in a chilly room, sitting on the tops of your hands to warm them? Maybe the impressions were from direct contact with the clothes or skin of another person? OR... perhaps you *have* experienced this, but didn't stop to notice the wonder in this every day phenomenon.

Through this experience, I am aware of temporality and the magnificent beauty contained in the most mundane event. Beautiful because of its fleeting nature, and special because of the authentic intimacy contained in its physical *Realness*.

I ask: How can today's building practices more responsibly engage the human body and express the element of time toward an increased awareness of people and natural environment around us and our role as caretakers of both?

Methodology

This paper discusses the importance of Haptic experiences in our physical world made relevant by technology and offers architects ways we can increase and preserve haptic sensitivity in our built environment. Analysis of architectural methodologies includes an investigation of Eastern values and building practices, specifically wabi-sabi, a discussion regarding tactile processes, and an analysis of several architectural spaces designed with haptic sensitivity, thereby engendering a more humane perception of other people and our environment.

HAPTIC PERCEPTION, BODY MEMORY, AND SIMULATION

Haptic is defined as "of or relating to the sense of touch, in particular relating to the perception and manipulation of objects using the senses of touch and proprioception." Haptic perception involving materiality creates deeper, enhanced memories of place, which resonate more profoundly within us than mediated, digital, or simulated reality. Haptic engagement with life and objects that remind us of life allow us to create more emotionally resonant experiences, and increases awareness of our connection to life systems; an awareness that engenders humility, empathy, and a more humane perception of life and our environment.

While technological advances offer benefits in many capacities, and even defines the age in which we live, simulation and mediation brought about by new technology removes opportunities for haptic or embodied experiences. When we choose simulated experiences in place of haptic experiences, we disconnect from natural life and amputate our biologically rooted desire to bond and empathize with living systems in our natural surroundings.⁴

French philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, argues that simulation today is "the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a *hyperreal*. The territory no longer pre-cedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - it is the map that engenders the territory..."⁵ It is critical that we acknowledge this, as we rely on emotional connections built from past experiences to facilitate decision making about new experiences. ⁶

In critiquing Baudrillard's unbound theory of sensuous geographies, psychologist and sociologist Paul Rodaway⁷ explains how in our current order of simulation, the intent is no longer to access the original more clearly, but rather, as Rodaway posits, "...it is to generate or synthesize a reality *more real* and *more perfect*, one which fulfills our desires."

Since Rodaway's 1994 work, Sensuous Geographies, one example of advancement toward integrating simulation and embodied experience is witnessed in touch screen phones. The icons on the screen provide multi-sensory feedback not just to the user's eyes and ears, but now, also through their fingertips in the form of a small vibration when touched. While this may be a step forward in the eyes of embodied cognition theorists,9 consider this: the vibration cue from the phone is the same sensory feedback you might receive from a video game controller or any number of handheld electronic devices. The simulated homogenous sensory input experienced with the cell phone screen is unlike the physical engagement and body memory involved with its early predecessor, for example, the rotary phone, where memory and engagement is based on movement and kinesthetic feedback specific to object and event. With each number dialed on a rotary phone, your index finger travels a path of a specific distance and gathers a certain amount of resistance before you release the dial and hear it spin back into 'start' position. No other object would feed your senses precisely the same. The question is not why are we not still using rotary phones, but rather, what can we learn from it, and similar 'base' embodied experiences?

Philosopher Henri Bergson writes, "The objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them." Likewise, the *architectural spaces* that surround your body should reflect your body's possible action upon them.

Finnish architect and former professor Juhanni Pallasmaa echoes my concerns, stating that "Architecture articulates the experiences of being-in-the-world and strengthens our sense of reality and self; it does not make us inhabit worlds of mere fabrication and fantasy."¹¹

Kent C Bloomer and Charles W Moore explain in their book *Body, Memory, and Architecture*, that "The body image... is informed fundamentally from *haptic and orienting experiences early in life*. Our visual images are developed later on, and depend for their meaning on primal experiences that were acquired haptically."¹²

Pallasmaa argues that "To at least some extent every place can be remembered partly because it is unique, but partly because it has affected our bodies and generated enough associations to hold it in our personal worlds..."

Frighteningly, this potential dialogue between environment, body, and imagination is often missing from architectural spaces today, severing our bodies' ability to remember these experiences of place.

Architect and author Anne Cline speaks of how upon encountering art in a gallery- and I would add, any time we passively view art or architecture- we leave our daily lives, and our selves, at the door. Meaningful architecture, and art, however, compels our bodies to engage with its form, space, materials, and site

American Values Beyond Modern Technology

Present day observations and historical evidence convey that socioeconomic values of *capital gain* and aesthetic values of *timeless perfection* have been driving American culture and its architecture at the expense of all else since the dawn of the industrial age. This demand for unnatural perfection and newness cultivates values of *commodity, consumption,* and *greed,* and is reflected in building practices today. I believe, however, what we truly value lies deeper than this.

If capital gain, timeless perfection, commodity and consumption are not in fact what conscientious Americans value, what do we care about? What is the essence of this American architecture that has not yet been fully realized?

The flood of technological advances in the field of communication is admirably aimed at fostering global connection. Ironically, what people are discovering, is that this transferring of information is not, in fact, communication. These deeper desires for greater connectivity support values more closely aligned with humility, awareness, and empathy.

US Senator Barack Obama stated in a speech on August 11, 2006: "You know, there's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit - the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through the eyes of those who are different from us - the child who's hungry, the steelworker who's been laid-off, the family who lost the entire life they built together when the storm came to town. When you think like this - when you choose to broaden your ambit of concern and empathize with the plight of others, whether they are close friends or distant strangers - it becomes harder not to act; harder not to help." On August 7th of that same year, this senator also commented that "Yes, our greatness as a nation has depended on individual initiative, on a belief in the free market. But it has also depended on our sense of mutual regard for each other, of mutual responsibility." Obama's elected role as current president is further evidence that even the common public actively acknowledges that now is the time to act upon desires toward awareness, empathy, and humility via connection with our physical world.

We, as architects, can address this empathy deficit by providing haptic experiences. Unfortunately, the challenge, depth, and complexity inherent in connecting emotionally with our physical world is too often and too easily circumvented by the constant influx of technological innovations that offer us a means to avoid one another.

Balancing our digital worlds with haptic connections in our material world is crucial if we are to provide architectural experiences that engender awareness toward empathy, and humility.

ARCHITECTURAL METHODOLOGIES FOSTER-ING HAPTIC SENSITIVITY

Francesca Woodman, American Photographer (1958-1981), is most well known for her emotive and often ethereal black and white self-portraits that have been described as "an experience of the real as embodied".¹⁴

Referencing the experience of playing piano, an inscription beneath one of Woodman's *House Series* prints reads "Then, at one point I did not need to translate the notes; they went directly to my hands. Nothing could be more precise about a sense of self as medium, a conduit, a plane of passage". With engagement of her body, Woodman becomes her subject. She identifies with the strangeness of absence, the pain of longing, and the fear and beauty inherent in change.

As with life-enhancing architecture, Woodman's work exemplifies how haptic engagement with the material world offers an emotive connection. Her photographs document place and capture the temporality of human existence and an understanding of how our bodies interact with place in time. The materials of these places become part of the narrative.

Japanese Aesthetic Value of Wabi-Sabi

Emotions engendering humility as conveyed through connections with our natural material world is the very basis of wabi-sabi, the beauty of imperfection. Though wabi's origins are in Japan, the core values of wabi-sabi are not culturally specific.



Figure 2

Wabi's aesthetic celebrates the wear patterns and patina that time, weather, and loving use leave behind. Author Leonard Koren explains16 how wabi-sabi "occupies roughly the same position in the Japanese pantheon of aesthetic values as do the Greek ideals of beauty and perfection in the West... Wabi-sabi nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging three simple realities: nothing lasts, nothing is finished, and nothing is perfect." If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and spiritual longing, then that object could be said to be wabi-sabi. Embracing Eastern wabi values requires us to accept our own temporal existence while still engaging our physical world with our physical bodies.

The subtle yet substantial messages that breathe within wabi-sabi are perhaps the very things we long for today: Slow down... appreciate the present moment... and find beauty, pleasure, and contentment in the imperfect.

Nearly a century after Okakura's 1906 publication, The Book of Tea, Anne Cline writes of how her desires to tap into the True and fleeting joys of existence inspire her own hut-making and wabi experiences here in America. ¹⁸ Cline is one of many in the West who seek that which Zen followers in the East live by, the wabi-sabi way of life.

Celebrating asymmetry, asperity, simplicity, modesty, and intimacy, wabi architecture offers opportunities for unmediated haptic experiences of place that are more like life. Life is complex and infinitely dynamic, never static, never boring. Life involves multiplicity and variance in scales. Life is both beautiful and grotesque in its honesty. With life comes decay, healing, growing, changing, and renewal. An Architecture that embraces the flux inherent in fleeting dimensions like the forms and colors of light and shadows, which change in time and (re)cycle as the seasons do, is more like life.

When architects embrace the wabi values of empathy, transience, and a love of life in design, we (re) introduce values that can be understood cross culturally through a universal language of Mono no aware. Mono no aware is a Japanese term that means "self-consciousness of the transience of all earthly things," and also, "an empathy toward things." 20 21

Peter Zumthor helps us understand however, that

empathy is not only born of thingness, but also springs from absence and longing. "Beauty... is at its most intense when it is born of absence. I find something missing, a compelling expression, an empathy, which instantly affects me when I experience beauty. Before the experience, I did not realize or perhaps no longer knew that I missed it, but now I am persuaded by knowledge renewed that I will always miss it. Longing... Painful is the experience of absence and pure bliss the experience of a beautiful form that has been ignited by the feeling of absence." ²²

It is the void, the anticipation, the break in the waves that helps us foster appreciation for that which 'exists'. Pauses in a musical score allow the notes to resonate and breathe. The blank margins of the pages in a book give our minds a place of rest in filtering and absorbing its contents. These moments of absence give relief to the steady stream of auditory and visual input. Sadly but understandably, our digital age seems no longer concerned for the importance of longing, as it slows us down.

Architects must offer opportunities within haptic spaces for absence, anticipation, and reflection.

Tactile Design Processes

"When working, both the artists and craftsman are directly engaged with their bodies and their existential experiences, rather than focused on an external and objectified problem. A wise architect works with his/her entire body and sense of self." -Juhani Pallasmaa²³

This past June, my journey with wabi-sabi led me to Indiana based artist, Zach Medler,²⁴ whose interests and investigations in art-making were directly paralleling mine in architecture; Both of us working toward understanding the universal human need to connect with other life, as filtered through the body, in experiences specific to person and place.

Clay, I learned, has a memory. When you mould clay, it remembers. When fired, the process shows in the bends, cracks, and stature of its form. The piece tells a story of its making. If my hands did not humbly yield to and honor the inherent make-up of the clay, my design intentions would be futile. How many of us, I wondered... truly yield to and honor the inherent make-up of the people and natural world around us? And how often is this expressed in architecture?

Through this experience, I was humbled by my own quest toward understanding the connection between TOUCH and HUMILITY.

Life-enhancing transcendent spaces are created by architects who allow tactile engagement to affect a design and enrich its pocess.

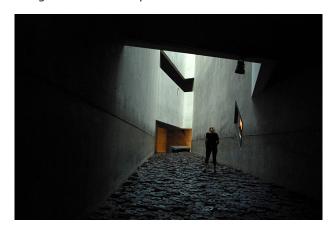


Figure 3

In collaboration with artist Menashe Kadishman, architect Daniel Libeskind designed a space specifically for a permanent installation called Shalet (Fallen Leaves) in his Jewish Museum in Berlin, Germany (Figure 3). Littering the floor of this long room are thousands of life-sized metal faces, scattered about, each with its own abstracted anguished expression. The space simultaneously invites pause and action. As the visitor approaches from around a corner, they encounter what a friend described to me as "a murky hollow volume pierced by light from a skylight above... it made me want to be completely silent... to affect very little so I could experience the space at its essence. Of course, after a moment, you see these faces, and know that you're allowed to walk on them, but understand that there's a reverence to the space. When you step on the pieces... the faces... the metal clinks and echoes, and if you are very quiet the echo becomes very loud. The space was powerful." 25

As with clay artifacts, "Architecture is communication from the body of the architect directly to the body of the person who encounters the work, perhaps centuries later." 26

In her 2009 article, Materiality, Memory and Imagination: Using Empathy to Research Creativity, Cathy

Treadaway explores the roles of materials, sensory experiences, and technology in the creative process. The outcome of her analysis reflects my sentiment that in order to engender enhanced expression of gesture and emotion in design, new digital creativity-support-tools should take into account the practitioner's need and desire for haptic sensory input.

When addressing mankind's greater universal need for joy and meaning, Anne Cline comments that "what is most at stake... is not found but made in the primitive hut." ²⁷ The embodied act of making toward meaning and joy is key here. How can we collect the same joy from mere existence in a world less physically bound to our natural surroundings?

ARCHITECTURAL CASE STUDIES

The following architectural case studies explore how can designers and architects in western cultures embrace the wabi philosophy and values in very practical terms to create haptically sensitive spaces.

Material Reuse

Most of the seeds of our technological advancements in the fields of building materials and construction were planted during early Modernism and unfortunately resulted in the mass production and use of architectural materials that are void of the expression of time. "The weakening of the experience of time in today's environments has devastating mental effects... We have a mental need to grasp that we are rooted in the continuity of time, and in the manmade world it is the task of architecture to facilitate this experience."28 Modern material choices associated with the International style in the US neglect this task.

Like the physical places in Woodman's photographs, materials create a dialogue through a language of mono no aware. By preserving and reusing materials whose patina and wear patterns express use from a previous life, we become aware of our own existence through the awareness of the existence of others before us.

Wabi is more responsible, more natural, and more real. It teaches us to see the potential in what we have. Materials salvaged from previous lives are physical reminders that we engage with our world as part of larger systems of life.

Spiritual Resonance

Spiritually resonant, life-enhancing architecture offers its visitor mystery, absence, stillness, and anticipation through formal and tectonic juxtaposition to engage the human spirit.



Figure 4

In the example of Bigelow chapel, the architect creates an anticipatory experience as the visitor steps from its austere and site specific geometric exterior into the serenity of its fluid interior. The chapel "becomes an essay on one of architecture's fundamental expressions: the creation of inner and outer realms — a concept well-suited to spiritual contemplation."²⁹

Embodied Experiences in Nature

"In our own fragmented and desperately ambiguous time, the rhythms of season and the cycles of growth and decay that we engage with a gardener's care, still allow us the sense of participating in a greater pattern."

-Moore, Mitchell & Turnbull

Architecture that immerses our bodies in the elements through exposure to daylight, natural ventilation, and rain, offer haptic knowledge about the natural cycles of life.

At the urban scale, this would include walk able neighborhoods. At the scale of building, manual operation of building systems can serve as interactive teaching and learning tools, as seen at both Shelly Ridge³⁰ and the Environmental Education Center by architect Peter Bohlin, where "...building materiality engage

and elevate public awareness of natural systems."31

In collaboration with environmental artist Ned Kahn, Koning Eizenberg designed a three-story contemporary structure made of steel and glass but encased in an unforgettable shade of fluttering translucent panels that opened in 2004 as an addition to the Pittsburgh Children's museum. The panels of the "articulated cloud" design respond to wind currents, swaying individually to create an elegant chorus of light and sound. From the exterior of the building, the child-size scale of the panels invites walkers by to approach the façade and touch the material. From the interior, a tempo of sunlight dances across the surfaces of the rooms and warms the skin of its pint-sized visitors.

Adapted for reuse, Bohlin's renovation for the Barn at Falling Water seamlessly integrates modern materials with the original structure of the barn original structure. Educational and social events for the community are held in the space on the upper level, which opens directly to the exterior, encouraging indoor and outdoor use. In addition to directly connecting people with nature, the renovation uses repurposed wooden floors from a gymnasium and integrates technologically advanced systems and modern materials with local vernacular forms and natural systems. The Barn at Falling Water exemplifies the PA Conservancies mission of: "Saving the places we care about by connecting people to the natural world."³³

Peter Bohlin's renovation for the Barn at Falling Water is another example of architecture that seamlessly threads nature and technology into emotionally resonant spaces whose tectonics and (repurposed) materials foster haptic connection, thereby engendering a more humane perception of life and our environment. 34 Bohlin aims to create spaces "people will value and love, which for him is 'one of the most sustainable building practices."35

Embracing the Digital

One example of how simulation has engendered rather than excluded haptic engagement with life, is in Chicago's Millennium Park where artist Jaume Plensa collaborated with Kreuck Sexton Architects, and where technology collaborated with nature, in the erection of Crown Fountain, completed in 2004.³⁶



Figure

The fountain consists of two 50-foot high glass block towers at each end of a shallow reflecting pool. Faces taken from a cross section of 1,000 Chicago residents are projected on the towers' massive LED screens. A water outlet piercing each of the screens spurts water into the reflecting pool to give the illusion that the water is spouting from their mouths, a reference to the traditional use of gargoyles in fountains, where faces of mythological beings carved from stone spouted water, a symbol of life. Entire families, single individuals, Chicago citizens and distant travelers from every walk of life all gather at this fountain anchoring the southwest corner of Millennium Park at Michigan Avenue and Monroe Streets.³⁷

CONCLUSION

"Nothing gives man fuller satisfaction than participation in processes that supersede the span of individual life."

-Gotthard Booth

I believe in building and design practices that satisfy Juhanni Pallasmaa's definition for the role of architecture as "enabling us to perceive and understand the dialectics of permanence and change, to settle ourselves in the world, and to place ourselves in the continuum of culture and time." While architecture should reflect our current zeitgeist, it should do so responsibly and thoughtfully, and not just theoretically. It should teach us about 'life today' while grounding us in 'life eternal'.

When designing with wabi philosophy and values in practical terms authentic to American culture, haptic spaces engendering empathy and awareness of our natural world and its people can offer much needed balance to the disconnect fostered by technology today in what I refer to as An Architecture of Humility.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958).
- 2 Cathy Treadaway, *Materiality, Memory and Imagination: Using Empathy to Research Creativity* Treadaway States, 2009. "Perceived experience is also influenced by memory of previous experiences; we bring to the present personal and cultural influences that have been previously sensed or learnt. What we perceive is "the product of past experience and future expectations."
- 3 Oxford English Dictionary.
- 4 Ibid.

Biophilia, literally means "love of life or living systems." This term, first used by German social psychologist Eric Fromm (1900-1980), and popularized by Edward O. Wilson (b. 1929), suggests that there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems and states that human beings subconsciously seek connections with the rest of life. According to Wilson, this deep affiliation we have with nature is rooted in our biology.

- 5 Paul Rodaway, Sensuous Geographies, 1994, 174. 6 Treadaway; further offers, "Retention of the sensory experience is enhanced by emotional involvement and enables similar experience to be recognized and rekindled later in the
- similar experience to be recognized and rekindled later in the imagination.. The emotional connection with an occurrence and recognition of a similar past experience facilitates decision-making."
- 7 Rodaway, 175.8 Ibid, p 176.
- 9 http://www.iep.utm.edu/embodcog/

Research continues to emerge in each of the subfields comprising cognitive science (including developmental psychology, philosophy of mind, linguistics, and artificial life/robotics) all maintain that embodiment is a necessary condition for cognition. According to cognition theorists, embodiment is broadly understood as "the unique way an organism's sensorimotor capacities enable it to successfully interact with its environmental niche. In addition, all of the different formulations of the general embodied cognition thesis share a common goal of developing cognitive explanations that capture the manner in which mind, body, and world mutually interact and influence one another to promote an organism's adaptive success."

- 10 Henry Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, (Zone Books, New York, 1991), 21.
- 11 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The thinking hand: Existential and embodied wisdom in architecture*, AD Primers, (Chichester, U.K.: Wiley, 2009), 11.
- 12 Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body Memory,* and *Architecture*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 44.
- 13 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses.* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 107.
- 14 Rosalind E. Krauss, *Bachelors*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 177.
- 15 Ibid., 173.
- Leonard Koren, Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets
 Philosophers, (Berkeley, California: Stonebridge Press, 1994).
 Leonard Koren, Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets
- & Philosophers, (Berkeley, California: Stonebridge Press, 1994), Intro.
- 18 Ann Cline, A Hut of One's Own: Life outside the circle

of architecture, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

J. T. Rimer, Reader's Guide Japanese Lit, 1991, 155.

20 Oxford English Dictionary.

Also defined as: "the experience of being, deeply and spontaneously moved by various poignant manifestations of nature, including human nature; *esp.* a sense of pathos arising from intense awareness of the impermanence of earthly things."

- 21 Dr. Anne Wicks, professor of Asian Art History at Miami University, Interview by author.
- Dr. Wicks explains that as a Heian period (10th 12th c.) model, "...architecture was built with the concept that you could feel the outdoors even when indoors... Thus, the changing seasons assumed great importance in the everyday lives of the poets and painters. They FELT it as well as saw it. The impermanence of the architectural materials--wood, paper--reflected the impermanence of the seasons and the impermanence of life in general."
- 22 Peter Zumthor & H. Binet, *Peter Zumthor Works:* Buildings and projects 1979-1997, (Baden: Lars Müller, 1998), 80, 81.
- 23 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin: Architecture and the senses*, (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 12.
- 24 Examples of Zach Medler's work can be seen at http://www.zmed-ceramics.com/.
- Video and audio of a visitor walking through the installation space can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ha0aVRnntgY.
- Pallasmaa, 67.
- 27 Cline, 20.
- 28 Pallasmaa
- 29 http://www.ArchitectureWeek.com/2006/0208/design 1-2.html.

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- 31 Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson, *Bohlin Cywinski Jackson:* The Nature of Circumstance, (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 14.
- 32 Video and audio of this façade in action can be viewed at Kahn's website, here: http://nedkahn.com/wind.html.
- 33 Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson, 17.
- 34 Ibid., 17.
- 35 Ibid., 17.
- 36 http://www.millenniumpark.org/artandarchitecture/crown_fountain_factsheet.html.
- 37 http://www.millenniumpark.org/artandarchitecture/crown_fountain_factsheet.html.

FIGURE REFERENCES

Figure 1: Photo by author

Figure 2: Photo by Francesca Woodman Untitled.

Providence Rhode Island, 1976

Chris Townsend. Scattered in Space and Time p 97

Figure 3: http://www.flickr.com/photos/

adamcnelson/1187684846/ (accessed, Nov 04, 2010)

Figure 4: http://www.ArchitectureWeek.com/2006/0208/

design 1-2.html (accessed, August 20, 2010)

Figure 5: http://www.flickr.com/photos/

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(accessed, Nov 04, 2010)