

PHENOMENOLOGY AS A METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

A phenomenological research when exploring the potential environmental crises in the New York city

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Thesis "The essential environmental crisis in Midtown-Manhattan"

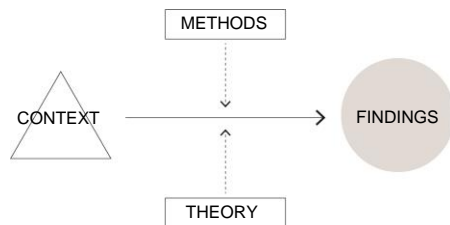
Lecture Series on Research Methods

I THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH MECHODOLOGY

Research, as a scientific and systematic investigation for relevant information on a specific topic, is a movement of discovery that brings us from the known to the unknown. In other words, the primary objective of research is to discover answers to questions through a series of applicable methods and procedures.

Architecture design is an interactive process which highly rely on a large spectrum of social situations. The process not only deals with the architectural knowledge within its own epistemological sense, but also involves other areas, such as environmental, cultural and social space, and economical and political issues. According to Bryan Lawson, a professor of Sheffield University, there are basically three phases of research to make architectural studies clearer. The first step is the process. During the process, researchers have to address the knowledge about history and environmental problems related to the project, or even prepare for the potential constructing challenges. The next step is about the produce, where researches design the project referring to researches. It might take the materials, tectonics and aesthetics into account. The third step is the building performance. Observing and testing the built project’s issues in terms of social occupation, cultural assimilation and environmental performance. The model describes that architectural research encourages cross-disciplinary methods for investigating the life process of a project. However, to create a physical outcome in both academic and real-world practice, research on the process is essential, and choosing a correlational research method from the options is just as vital. Appropriate and rigorous methods will ensure your answers represent an original contribution to knowledge.

The series of lectures help me deeper the understanding of epistemology. Epistemology is the investigation of the nature of knowledge. It guides us to acquire information and distinguish the truth from falsehood, involving both rational and empirical ways. When it comes to how to conduct an architectural research, which is also the main topic of the course, the investigation can combine various components: context, method and theory. The changeable relations between the several factors form the different study structures will lead to the polydirectional findings. This is depicted in the diagram below as well.



(source: Lucas 2015. Research Methods for Architecture. Introduction chapter)

The course also strengthens the importance of choosing research methodologies. Although there is no hierarchy of types of methodologies, some of which might be more or less appropriate to your research contents. For example, typology- a critique of typological thinking, is more applicable in investigating the development of architectural style of cathedrals but less suitable in the environmental risks’ investigation. It is also believed that a focus research methodology, immersed in a single approach, can often appear to be more thorough since there is greater opportunity for depth of engagement within the scope of a research project.¹ (Lucas 2016) However, as the nature of architecture can be multi-disciplinary, the research questions commonly stretch into different fields. In this regard, researchers are encouraged to cooperate with other disciplines as much as possible to achieve a richer outcome, while two or three methodologies could be combined.

This paper will investigate the episteme of phenomenology, and also explore its collaboration with the episteme of praxeology, which are relevant to my graduation research thesis, tin order to realize the essential environmental issues in the study site – Midtown Manhattan, New York. The general

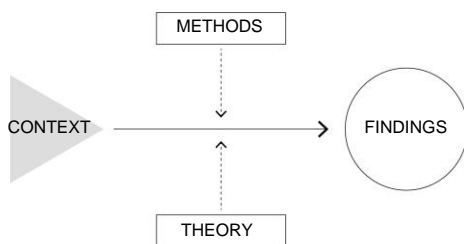
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questions are what the main causes are and why the situations are specifically related to the region, concerning the community health. The primary methods were mapping and writing through collecting and analyzing the data, while manners, such as observation, experiencing, drawing, filming and interviewing on the site trip are were applied. The studio has been focusing on the urgent social issues to find better solutions to improve the resiliency and spatial quality of the city's future development.

II PHENOMENOLOGY AS A MAIN METHODOLOGICAL TOOL

Adapting a research-methodology requires prior identification of research goals. My research has the objectives of understanding the factors influencing the community health within the urban context in Midtown Manhattan, NYC. In this instance, a phenomenological approach was chosen as the main methodology in carrying out the research of the context. Generally, it is always my way to start with the point based on contextually led.

Within the research framework, the form of context discussed is unique, which seeks to realize the specific characteristics make the subject different from others. The subject- Midtown Manhattan area, is the central portion of the borough of Manhattan in NYC. The district is the home to the skyscrapers and possess some of the world's most iconic constructions, including the Empire State, the headquarters of the United Nations, and Times Square. The architectural features, along with the economic, politic and cultural status, contribute to the uniqueness of the boundary. Having the context background in mind, it helps to build a more complete perception of place. In other words, the architectural ideas responding to a site should be developed on the foundation of contextual research.



(source: A diagram illustrating context-led research. Lucas 2016.)

Before the excursion to Manhattan, the pre-research undertaken within group through collecting and analyzing hard data, established the initial understanding of the site. The topics with the signification of investigation constructed a pragmatic group framework and the contents were ultimately presented in the form of a research booklet. Since the individuals' research contents would largely constitute the group's work, the methods taken personally in the period were consistent with the group's investigating methods, like, mapping, diagraming, etc. Individually, the objectives of analyzing environmental issues concerning community health led to analytical methods both quantitative and qualitative. (Lucas, 2016) Generally, some of the individual conclusions were drawn based on the quantitative analysis.

On one side, the workflows of the complex studio essentially influenced my choice of the methodology. The preparation stage informed a certain degree of perception of the site, the real contact with the field gave the ones truly understanding of the spatial atmosphere and territorial appreciation. (Tuan, 1990) The studio encouraged the research participants to visit midtown, which offered the chance to interact with the surroundings. From the phenomenological perspective, on the other side, the participants could get closer to the appearance of research subjects, and experienced things they want to explore. Heidegger advocates to show the many-sidedness of the space in question, instead of making up a fictional representation of the site.² (Heidegger, 1993) The trip was more of a conscious experience as undertaken from the subjective and first-person point of view. The depth and complexity explored personally shaped the qualitative awareness to circumstances of midtown area, while the previous mapping investigations in a quantitative way were also examined and supplemented.

According to Linguist Kenneth Pike's definition of etic and emic research, (Lucas, 2016) the 10-days stay in midtown Manhattan was more like a moving process between these two positions. The changing stances meant sometimes we participants acted as observers who were outside the culture, while sometimes immersed in the culture and enjoyed the local life. Surely, it required compassion and empathy to investigate an alien culture through the methods within a limited time.

Field notes and sketchbooks played an essential role during the site trip. Field notes as a conventional anthropological practice helped to remember the memorable moments, while the sketchbooks- a more architectural recording way- assisted to explore the city graphically. Besides, photographing and filming were also extremely valuable tools, as they can accurately and objectively capture the delicate details of the buildings and the movement of the activities. (Lucas, 2016) Writing was also a sensitive visual documentation taken to organize the moments of what I saw, heard and experienced, it was attributed to what the nose, ears, skin and tongue experiences.³ (Pallasmaa, 1996)

However, the editing of materials from these approaches to solid a narrative story became a new challenge. As the studio encouraged to use a short video to make the research result digestible to audiences, materials like videos, photos and sketches integrated to express the researchers' transient cognition are relatively subjective. In this case, the combination of the episteme of praxeology makes the phenomenological based research solid. Therefore, some interviews were conducted with the residents to listen to views about the social environment they reside on. Communicating with natives slightly compensated the researchers' lack of real-life experience of the study site. This proved that the combination of two methodology, phenomenology and praxeology, can make a complex object more comprehensive.

III HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Since the late 1950s, European continents had largely completed their post-war reconstruction. The demands for a built environment was no longer limited to build houses at low cost and at high speed, instead residents began to put forward various needs in social, cultural and psychological aspects, or aesthetic expression. Therefore, in the 1960s, the architecture experienced a theoretical research climax. Before this era, the symbolic meaning of architecture was mainly conveyed by its external forms, such as the shape of a restaurant like a hamburger, or still relied on conventional architectural styles. In the late 1960s, architects began to exploit how to interpret the inner implication of a building by a new architectural language. The emergence and application of phenomenology was an attempt to provide answers to these requirements.

The philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) founded phenomenology, which he described as 'the descriptive, non-reductive science of whatever appears, in the manner of its appearing, in the subjective and intersubjective life of consciousness'.⁴ Many years later, other philosophers, including Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), advanced their phenomenological implications beyond 'consciousness' toward related philosophical discourses such as the nature of human being, the various manners experientially by which human meaning arises, and the central role of bodily presence and action in human life.⁵ There is a question relevant to architecture that might be explored phenomenologically: in what ways does architecture nurture or disrupt human life, whether via everyday, ordinary experience or via intense, extra-ordinary encounter? ⁶

Phenomenology, literally, became to influence architects and architectural thinking is a complex story, as an interactive consequence of various disciplines, professional contributions, and intellectual events. From the 1940s, philosophers began to explore the relationship between architecture and phenomenology. For example, Merleau-Ponty interpreted the significance of human scale in human spatiality, (Hale, 2017) and Heidegger introduced that human-being-in-the-world is always human-being-grounded-in-place, especially as that place maintains and is maintained by engaged caretaking—what Heidegger identified as dwelling. (Sharr, 2007) From late 1940s to 1950s, architects started becoming strongly interested in phenomenology. Architectural theorist Jorge Otero-Pailos emphasized several influential figures in his book of architectural phenomenology. One is Italian modernist architect Ernesto Nathan Rogers, who set up some of the earliest collaborations between

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architects and phenomenologists and explored phenomenology as an intellectual manner for reshaping modernism. Another important figure discussed is the French American architect Jean Labatut, who took phenomenology as a conceptual tool for developing innovative designs encouraged by human experience. The investigating way of experience was a key tool during our site trip as well.

Then, architectural phenomenology experienced a wave in 1960s. The development of "environment-behavior studies (EBS)", an interdisciplinary research and design movement, was part of it. It was led by the work of some key innovators, like architects Christopher Alexander, Kevin Lynch, and Oscar Newman; anthropologist Edward Hall; psychologist Robert Sommer; and urbanists Jan Gehl, Jane Jacobs.⁷ While much of the EBS research was quantitative and limited to the cognitive dimensions of architectural and environmental behavior, works by Alexander and Jacobs produced were qualitative, subjective, and implicitly phenomenological. During that time, influenced by EBS, other mode like writing emerged as well, introduced by so-called "humanistic geographers" Yi-Fu Tuan, who provided an academic reference for phenomenological efforts researching architectural embodiment, environmental atmospheres. Inspiringly, in order to memorize the precious moments of trip study, we were encouraged to use writing to record our experience.

During the 1970s and 1980s, one architectural theorist, the Norwegian Christian Norberg-Schulz, played a key role in promoting phenomenological research in architecture. He reinterpreted how architects understood architecture, partly influenced by phenomenological work of researcher like Kevin Lynch. Explained by his major phenomenological work, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, a comprehensive architectural understanding requires "a theory where space is really understood as a dimension of human existence...Architectural space, therefore, is best envisioned as "a "concretization" of existential space." In his other writing works, he also explored a lot about the architectural and environmental dimensions of human "lived space". Architectural interest in phenomenology continued through the next two decades, thanks to Schulz's work, though the conventional approach began to be challenged in the 1980s by newer conceptual perspectives, such as, poststructuralism, deconstruction, and feminist and critical points of view. However, the phenomenological work continues to appear, including the design work of such excellent architects as Alvar Aalto, Tadao Ando, Stephen Holl. Peter Zumthor has come to be associated with an explicit or implicit phenomenological sensibility.⁸

This leads me to reflect on the challenges and new roles that contemporary architects have during the research phases. Due to the development of informative and digital technology, traditional research methods such as drawing and writing are gradually abandoned by modern designers and researchers, although these methods can better reflect the value of phenomenology and praxeology in methodological research. Digital diagramming and modelling might be a considerable communitive manner, but these could fail to convey the experience and perception outlined by phenomenology. What is worth mentioning that collage is an ideal way I would like to apply during the research, as the rational and emotional characteristics it has.

To conclude, architectural phenomenology has undergone a long process of development, shaped by several disciplines though. And it still has a critical role to play in contemporary architectural research and practice.

IV PERSONAL POSITIONING

Reviewing the lecture series, although there are few introductions of phenomenology in the lectures, still some affordable reading materials have greatly inspired my own research position, such as Tom Avermaete's notes on architectural epistemes, and Klaske Havik's writing on atmosphere and so on. Referring to readings, Lucas's book "Research Methods for Architecture" provides the guides how to formulate a research questions and define the terms, while Avermaete's lecture notes of "Architecture

and Its Epistemes” distinguishes a list of methodologies which are being used in architectural research.

As Lucas state in his book, ‘architecture has the advantage of being a relatively methodology-agnostic, or neutral, research discipline’.⁹ (Lucas, 2016) This feature can also be the obstacle for researchers as there are many available methodologies which could be adopted. While Heidegger was hugely associated with the philosophical phenomenology, theorists like Merleau-Ponty adopted other phenomenological approaches, such as experience and perception, which he gave the intention of ‘a matter of describing, not of explaining or analyzing’. Back to my research question of the project, what I want to find out about the site is, what the essential factors influence the environmental resilience and community health are, how and why these elements have a negative impact on the study site. Keep these queries in mind, and thanks to the stimulating knowledges, I identified that phenomenology, supplemented praxeology as the most appropriate methodology for my graduation research.

Avermaete, in his lecture notes, stressed the significance of studying across the spectrum of episteme. As phenomenology and praxeology stands at the different tips of the episteme, it was challenging to use both and complement each other within the research. Modernist architecture group GAMMA presented to be a good example. The so-called ‘syndicalist’ architects sought for a new mode in which architects should not try to impose their modernistic conceptions such as geometry but provide a thoughtful solution within which the public could develop a personalized lifestyle. Ultimately, the epistemic approach used by the group was a combination of phenomenology and praxeology. By eliminating the ‘imposed colonial logics’ and the passive perception (phenomenological episteme) and by deeply researching the way of life of those rural mass immigrants living in the slums (praxeological episteme), those architects successfully put forward a new strategy of integrating the modern ways of living into the conventional culture of dwellings.

On other sides, Havik’s narratives of ‘*Writing Urban Atmosphere*’ provides a sensorial approach to describe the relationship between inhabitants and the built environment. In the relationship, the notion of atmosphere appears as a mediating force. Her intention hereby is to explore how insights derived from writings to observe, describe and evoke atmosphere can become operative as analytical methods to understand and conceptualize the vagueness and complexities of architectural experience. (Havik, 2018) By literary skill, she investigates a series of so-called thresholds of architectural experience, like, subject-object, individual-collective, naivety-expertise, here-there, parts-whole, arousing an overlooked method for research. As mentioned on the third chapter, geographer, Yi-Fu Tuan, already suggested the role of writing in phenomenological research. The writers can deal with the contradictory ideas and validate their perceptions with a more open, experiential mode of investigation. I am also willing to try the writing method to explore the identities of the site in the following research phase. Literary methods offer an essential way for architects, urban planners and researchers to experience and understand the atmospheric qualities.

To reflect, the general approach applied by the complex graduation studio was mapping and drawing. Since most of mapping work was done before site study, in other words, all data were collected from websites or previous research materials. Despite the apparent credibility of official data, it was inevitable that the data would not be updated timely or would be inexhaustive, leading to irresponsible use. Analytic drawings are commonly accepted architectural language of presenting analysis and conclusions, but objective and static outcomes cannot express the phenomenology of context to the commons. In addition, encouraging students to participate in field research was an effective way to understand the social context. There were two main advantages of the site trip: revising the recollecting date by counting, and recording; the other good point was to experience the site, through visiting local buildings, communicating with natives, engaging in cultural activities, etc. These could be recorded by filming, photographing and sketching. This ethnographical approach could be further reinforced, if the excursion had lasted months instead of ten days, more detailed quantitative and qualitative analysis could be generated.

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To conclude, this paper is a reflection on the value of methodology on architectural research. Phenomenology was the main methodology I applied to conduct my graduation research, while praxeology acted as a supplemental way. The increasing polluted water and inadequate nutrition were the main factors negatively impacted the community resilience and health. (praxeological episteme) The public needs more diverse open space and positive perception of environmental protection. (phenomenological episteme). The research outcomes become the guide to the next step of design.

END NOTES:

1. Lucas Ray, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd. 2016), P11.
2. Martin Heidegger, *Building, dwelling, thinking*. (New York, 1993), P344.
3. Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Geometry Of Feeling: A look at the phenomenology of Architecture*, P451.
4. David Seamon, *Architecture and Phenomenology* (London: Routledge. 2018), P1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, P4.
8. *Ibid.*, P5.
9. Lucas Ray, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing Ltd. 2016), P53.

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