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Analysis of the Relationship Between Spaces and Places in Relation to the Subject, with an Emphasis on Edward Hopper's Paintings Based on Juhani Pallasmaa's Perspective

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Abstract

The present study examines the relationship between image and place in the prominent paintings of Edward Hopper, with attention to the significance of spatial perception in aesthetic experience, highlighting the necessity of reinterpreting these works from the perspective of sensory and phenomenological theories. Edward Hopper, a twentieth-century American painter, creates paintings such as *Nighthawks*, *Night Windows*, and *Cinema Hall*, portraying calm, static, and solitude-filled spaces that possess both sensory and mental dimensions. The theoretical framework of this study is based on the phenomenological perspective of Juhani Pallasmaa, a Finnish architect, and the concepts presented in his books *The Eyes of the Skin* and *The Architecture of Image*, which emphasize the perception of space through the senses, body, and memory. In line with this, Hopper's works employ directional lighting, minimal compositions, and defamiliarization of direct subject presentation to produce places that enable an internal, intersubjective experience of space. The aim of this research is to understand the relationship between spaces and places in relation to the subject in Edward Hopper's paintings, emphasizing Juhani Pallasmaa's perspective. This study addresses the question: "How does imagery in Hopper's paintings, through form and stillness, possess the capacity to create space in which place is perceived not only as a background for events but also as a sensory and perceptual phenomenon?" The research adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on descriptive and analytical methods applied to preselected case studies (Hopper's paintings) and comparative analysis of their features. In the analytical phase, by concentrating on the connection between spatial theory and the visual patterns of the samples in relation to the subject, the study explains and expands the reinterpretation of spatial experience in Hopper's paintings. Data were collected through analysis of selected artworks, library sources, and empirical observation of the samples. Given that Juhani Pallasmaa's perspective addresses the relationship between the subject's perceptual modes and spaces/places, this study is expected to reveal and analyze new dimensions of Hopper's paintings.

Keywords: Edward hopper, Juhani pallasmaa, phenomenology, Architecture of image, Multisensory perception, Realist painting.

1 | Introduction

Today, image and place are among the most important tools for presenting and representing complex human, psychological, and cultural concepts.

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In art, these two elements not only create visual scenes but, through their sensory and perceptual capacities, convey a profound and contemplative experience of being. This significance becomes even more apparent in the works of artists such as Hopper, where image and place emerge not as complementary elements but as ontologically independent phenomena in the formation of meaning. From this perspective, research on the relationship between these two concepts, particularly within the framework of philosophical theories of space, is fully justified.

The present article examines how spatial perception is formed in the context of image and painting, recognizing that a visual composition can carry meaning, memory, silence, and lived experience. This inquiry leads to exploring the hidden yet influential relationship between form, space, and the human subject. Edward Hopper's distinctive style—characterized by stillness, elimination of details, directional lighting, and quiet, contemplative spaces—aligns with Pallasmaa's perspective, which emphasizes a bodily, silent, and sensory understanding of space. In Hopper's works, space is not merely a backdrop for the subject but a living entity within the viewer's experience.

This study aims, through a systematic approach, to analyze visual patterns, stillness, omission, explicit narrative techniques, and sensory undertones in relation to spatial perception. The theoretical framework is based on the phenomenological perspective of Juhani Pallasmaa, who in *The Architecture of Image and The Eyes of the Skin* critiques the visual-centric approach to space and emphasizes bodily awareness and sensory perception in experiencing spaces and places. According to Pallasmaa, space is not only a physical structure but also a mental, sensory, and memory-laden field whose comprehension requires the engagement of all senses. Analysis of Hopper's paintings reveals that they possess a form of architecture, where the unadorned form carries hidden meanings and invites the viewer to an inner, contemplative experience of being and seeing. Pallasmaa's theory allows for the analysis of these hidden qualities.

2 | Literature Review

Juhani Pallasmaa, a Finnish architect and contemporary theorist (born 1936, Helsinki), has significantly contributed to redefining human lived experience of space. He studied architecture at Helsinki University of Technology. In seminal works such as *The Eyes of the Skin* and *The Architecture of Image*, he argues that architecture and visual arts should be analyzed through multisensory perception, auditory and bodily memory, and silence. Pallasmaa critiques the modernist emphasis on vision and highlights that all senses shape meaning. According to him, architecture must be experienced, not merely seen. By challenging visual-centric modern architecture, he emphasizes perception through the five senses, memory, time, and embodiment.

Pallasmaa's approach provides a novel framework for analyzing Hopper's paintings, distinct from previous interpretive methods. Earlier dominant approaches to Hopper's work include:

- I. Historical-artistic: providing background on Hopper's life and career while avoiding narrative interpretation of the paintings.
- II. Literary or psychoanalytic: decoding implicit stories, shadows, and sometimes sexual motifs, focusing on gaze, window-eye relationships, and literary/artistic influences.

In contrast, Pallasmaa's phenomenological approach addresses the relationship between space and the subject. Influenced by Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of *Being-in-the-World*, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodied vision, Gaston Bachelard's poetic spatial theory, and Alvar Aalto's human-centered architecture, Pallasmaa places light, material, and silence as fundamental elements in understanding architecture. He has applied this approach comparatively to analyze paintings such as *Night Windows* (1928), *Automat* (1927), *Eleven at Night* (1926), *Office in a Small Town* (1953), and Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, although the specific case studies in this research are distinct.

In Western culture, from Ancient Greece to the 20th century, the eyes have been considered the model of philosophical perception, with vision prioritized as the means of seeing and self-reflection. With the rise of representational landscapes, the eye became the center of the perceptual world and the concept of the self.

However, this symbolic system limits perception. Descartes considered vision the most important sense, though multisensory perception is more precise and less error-prone. Nietzsche criticized vision-centered thinking, advocating the disruption of its dominance [1].

In the 20th century, French intellectuals, especially Merleau-Ponty, critiqued visual dominance and emphasized bodily, embodied vision. Architecture, as a narrator of human Being-in-the-World, raises metaphysical questions about the world and human existence. The world is a site of human habitation, and architecture shapes place to foster lived experience—a dialectic of inner and outer space that influences art and architecture. Inner lived space intertwines with external reality, with psychological images inseparable from the subject's perception of physical reality, experienced through emotional and sensory participation [1]. The lived body forms the foundation of phenomenological perception, and the body is the primary means of understanding the world. A world perceived only through the eyes lacks sensory and emotional unity. When vision becomes a technological tool for controlling human affairs, it dominates experience, dispersing life into disconnected images and depriving lived experience of multisensory richness [2].

Edward Hopper (1882–1976), a leading American painter and key figure in 20th-century modern realism, explored the inner life of urban loneliness, emptiness, and stillness rather than merely observing external reality. Hopper's works are filled with static moments, meaningful silence, and distinctive lighting, evoking isolation, timelessness, and social detachment through minimalistic form. Beyond the four key paintings analyzed here, works such as *Sunlight on the Woman* (1952), *Room in New York* (1932), and *Night Windows* (1931) exemplify his unique attention to space, light, and the human psyche in the modern world.

Hopper was influenced by literary and artistic works of James, early Symbolist painting, and film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. Instead of representing objective reality, he explored the subjective experience of the modern human, intertwined with solitude, anxiety, and silence. Digital reconstruction projects, such as Montoya's, demonstrate how the lighting in Hopper's paintings can serve as a subject for architectural and sensory studies. Studies of lived space (e.g., Henri Lefebvre) emphasize that even Hopper's simple, sparse spaces (rooms or streets) are rich with new layers of semantic meaning, and, as Pallasmaa notes, art redefines the boundary between self and world. Thus, emphasizing the individual and subjective experience of space in Hopper's paintings—not just how it appears visually but how it is felt and imbued with everyday meaning—opens avenues for phenomenological analysis.

3 | Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative approach. It focuses on preselected case studies, employing descriptive and analytical methods in relation to these cases—specifically Edward Hopper's paintings *Morning Sun*, *Nighthawks*, *Cinema Hall*, and *Night Windows*—and compares their characteristics. The research aims, through a systematic approach, to analyze visual patterns, stillness, omission, explicit narrative techniques, and sensory undertones in relation to spatial perception. The theoretical framework is based on the phenomenological perspective of Juhani Pallasmaa. During the analytical phase, by focusing on the connection between spatial theory and the visual patterns of the selected samples in relation to the subject, the study enables the reinterpretation of spatial experience in Hopper's paintings. Data were collected through analysis of selected artworks, library resources, and empirical observation of the samples.

4 | Analysis of Hopper's Paintings

4.1 | Night Windows

Night Windows (1928), approximately 91 × 71 cm in size (oil on canvas), was created in the American realism style with modernist and phenomenological tendencies. The painting is part of a private collection and is not currently exhibited in any permanent museum. However, images and digital copies have been made available to researchers through temporary exhibitions and specialized archives.

Night Windows is one of Hopper's seminal works in representing themes of urban solitude, silence, and the disconnection of the modern individual from their surroundings. The painting employs a simple yet meaningful composition, effectively reflecting Hopper's ongoing concern with depicting transitional and unstable urban spaces (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Night windows—Edward Hopper.

4.1.1 | Description of Night Windows

This painting depicts a quiet brick building at night, with one of the second-floor windows illuminated. Beyond this light, the surrounding space is enveloped in complete darkness and stillness. By exploiting the contrast between the artificial interior light and the exterior darkness, Hopper creates a suspended, mysterious atmosphere—a space in which human presence is not a sign of life but of isolation.

Hopper eliminates decorative details and focuses on simple architectural forms, producing a space oscillating between concern and stasis. The woman framed in the window, like other figures in Hopper's works, is depicted anonymously, silently, and introspectively, as if experiencing an existential solitude that arises not from the absence of others but from her disconnection from her surroundings.

While the painting belongs to the tradition of American realism, it transcends superficial realism to offer an intuitive understanding of space, light, and the urban human psyche. *Night Windows* is not merely a representation of everyday life but a visual meditation on the human condition in the modern world—a world where real connection, presence, and experience of place have become rare and weakened. These qualities make the painting an exemplary case for analyzing the phenomenology of place, particularly through Pallasmaa's perspective in *The Eyes of the Skin*.

Time and viewpoint in Hopper's nocturnal paintings invite a calm, static, and strange experience of urban night life. Silence, absence of sound, and the sensory distance between interior and exterior play a central role in spatial construction. By depicting a brick building at night with illuminated, cubic windows, Hopper establishes a detached, observational perspective. Unlike bustling urban scenes, there are no busy streets or moving figures; everything is frozen, silent, and in waiting.

The painting centers on a particular architectural perspective: the brick façade rises in the night, with a few luminous windows—some with partially drawn curtains—revealing glimpses of the interior. The exterior is plunged into complete darkness, suggesting an absence of sound, light, or tactile engagement. This contrast between dark exterior and the limited window light creates a space for distant observation. In Pallasmaa's terms, the relationship between architectural spaces and embodied subjectivity is inverted compared to real, bodily engagement with architecture: we are close to the space, yet we do not live within it. We see without any reciprocal physical or bodily interaction.

From a visual standpoint, light functions as a semiotic and perceptual element in the painting. The warm yellow light spilling from the windows illuminates the interior while generating a mental silence within the night's darkness. The windows become instruments of perception—a transparent but impermeable boundary separating private from public space. As Pallasmaa notes, these windows are a “seeing without bodily connection,” a one-sided, discontinuous experience of place. The architectural form—with vertical wall lines, a regular grid of windows, and a simple yet solid structural pattern—conveys stability, weight, and stasis, reminiscent of Alberti's window [3], [4].

The building emerges not as mere background but as a central figure. Its textured, silent brick surface contrasts with the gentle light and warm interior, creating sensory tension: our bodies are in the darkness, our eyes fixated on the light, yet there is no point of entry. Hopper's color contrast between the blue-gray night and the yellow window light produces an ambiguous, dreamlike space. Shadows consolidate and details gradually fade, lending the painting a sense of memory, as if the viewer is observing a distant recollection trapped behind frosted glass. Within one window, the shadow of a solitary woman appears—vague, silent, and detached from her surroundings. She neither makes eye contact with us nor interacts with her environment. Her body is still, while her mind drifts in absence. She might be reading, standing, or simply caught in a moment of inactivity.

What is evident is a void in her presence: a body in space, disconnected from place. The woman is trapped within the window; the window serves as a boundary rather than a bridge. She neither sees nor is heard and remains devoid of bodily connection. From the exterior, only her shadow is visible, as if witnessing a foggy memory rather than a living person.

4.1.2 | Analysis of the Relationship Between Spaces, Places, and the Subject in Night Windows

Night Windows is one of Hopper's most emblematic works, reflecting a deep phenomenological perspective on human experience within modern urban spaces. Through a delicate yet emotive visual presentation, the painting examines the relationship between interior and exterior space, light and darkness, and human presence and absence. The painting depicts the façade of a residential building, with artificial light emanating from several windows, confronting the viewer with a sense of immediate yet distanced observation.

From the perspective of the phenomenology of place, Hopper creates a seemingly familiar space that, in sensory terms, remains inaccessible. The windows, as Pallasmaa emphasizes in *The Eyes of the Skin*, are transparent yet impermeable. The viewer may see inside but cannot enter or fully experience the space, reflecting what Pallasmaa describes as “seeing without bodily engagement” or the absence of embodied interaction with place. The exterior vantage brings the viewer close to the interior, yet denies genuine spatial experience. The warm yellow light within the dark night evokes a simultaneous sense of familiarity and alienation.

Structurally, the painting is organized around geometric symmetry. The main wall is divided by orderly, parallel windows, and vertical and horizontal lines convey stasis and stillness. The absence of a street or surrounding context isolates the woman as the sole point of light in the nocturnal void. This omission reinforces a sense of placelessness—a feature of modern existence, as Pallasmaa notes: isolated humans trapped in islands of light, disconnected from the totality of place.

Color plays a central role in defining spatial perception. The blue-gray darkness of the exterior contrasts with the warm interior light, establishing a duality: the outside is cold, silent, and impersonal; the interior is warm, bright, yet inaccessible. The artificial light separates the woman from the exterior darkness. This contrast not only signifies separation between inside and outside but also reveals gaps in human experience. According to Pallasmaa, light devoid of sensory engagement can become a source of alienation. Here, the light is neither warm nor inviting; it only produces a detached observational presence.

The window functions not merely as a visual tool but as an impermeable shell, a concept Pallasmaa repeatedly emphasizes in *The Architecture of Image*: it is visible yet denies participation. Hopper represents not the subject itself but traces of human presence through light cues and interior spatial arrangement. The conscious absence of the body embodies Pallasmaa's notion of the "bodyless" space in modern architecture. In the absence of sensory, physical, or auditory engagement, place becomes a purely visual image, losing its lived quality. No sound, movement, or other emotional and sensory relations exist. The viewer is restricted to observation, with no means of bodily or spatial interaction.

The experience of place in this painting is mediated not through physical presence but through distanced viewing. This visual experience, lacking direct bodily engagement, constitutes a form of placelessness—space exists, but place does not. Pallasmaa emphasizes that real architecture should engage sensory perception, embedding space within body, mind, unconscious, and external sensory experience. In *Night Windows*, this is reversed: the space remains outside us, and we are silent observers.

The painting represents the modern human enclosed within a building, separated from society, engaged with the self, and confined within architecture designed not for living but for distancing. Hopper visually conveys concepts that Pallasmaa critiques in modern architecture: elimination of the body, absence of reciprocal physical interaction, and suppression of sensory memory. The woman in the window embodies stasis rather than life; she is visible but lacks bodily and physical presence—a presence that exists but is not lived for the viewer.

Regarding her presence in space, Pallasmaa would describe such moments as "discontinuous inhabitation of place": the body is present, yet sensory awareness, spatial participation, and emotional contact are absent. Her posture narrates disconnection: slightly slumped shoulders, minimal bend, or complete stillness. Her attire is simple, shadowed, and partially obscured; her face is absent, preventing empathy. She represents not merely an individual but the psychological condition of the modern human at night: behind illuminated glass, immersed in inevitable inner isolation. The warm interior light contrasts with the cold exterior, producing a false sense of warmth that conveys entrapment. She stands in a timeless frame, observing the night's silence or engaged in inner dialogue. This stasis separates time from place and body from experience.

The woman is neither fully present nor absent; she remains like a memory framed within the window, barely perceptible. This palpable absence is central to Pallasmaa's concept of lived space: spaces that, instead of being filled with sensory contact, are only seen and devoid of meaning.

The narrative of *Night Windows* centers on a lit room within a house in the foreground. The viewer is positioned at a distance, and the woman behind the window is not alone but left isolated—cut off from the observer's body, reciprocal physical interaction, sound, and spatial participation.

Table 1. Analysis of the relationship between spaces and places in relation to the subject in night windows.

No.	Aspect	Analysis
1	Space	Urban night space; suspended and mysterious; interior; absence; placelessness; isolated
2	Place	Brick building; window; impermeable; one-sided; lacking physical interaction; distancing
3	Subject	Woman; existential solitude; disconnection from environment; confined within window; discontinuous inhabitation
4	Relationship between Space, Place, and Subject	Passive observer; absence of physical interaction; isolation; discontinuity; bodyless experience of place

4.2 | Movie Theater in New York

Movie Theater in New York (1939), measuring 101 × 81 cm (oil on canvas), was created in the American realism style with an approach toward subjective expressionism. The painting is housed at the Museum of

Modern Art in New York. This work is one of Edward Hopper's most important pieces in portraying the psychological complexity of the modern human within urban spaces during the height of the Great Depression in the United States. The painting effectively reflects the tension between public entertainment and individual isolation in modern American society (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Movie theater in new york– edward hopper.

4.2.1 | Description of Movie Theater in New York

This painting depicts the interior of a cinema in the pre–World War II era. It reflects Hopper's repeated observations of urban cinemas, combining visual observation with introspective and contemplative impressions. The theater appears dimly lit, with a few silent viewers watching a film. On the right side of the frame, a bright, columned hallway shows a young woman in blue standing quietly.

The style is American realism with layers of psychological phenomenology and poetic spatial composition. Hopper, as in his other works, uses contrasts of light and shadow, elimination of unnecessary elements, simple architectural forms, and controlled color use to convey the lived experience of the modern human in urban space—filled with silence, solitude, pause, and reflection. The painting goes beyond representing a mere space; it portrays human presence in modern architecture, emphasizing bodily experience, sensory memory, and inhabitation. From a phenomenological perspective, especially in Pallasmaa's theory, the work engages not only the eyes but the body, silence, light, and solitude, leading the observer beyond a purely visual experience.

The scene is divided into two main sections: on the right, the bright hallway where a female attendant leans against the wall, deeply absorbed in thought, hand on her chin, gaze downcast; on the left, the theater hall with red velvet seats and shadowed spectators, whose faces are unseen, appearing as silent, nameless presences. The composition, though asymmetrical, is highly balanced, with contrasts between the hallway's golden walls, bright lamp light, deep red seats, and the blue of the woman's dress, emphasizing her isolation. The architectural space is simple, contemplative, and stark, in contrast to flashy cinematic staging. Vertical forms, thick walls, columns, and perspective lines create a heavy, connected spatial experience—a space that, according to Pallasmaa, is perceived not only visually but through the body (hapticity).

Light is not merely for illumination but also carries semantic weight. In the hall, projector light evokes cinematic memory, while wall lights near the woman simulate morning light, creating a sense of mental

wakefulness despite being artificial. The boundary between watching the film and inhabiting the space is blurred. The silent, stationary woman, along with the architectural texture and surrounding light, constructs a contemplative, isolated environment reflecting lived experience within the space. The scene represents not just a theater but the human condition, combining immersion and detachment, aligning with Pallasmaa's notion of lived space.

4.2.2 | Analysis of the relationship between spaces, places, and the subject in movie theater in new york

From Pallasmaa's perspective, space is not purely visual but is perceived through the body, memory, and sensory experience. Architecture and space gain meaning when inhabited (Pallasmaa, 2015: 21). In this painting, the cinema transforms into a space of mental experience—static and silent yet full of presence and absence. The wall lamp illuminating the woman symbolizes awareness, memory, and contemplation, while the theater's darkness portrays the unstable observation of social space and lack of interaction.

Light shapes meaning and spatial memory, delineating the woman's individual world from the public environment. The formal language, with vertical and horizontal lines in walls and architectural elements, evokes geometric order derived from modern architecture. Human presence in this framework transforms it from a mere visual pattern into a lived, sensorial space, consistent with Pallasmaa's concept connecting memory, meaning, architecture, and the body.

The standing woman becomes an architectural element herself—part of the pattern yet distinct, emphasizing isolation and reflection, not absolute solitude but in a public space. The theater is transformed from a social space to one of introspection. This shift—from public to internalized space—reflects Pallasmaa's idea that architecture can be more inward than outward, a lived experience situated in body and memory.

Hopper removes social interaction, replacing filled space with emptiness, converting public space into a venue for contemplation and individual experience. Warm tones in the woman's area (gold, ochre, lamp light) contrast with the dark blues and blacks of the theater, demarcating her mental space. Using architectural forms, directional lighting, and suspended spatial composition, Hopper guides the viewer into an experience simultaneously public and private, familiar and strange, real and mental. Like good architecture in Pallasmaa's terms, this work communicates silently through the senses.

Table 2. Analysis of the relationship between spaces, places, and the subject in movie theater in New York.

No.	Aspect	Analysis
1	Space	Nighttime, dimly lit, suspenseful and mysterious; interior; situated yet isolated
2	Place	Interior walls, theater hall; detached, static; illuminated by artificial light
3	Subject	Woman; reflective and suspended; present in the environment without spatial engagement; discontinuous inhabitation
4	Relationship between Space, Place, and Subject	Isolation amid public entertainment; lack of sensory connection despite physical presence; detachment

4.3 | Nighthawks

Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* (1982), measuring 152 × 82 cm (oil on canvas), was created in a modern realist style with a phenomenological approach, reflecting the social and psychological crises during World War II.

This painting is one of the most famous works of the 20th century and Hopper's signature piece, housed at the Art Institute of Chicago. It has inspired countless cinematic, literary, and artistic works and is frequently analyzed as a symbol of modern solitude, urban placelessness, and interpersonal silence.

Hopper completed the painting in his New York studio after a series of preparatory sketches. *Nighthawks* depicts the nocturnal life of individuals inside a diner situated on a quiet street corner in New York City (Fig. 3).

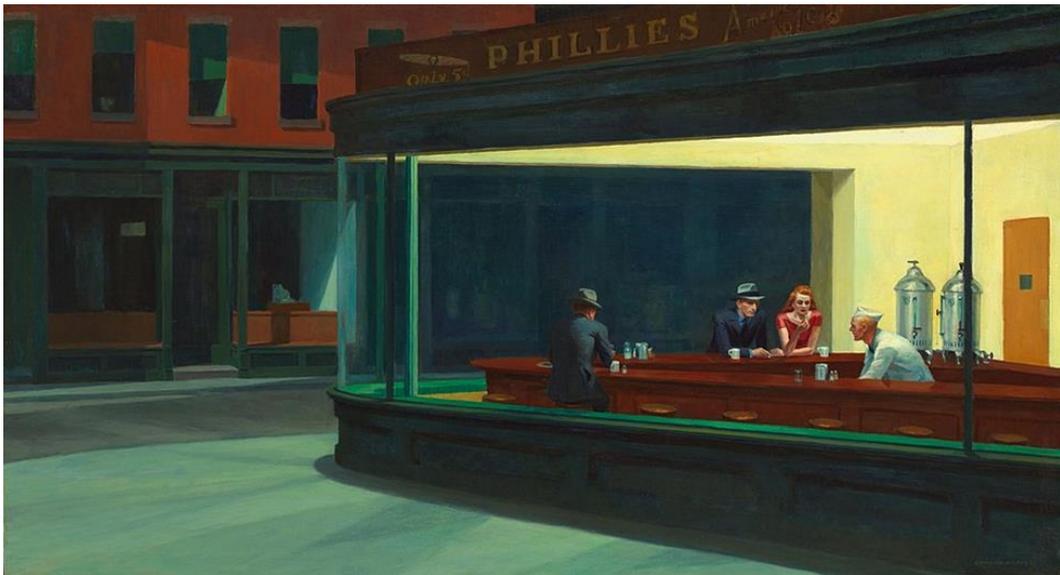


Fig. 3. Nighthawks—edward hopper.

4.3.1 | Description of nighthawks

One of Edward Hopper's most recognizable and influential works takes us into the heart of a quiet, deserted urban night. The image depicts an exterior view of a nighttime diner located at a street corner. The diner is made entirely of glass walls, which eliminate the boundary between inside and outside, yet simultaneously create a sense of separation between the two. Inside the diner, three patrons are seated: a lone man on the left, a woman in a red dress in the center, and another man wearing a hat, seemingly the woman's companion. Behind the counter, a male server stands, engaged in a silent form of interaction or service. None of the figures make eye contact with one another or with the viewer. Interactions between them are cold and disconnected, as if each person is enclosed in their own world.

The diner is illuminated with artificial yellow light, contrasting sharply with the dark blue and green tones of the surrounding night. This light darkens objects yet does not provide warmth; it merely emphasizes their presence. The exterior space is an empty, silent street. No pedestrians, vehicles, or even signs are visible, and the windows of buildings across the street are dark, with shutters drawn. The city is submerged in silence and stillness. The composition is precise and enclosed. The painter positions himself at a separate viewpoint, observing the people within the scene from an external distance without being noticed.

The main scene presents a diagonal perspective of the diner set in a quiet, motionless street. The strong artificial interior light contrasts starkly with the darkness outside, creating a dual space that is simultaneously inviting and repelling. The viewpoint is slightly oblique and from the outside, making the viewer feel as though observing from a distance rather than entering the space. The transparent glass invites us in, yet the glass itself acts as a barrier. Colors are carefully selected: the artificial interior light, cold green and brown tones of the exterior, the warm red of the woman's dress, and muted blues in the men's coats and the background. The colors convey the emotional atmosphere of the space.

There is solitude, distance, and a quiet, restrained sadness. Forms are simple, volumes geometric and angular, and textures smooth and polished. No decorative or unrelated elements are present; everything serves the purpose of creating the atmosphere. At first glance, the image may seem like a depiction of an ordinary

moment, but in reality, it is a suspended moment, fully phenomenological: there is no explicit narrative, no specific action, no beginning or end. What flows through the image is the experience of being in a place—a suspended presence in an urban nocturnal space. The diner, as a visual focal point between interior and exterior, becomes a stage for silence, pause, and reflection. The transparent windows shape the viewer's experience. By removing any narrative or distracting imagery, Hopper confronts us with pure visuality: with the light that defines the space, the silence that creates meaning, and the distance that questions human relationships.

4.3.2 | Analysis of the relationship between spaces, places, and the subject in *Nighthawks*

This painting, utilizing modern urban space, strong contrasts of light and darkness, and geometric form, depicts the isolation of the modern human and their fragmented experience of place. From Pallasmaa's perspective, perceived space must be experienced through the body and senses, while Hopper's interior space conveys a sense of bodily detachment. In this painting, despite the presence of three patrons and the café attendant, no real relationship exists between them. Bodies are motionless, interactions are disconnected, and dialogue is absent.

The large glass window defining the boundary between inside and outside has a dual function: on one hand, it allows the viewer to see inside, but on the other, it acts as a barrier to entry (Pallasmaa, 2015: 21). In fact, the space is seen but not experienced. This is exactly what Pallasmaa refers to as “non-contact transparency” or the “impermeable skin” of a place. Lighting plays a key role in conveying the spatial experience. The fluorescent interior light intensifies the artificial quality of the environment. Dominant colors inside the diner include yellowish-green, white, and dull red, which against the dark blue and black of the street create a cold, isolated effect. This contrast not only defines the spatial boundaries but also evokes feelings of loneliness, disconnectedness, and placelessness for the viewer.

According to Pallasmaa, spaces that are only visually perceived rather than physically or sensorially engaged are fragmented and emotionally detached [5]. This characteristic is clearly evident in *Nighthawks*. Geometric forms in the painting reinforce this theme. The combination of horizontal and oblique lines, the triangular arrangement of the characters, and the angled layout of the café help stabilize the sense of stillness and frozen space. No visible entrance is depicted for the diner, implying that the space exists but is inaccessible. From a phenomenological spatial perspective, this absence of entry symbolizes the modern human's inability to experience place as a lived and re-lived space.

Hopper, through phenomenological realism, portrays the crises of the modern era: space as a theatrical stage (staged lighting), place as an urban non-place (removal of lived qualities), subjects as immobile objects (dehumanization of relationships), and interactions as a display of disconnection: transparency without reciprocal bodily engagement [6].

In *Nighthawks*, the space is simultaneously inviting and repelling. The transparency of the glass allows for visual access but prevents sensorial experience. Artificial lighting transforms the interior into a stage-like scene, isolating the subjects. The diner becomes a modern non-place. The absence of human activity and urban signs conveys a sense of placelessness. Hopper, by removing an entry, makes physical access impossible. The subjects are reduced to decorative objects. The woman's red dress is the only warm element in the composition, yet she too remains in emotional isolation. The men's hats symbolize standardized urban identities. The relationship of the subjects to the space is paradoxical; despite occupying a shared space, their presence is disconnected. The glass windows serve as a metaphor for human boundaries. The interior resembles the glass cage of modernity. Hopper, rather than presenting place as a lived environment, transforms it into a platform for the absent gaze.

Stylistically, the painting is classified within American Realism but with deep phenomenological undertones critiquing modernity, urban life, and the erosion of reciprocal human relationships. *Nighthawks* is not merely an urban scene but a visual embodiment of anxiety, silence, and the isolation of the industrial age. Concepts highlighted in Pallasmaa's thought regarding sense-deprived architecture and disconnected places are evident

here. Inspired by Pallasmaa's theory of "sensory and emotional architecture," the painting demonstrates how modernity, by privileging visual dominance, neglects other sensory dimensions of place. Cool colors (blue, green) contrasted with artificial yellow light reveal the tension between human warmth and technological coldness.

Table 3. Analysis of the relationship between spaces and places in relation to the subject in nighthawks.

Row	Title	Analysis
1	Space	Interior of the café with yellow artificial light, dark and empty exterior, transparent glass walls, geometric and angular composition
2	Place	Nighttime restaurant on a street corner, absence of urban elements (signs, cars, pedestrians), dark windows of opposite buildings, no defined entrance
3	Subject	Four separate characters (three customers and a server), no eye contact, motionless postures, formal clothing, symbolic colors (red, blue)
4	Relationship between space, place, and subject	Physical separation of subjects from each other, non-intersecting gazes, placement at separate tables, server as the only standing figure

4.4 | Comparison of the Range of Shared Features in Night Windows, New York Movie, and Nighthawks

The locations in Hopper's paintings, according to his theory, include key characteristics such as the process of dehumanization, expressed through windows and the act of confinement in cinematic light, and the suspension in darkness and cafés through architectural glass. In these paintings, architecture is treated not as a background for human relations but as an obstacle. The subjects' bodies are placeless, exhibiting physical presence without lived quality, and light functions metaphorically in all three paintings, signaling sensation without generating it. These paintings display a dialectical sequence of modernity's crises: isolation in private spheres (windows), suspension in semi-public spaces (New York Movie), and freezing in public places (cafés); Pallasmaa calls this the gradual death of sensory and emotional experience of place [7].

Night Windows (1928) by Edward Hopper represents the contrast of opposing spaces and sensory disconnection. The painting, by creating a strong contrast between the interior (bright, warm) and exterior (dark, cold), illustrates the dialectic of presence/absence. According to Pallasmaa, this space represents "seeing without bodily engagement"; the viewer sees but cannot have a sensory experience. The window light does not illuminate but acts as an invisible wall separating the woman from the outside world. This light lacks human warmth and emphasizes modern isolation. The painting carries a memory trapped in placelessness.

The brick building, despite being occupied, lacks lived quality. Pallasmaa calls this condition "placelessness"; a space that appears familiar but cannot truly be inhabited. The vertical lines of windows and walls evoke confinement. Windows act as impermeable shells, blocking interaction. In this situation, the subject is seen in existential isolation in the modern era. The woman behind the window has physical presence, like a shadow, yet is sensorially absent. This "absence" (Pallasmaa) reflects the rupture of the modern human from their environment. Her upright posture and the absence of facial display reduce her to a decorative object, critiquing the standardization of urban identities. The window appears as an existential boundary: glass allows visual access but obstructs connection. This transparency/confinement dialectic illustrates the crisis of communication in the modern world. The viewer, like the woman, is suspended: close yet unable to enter. This reflects "discontinuous living" [8], [9].

In Night Windows, Hopper combines realism and phenomenology to present a vision of the modern city, where space is reduced to a visual stage rather than being sensory; place becomes a non-relational placeless environment. The subject experiences existential loneliness passively, with connection possible only through the window. The painting reflects modernity's failure to create sensory spaces. By removing warmth, sound,

and movement, Hopper visualizes the silence of the industrial city—a city where people are confined but not truly alive. *Night Windows* prefigures Pallasmaa's theories on the necessity of restoring sensory dimensions to urban design.

In *New York Movie* (1939), light is not only illuminative but also meaning-producing. Pallasmaa describes this as “light as a spatial language.” The architecture, stripped of detail, becomes a tool for mental experience. Light acts as the “second body” in a “third space”: the contrast between the dark theater and the bright corridor generates a mental “third space,” which Pallasmaa calls the “architectural memory.” Warm light in the woman's area functions as a “second skin” enabling sensory experience (Pallasmaa). Light here becomes a visual prison; warm window light, according to Pallasmaa's concept of “light without warmth,” creates a space that invites yet rejects, an illumination devoid of human warmth [4].

Place in this work is multi-functional: both public space and a domain of solitude. Pallasmaa terms this “alienating architecture,” where public places become containers for individual isolation. Vertical wall lines reflect Pallasmaa's concept of “active silence” in architecture, allowing reflection. Architecture laments without sound. The main subject (woman) exists in a state of existential suspension: neither in public space nor entirely outside it. Pallasmaa calls this the “borderline subject,” revealing physical and mental boundaries. Film viewers in the darkness are identity-less subjects of modernity. The woman's posture embodies Pallasmaa's theory of the “third skin” of architecture—a body enclosed in architecture but without sensory connection. The subject-space relationship is paradoxical: architecture both envelops and rejects. Pallasmaa calls this “unfinished sensory engagement.” The woman, as an internal observer, is both witness and part of the space. Her passive-active body expresses Pallasmaa's idea of “present and absent”: the body is both present in the space and transcending it [10], [11].

The tripartite spatial division in the painting—with three distinct zones (dark theater / bright corridor / transitional area)—creates a perceptual hierarchy. This arrangement, according to Pallasmaa, illustrates spatial polyphony, simultaneous public and private experiences. Projector light in the theater, warm corridor light, and soft wall light each represent different mental states. Pallasmaa calls this “light as spatial memory” [1]. The cinema, despite its public function, becomes a space for isolation. This paradox is the modern placelessness, where public spaces lose their lived quality. Vertical and horizontal lines act like theatrical frames, confining viewers to pre-assigned roles. The woman standing in the corridor is suspended between the theater audience and solitude. This intermediary subject symbolizes the rupture of the modern human from their environment. Physical presence without identity reflects the standardization of human relations in public spaces. Although the theater lacks glass walls, the lighting creates invisible limits between the woman and the audience. These sensory boundaries prevent real interaction [12], [13].

The woman leaning against the wall is both present in the space and withdrawn, representing the existential suspension of modern humans. Hopper, by combining realism and phenomenology, transforms the cinema into a symbol of industrial society, where environment produces isolation rather than connection. Place shifts from a context for interaction to a stage for observation [14]. Interaction occurs not through dialogue but from a safe distance.

New York Movie, as Pallasmaa notes, demonstrates modern architecture's failure to create sensory spaces. Hopper depicts urban alienation through silence, artificial light, and frozen bodies. The cinema becomes not merely a painting but a visual manifesto against the insensitivity of modern architecture, urging reflection on the relationship between body, space, and meaning.

Nighthawks depicts a sensory and visual rupture. The painting, with its explicit spatial division between inside (bright, artificial) and outside (dark, empty), creates a strong contrast that is simultaneously inviting and repelling. This duality reflects bodily-disconnected transparency: a space seen but not experienced. Yellow artificial light in the café lacks human warmth and emphasizes the coldness of social relations. The light highlights objects without creating a sense of belonging. Despite its social function, the café becomes a non-relational space. The absence of a defined entrance and the empty street reinforce placelessness. Geometric

lines and transparent glass create physical and psychological boundaries. This architecture confines humans without enabling interaction.

The four characters in the café, with no eye contact or verbal interaction, are reduced to decorative objects. Their bodies are immobile, postures rigid, and formal clothing (men's hats, woman's red dress) symbolizes standardized urban identities that erase individuality. Windows, as invisible limits, allow visual access that is non-sensory.

This dialectic of seeing/confinement illustrates the crisis of communication in the modern era. The interior functions as a theatrical stage: patrons are like mannequins performing roles without interacting with each other or the environment [15]. Hopper, in *Nighthawks*, through realism and phenomenology, presents a modern city in which space is reduced to a visual stage instead of being sensory. Place becomes a non-relational environment. The subjects, passively present, experience loneliness amidst others. Connection occurs not through bodily presence or sound but only through glass. This painting reflects modernity's failure to create sensory spaces. By removing warmth, sound, and motion, Hopper portrays the visual silence of the industrial city: humans are present but not living.

Nighthawks is not merely a depiction of a nighttime café but a visual critique of insensate architecture and disconnected human relations in the modern era. It prefigures Pallasmaa's theories on the necessity of restoring sensory experience to urban spaces. The dual space is simultaneously inviting and repelling. Glass transparency enables vision but blocks sensory experience. Artificial lighting turns the interior into a theatrical stage in which subjects are isolated. The place becomes a modern placeless environment. The lack of human activity and urban markers conveys a sense of placelessness. Hopper eliminates entrances, rendering access impossible. The subjects are reduced to decorative objects. The woman's red clothing is the only warm element but she remains emotionally isolated. Men's hats symbolize standardized urban identities. The subjects' relationship with space is paradoxical: occupying shared space yet being unrelated. Glass windows act as a metaphor for human boundaries. The interior resembles the glass cage of modernity.

Table 4. Comparative analysis of Edward Hopper's paintings.

Row	Title	Windows at Night (1928)	New York Movie Theater (1939)	Nighthawks (1982)
1	Space	Contrast between interior (warm/bright) and exterior (cold/dark)	Three-part division (dark theater / illuminated corridor / transitional zone)	Division of interior (artificial/bright) and exterior (empty/dark)
2	Place	Non-place, obstructive architecture, placelessness	Multi-functional modern non-place	Disconnected, lacking entrance, empty street, glass cage of modernity
3	Subject	Woman as object, lacking presence, existential isolation behind glass	Woman in suspended presence, viewers anonymous	Decorative objects, disconnected, theatrical passivity
4	Relationship	Partial sensory engagement with interaction from safe distance	Partial sensory engagement with interaction from safe distance	Fragmented relationships, unrelated presence in shared space

5 | Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the relationship between image and place in Edward Hopper's paintings, using Juhani Pallasmaa's phenomenological theory as a framework. Three notable works of Hopper were analyzed: *Windows at Night*, *New York Movie Theater*, and *Nighthawks*. The research employed a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach based on a sensorial-corporeal reading of space, which finds tangible expression in Hopper's works.

The central research question was: How do Hopper's paintings—*Windows at Night*, *New York Movie Theater*, and *Nighthawks*—align with and can be analyzed through Pallasmaa's theory of lived space?

The analysis indicates that Hopper's visual language depicts the experience of place as a sensorial and mental existence. However, due to a predominance of vision-centered perception, human figures appear disconnected from lived spaces and bodily senses; they are separated from the environment because of the lack of physical perceptual experience. The findings suggest that in Hopper's paintings, spaces are not designed as backgrounds for human presence but as settings that reflect psychological states, isolation, social disconnection, and inaccessibility.

Transparent yet impermeable boundaries (e.g., windows), angular forms, rigid architectural lines, cold artificial lighting, absence of sound, and lack of bodily human interactions all contribute to a sense of placelessness, emotional detachment, and de-corporealization—a concept Pallasmaa terms dehumanization of space and visual experience without bodily engagement.

In *Nighthawks*, the viewer faces a space that, despite bright interior lighting, is inaccessible and non-interactive. In *Windows at Night*, the warm interior light and the stationary woman in the window frame exist suspended between inclusion and exclusion. In morning light, the woman's body is immersed in precise architectural illumination but detached from the city and surroundings. In *New York Movie Theater*, the female guide stands in the light, distanced from the collective experience of film viewing.

In all three paintings, places are transformed into stillness, reflection, and contemplation rather than action and lived experience. They are not repositories of memory but suspend memory, remembrance, and recollection. According to Pallasmaa, architecture and lived spaces gain meaning only when they are experienced through the body, bodily presence, memory, and perception.

Despite their realist visual language, Hopper's paintings convey an experience of the placeless human—a modern individual who, amidst artificial light, rigid forms, and pervasive silence, exists not in space but in a representation of space. In other words, Hopper's works do not depict places; they represent the absence of place—a visual experience devoid of warmth, relation, and sensory presence.

Overall, the analyses show that Hopper's paintings align radically with Pallasmaa's concepts. Through form, light, separation, and the elimination of sound, Hopper portrays the experience of living in postmodern spaces, where humans are physically present but alienated from place. The study emphasizes the role of visual art in representing bodily experience in relation to space and subject, demonstrating how phenomenological theory can provide a creative framework for analyzing modernist painters such as Hopper.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

All data are included in the text.

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