

LEARNING FROM PHENOMENOLOGY AND PRAXEOLOGY

Towards Sensuous Public Spaces

Student

Luyuan Shen (4846184)

Complex Projects

New York Midtown Studio

I. INTRODUCTION

Research-methodology in Architectural Studies

Methodology is not a new term to me. Since I was in the high school, it has been introduced and elaborated in the philosophy course. Nevertheless, till I attended this course, I suddenly realized that I have always overlooked the role it plays in architectural researches.

The awareness of research methods is literally important in architectural practices. As our projects respect its culture and context, architectural research is needed before towards design process. A proper research method can not only provide the systematic and theoretical guidance but also trigger the efficiency to the possible solutions. Without a clear plan on research methods, it somehow might lead to a detour on the whole research process. Besides, during the architectural research and design, the problems and challenges which we faced could become precious experience to develop further on the epistemic frameworks of research methodology. The research methodology and architectural practices could influence and benefit to each other.

The lectures of this course fascinated me a lot. It clarified the terminology of some common research methods. And meanwhile, case studies worked together with lecturers' explanations offered a deeper understanding of the theories. Especially, it often reminded me some similar scenarios during my own study. It did arouse my awareness to find some theoretic support before starting the site analysis and help me coming up with the research question and research methods. During the thesis research, I realized that, in addition to find the "what", the "how" also matters.

Towards Sensuous Public Spaces

New York is a city with huge architectural diversity, where every taste is catered for. When people talking about Manhattan midtown, the image will pop up to the mind with the regularity of the urban grid system, the orderliness of the street profiles, the precision of the massive building blocks, and maybe the most dynamic and complex community in the world. People in this city do have very rich public life. Thus, my personal fascination is about studying the public life in the lower east area of midtown Manhattan.

In complex studio, we learn to observe the city from different scales and cultural backgrounds and build narratives to operate with diverse urban contexts. To seize the Zeitgeist, and response to it.

Changes keep happening, whether it's good or not. However, what globalization brings to people might be a homogeneous physical environment. Can people tell the difference between the Time Square in New York and Hong Kong? Can people distinguish a skyscraper in New York or elsewhere around the world? Will the future occupy with this homogeneity? As what many people predicted in the sci-fi films, to pursue efficiency, the competition between standardization and personality might never end. And finally, it may lead to either minimalism or "high tech low life" society. Even worse, our future might be spaceless due to the fast development of VR technology. As people more and more rely on and addicted to immersive experience, the physical buildings might not be needed anymore. Is this what we want? What's the position of public spaces in the future? How can we build bridges with the past and future public spaces?

Therefore, my research question is *How to understand public life in the site to create sensuous public spaces*. Sensuous public spaces are places where you can still touch, smell, hear, where can shelter you whether it's sunny or rainy, where you can emotionally feel security and happiness. To achieve this goal, the way to read and analyze the existing public spaces becomes important.

II. THE SELECTED RESEARCH METHODS AND THEIR MOTIVATION

To read the public spaces, the chosen research methods are phenomenology and praxeology, which are subjective and objective approaches respectively. As the goal is to create sensuous and affective public space, the main approach is more emotional by using the phenomenology, and the praxeology which act like a balance as an addition.

Phenomenology

Inspired by Bernard Tschumi's *The Manhattan Transcripts* project, which he tried to find the relationships among space, movements and events in New York City, my approach to research deeper

of public life in the site might also be more from bottom-up and personal investigations, and to experience the city by human senses in a more emotional and intangible way. The phenomenological approach is here to be introduced.

The philosophy I adopted is the branch about the phenomenology of perception, which was discussed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It emphasized the human experience and poetic considerations of space. How would people mentally remember a city? According to Kevin Lynch's theory, the image of the city relied on meaningful symbols and collective memories. The city contains symbols carrying values behind, which often visually repeat and repeat again. And when people describe a city, it's always based on human's activities, just as what it stated in the book *Invisible cities*. When people experience a city, they could observe the intangible characters through different sensory perception. As Merleau-Ponty said, "The sense of self, strengthened by art and architecture, also permits us to engage fully in the mental dimensions of dream, imagination and desire."

The trial of measuring tools is made to draw the sound map and smell map of the lower east Manhattan midtown. During the site visit in New York, I recorded the personal experience of the sensory map by using the camera. It helps to find the acoustic context and the scentscape of the site.



Praxeology

People's activities and behaviors formed the unique public image of the city. In the urban magnet theory, Mark Holland believed that, "the people are the place, activity is the new community." By using this praxeology, the research will focus on how people actually gather and their behaviors make the public spaces, and the relationship between public spaces and people's public life where takes place in them. Fieldtrip and site-collected hard data would be applied.

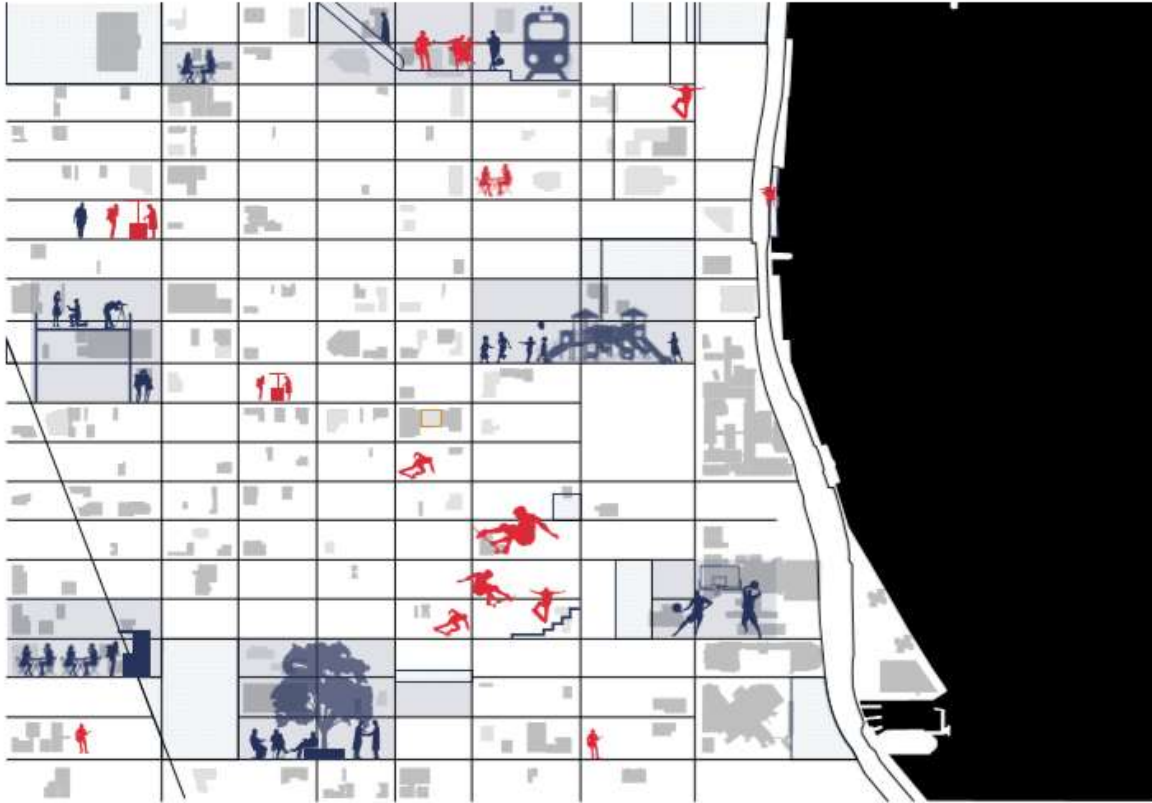
In New York City, most public activities, whether planned or spontaneous, occur in open public spaces, like parks, playgrounds. The primary functions of the planned public spaces depend on their context, whether it's residential or commercial. The Bryant Park, the Greeley Square Park and the Madison Square Park, which located near the west commercial area, contained more retail services and targeted for more diverse users. Both residents and tourists could enjoy the space at the same time. Meanwhile, there are many other public places surrounding it to support the main open space. The St. Vartan Park, the Robert Moses Playground and the Bellevue South Park are more served as neighbourhood community space. There are many exercise facilities for residents, such as basketball court and children's playground. As the users are residents, these parks are more gated and highly controlled for maintenance concern.

Compared to the vibrant and dynamic public life in the larger open space, the most relevant form of spontaneous activity, the street life, is slowly vanishing but still ubiquitous. Hot dog might be the most famous New York street food, where you can easily find it in the street food carts. These hot dog stands even became one of the "instagrammable spaces". And the "dirty water dog" became a must-try street food whenever people visited New York. Still, the hot dog stands are now becoming less and less. The skateboarding culture also faced the similar situation. What makes it even worse is that the skateboarding is illegal and prohibited in the New York. Thus, I mapped the public activities based on

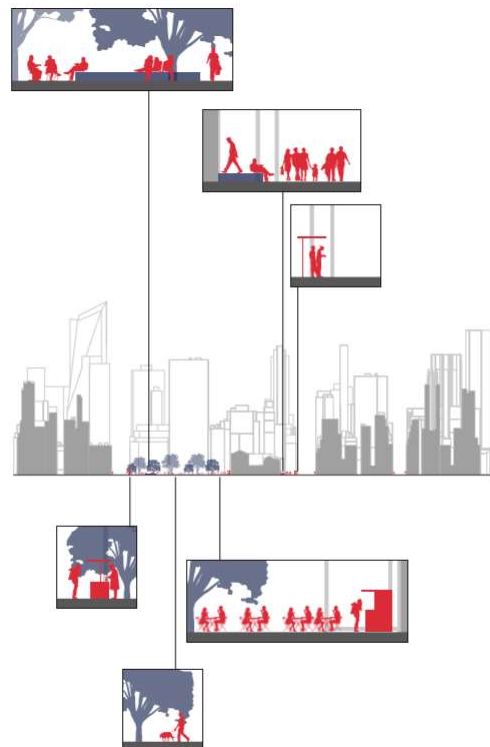
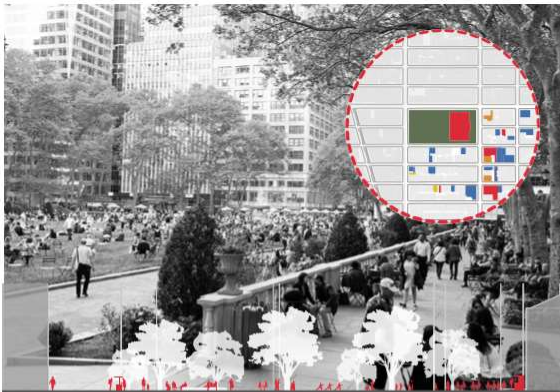
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the observations, which not only highlights each planned public space but also some typical informal spontaneous activities.

People won't always act and behave as what architects or planners designed and expected. To understand the city correctly more, the site observations and field experiments in praxeological approach do make sense.



BRYANT PARK



Section 1:6000

III. HISTORICALLY AND THEORETICALLY EVOLVEMENT

Phenomenology

Architectural phenomenology began in the 1950s and developed fast in the late 1970s and 1980s. In America, this movement started at the Princeton University with a PhD paper *Water and Architecture* in 1958, which referred much from Gaston Bachelard's philosophy. In Europe, the *Casabella Continuità* journal, which edited by a Milanese architect called Ernesto Nathan Rogers, fostered the development of the architectural phenomenology.

There are two main branches in the architectural phenomenology, which are Martin Heidegger's "the relationship between being and dwelling" and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "the phenomenology of perception".

Heidegger's idea mainly in this paper *Building Dwelling Thinking*, and his theory of phenomenology of dwelling influenced much on Christian Norberg-Schulz. In 1979, Norberg-Schulz published a book, which is named *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. He emphasized the spirit of place, which broadly expressed in 1980s.

However, my focus is on the phenomenology of perception, which was first explored by Merleau-Ponty in his book *Phenomenology of Perception* in 1945. He elaborated the term of "sensation", "association", "projection of memories", "attention" and "judgement" to introduce the phenomenal field. In 1962, Steen Eiler Rasmussen further explained the application of phenomenology in architecture in *Experiencing Architecture*. He tried to express his idea of reading the space through colours, rhythms, textures, daylight and acoustic qualities. Similar approaches and statements could also be found in Juhani Pallasmaa and Steven Holl's work later. Juhani Pallasmaa introduce the seven senses in his article *An Architecture of the Seven Senses* in 1994, which are "sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and a sense of movement he describes as skeleton and muscle". Together with his book *the Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* which released in 2005, he gradually builds a framework of sensory design. Steven Holl is another important architect and theorist in this movement of architectural phenomenology. His understanding also rooted in the theory of Merleau-Ponty. His publications, like *Anchoring*(1989), *Intertwining*(1996), *Parallax*(2000), not only showed his theoretical thoughts, but also his practices on applying this theory into reality. He could be seen as the first practitioner of architectural phenomenology in this branch. He constantly explores the relationship of light and shadow, the graphics and colours, the sound, the water, into his daily architectural practices. It's obvious to find these experiments through each of his works. Besides, Peter Zumthor also have plenty of good architectural exploration on light in his works.

In conclusion, the research on architectural phenomenology was mainly based on purely theoretical works in early stage. But the integrating of theory and practice gradually appeared later.

Praxeology

Praxeology refers to the study of human action and conduct. Normally, the word Praxeology was first officially raised by Louis Bourdeau in his *Théorie des sciences: Plan de Science intégrale* (1882), although it has been already appeared several times before. However, Alfred V. Espinas, a French thinker, was the person who gave the modern definition of Praxeology in 1890. Since then, the research on the praxeology has been gradually evolved into several major branches. Main practices and applications were still in the economic realm. Especially the Austrian Economics. They relied much on the praxeology in development of their economic theory. During that time, one of the economist, Ludwig von Mises, proposed and promoted the praxeology first time as a theory. Till then, it became really known to all.

IV. POSITIONING

Advantages and Benefits

Through a sensory research approach, the benefit of phenomenology is distinct. To understand the public spaces by truly physically sense it, we can then easily notice the materiality of each objects and the physical environment, and the beauty of every architectural details. Different senses together with different layer of spatial qualities can create a better living environment.

Furthermore, when phenomenology and praxeology encountered and integrated, it can conduct a more comprehensive architectural methodology. They somehow complemented each other perfectly.

Limitations and Challenges

It's also crucial that both phenomenology and praxeology have limitations. Both of them are focus on the study of humans and research on the human scale. On the one hand, this caused the research becoming too personal. For example, in the phenomenological research, the view of observers would always be different and uncontrollable. It might be varied depend on different weather conditions, different group of people, even people in different mood. It would never be neutral. In praxeology, human's behaviors are also unpredictable. Even if the database is large, there is still not the exactly accurate measuring tool somehow. On the other hand, it leads to fragmentary observations. The research method should not just look on one scale. Diverse scales could be applied, from larger scale like urban scale to smaller scale like building elements. A more holistic approach is needed.

Visions and Potentials

As the initial research question is *How to understand public life in the site to create sensuous public spaces*, my chosen approach tended to a more emotional and subjective way during the overall research. I realized that there is no need to limit myself to this scope. Design approach could be separate from the research approach. The research methods adopted during each process of doing an architectural project can be altered.

Still, the research question can narrow down to a more specific scenario. New York city rains a lot. It is said that there are 1/3 of days in one year rainy. That means although New York people love to stay outdoor and enjoy outdoor activities, they do need shelters during wet weather. How can the public survive in different weather conditions? How to create sensuous public spaces can satisfy people's needs in different weathers? As the site is located on the waterfront, how can architecture react when facing the flood risk and extreme weather? These are the questions and the possible next steps which remain to think.

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