

IN SEARCH OF MEDIUM BETWEEN PEOPLE AND THE CITY

Balancing phenomenology and architectural ethnography in understanding the complexity of perception

Student

Tsui Yan Yan (4916999)

Chair of Methods and Analysis, "Positions in Practice"

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I. In Search of Research Methodology

A design, often and many times, extracts the essence from multiple layers of research and trials; hence, in order to generate the optimal outcome, adopting a relevant methodology is crucial. The lectures introduce varied research methodologies at which each of them allows different lens to examine issues, providing solid foundation for design directions and defining the eventual intervention.

The notion of “architecture is not a corroboration” greatly inspires me as often do we find the final design as the “solution” for the site or problem. However, architectural design should not merely be the “solution”, but it is the decisions derived from appropriate research methodologies, posing suitable questions and providing opportunities for further investigations that matter. I often start researching from typology study, obtaining objective analysis for designs; yet, the lecture of Klaske Havik stimulates me with the possibility to inquire situations with intangible tools – senses, experiences, perceptions. It is certainly feasible to draw out limitless objective data, but they do not disclose the understanding of the way people link, experience and percept places (Havik, 279). A phenomenological approach highlights the untouchable aspect of information but perhaps gives more depth to architecture itself.

As architecture students, we dig into a variety of methods and tactics, but seldom do we realize the methodology behind it at which the latter enhances later stages on identifying appropriate data and narrowing down research parameter for design (Kothari, 8). When given a brief, there are countless potentials for the site to become something else and there are layers of information out there and a specific research would deem beneficial. While designing, we always get questioned on “how is the hypothesis formulated”, “on what basis this problem is defined”, and “what is the motivation of your design”. Yet what makes the decisions towards the site and approach valid is determined by what methodology(ies) you base on. As architects, to fully comprehend the adopted methodology and understand the underlying logic of chosen methods are crucial to produce responsible designs.

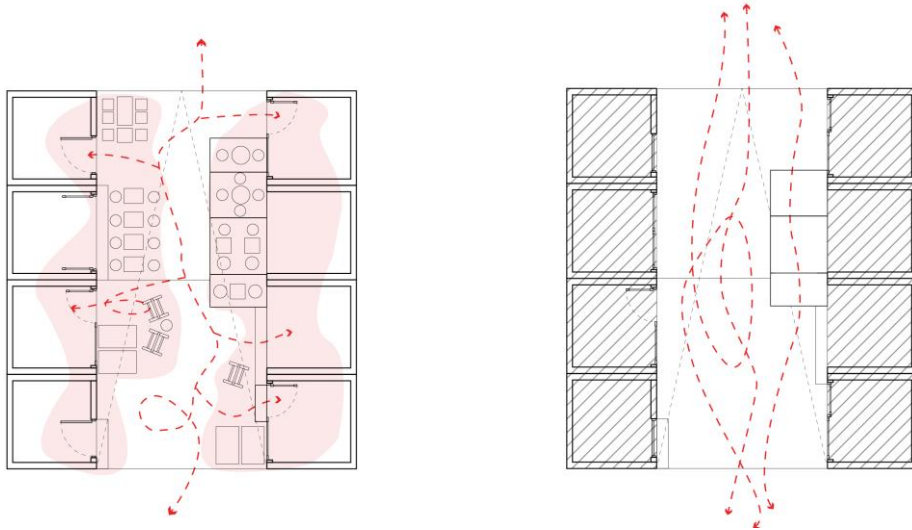
The thesis discusses the medium between the city and people, in indicating happenings of specific activities and routings under the lens of phenomenology and aided by architectural ethnography. The Methods & Analysis studio sets up a framework for students to develop and test a hypothesis in relation to meaningfulness, appropriation and integration, analyzing the site in Skopje, North Macedonia, where the country has undergone political and natural turmoil over the past decades. The research begins with a group-based analysis under the self-chosen theme of *informality* and formulated a hypothesis – *the more visually fragmented the street is, the denser informal interventions are*. The perception of the visual is focused first in the analysis. Visual fragmentation is the division of perception into broken pieces (blockages or openness) of the street; informal is the behavior not abided to formal rules and configurations; while intervention is actions taken to intentionally become involved within a given situation. Informal intervention here implies act of ad-hocness completed by storeowners who find it necessary when the space does not adequately provide, such as adding small furniture.

II. Merging Phenomenology and Architectural Ethnography

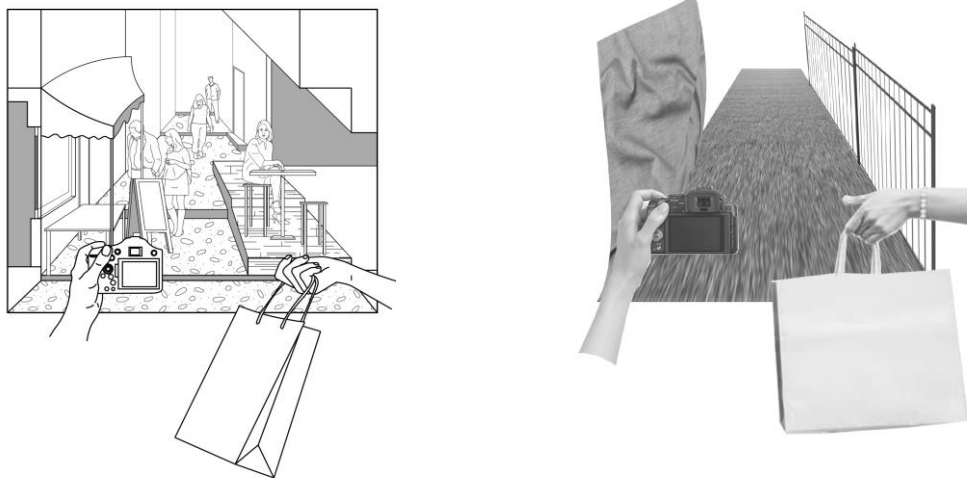
Norberg-Schulz's understanding of phenomenology as an architectural methodology implies, “*there are not different 'kinds' of architecture, but only different situations which require different solutions in order to satisfy man's physical and psychic needs*” (5). The research conducted is qualitative by selecting significant cases but not different space types, and instead of a quantitative research by stereotyping informal actions. 6 cases are brought into a comparative study to test the hypothesis.

Before the excursion, research was conducted through mapping and perceptive collages, an etic mode of study as an observer. Mapping is to illustrate changes of movement and behavior of people, while collages are to grasp the ethereality of perceptions induced by informal actions.

Kevin Lynch states that it is the shape, color or arrangement that cultivates the making of powerful and vivid mental maps of the surrounding (9), which depicts the essence of space visually. The use of these techniques highlights perceptions both objectively (fig.1) and subjectively (fig.2) and still at a distance for now.

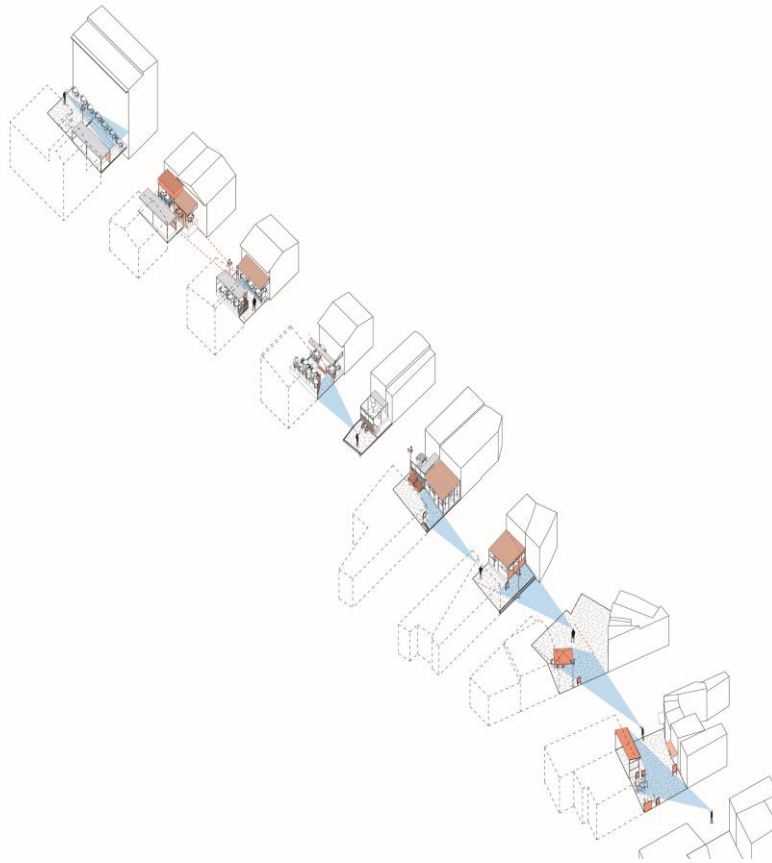


(fig.1. Plans showing change of flow according to position of informal interventions during day and night in Old Bazaar, Skopje. Drawing by author)



(fig.2. Collages showing reality and perception of informal interventions in Old Bazaar, Skopje. Drawing by author)

During the excursion, on-site observations and photographs are the frequently used tactics to visualize the impression and experience with a first-person point-of-view. On top of this, detailed and accurate documentation is carried out - dimensions of buildings and street, positioning and sizes of interventions are sketched and measured. Opening and closing procedures of interventions is observed to analyze the spatial alterations and distortion of people's visual perception and way of approaching (fig.3).

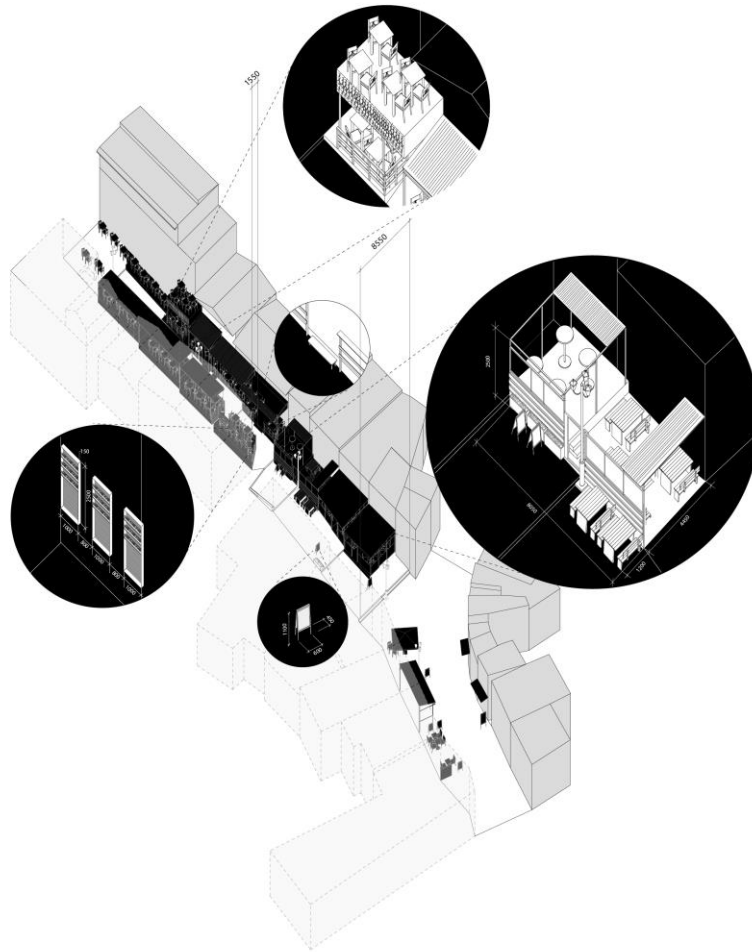


(fig.3. Visual fragmentation of street in Old Bazaar, Skopje, depicted in axonometric drawing with fragmented pieces. Drawing by author)

The reading and data collection of the cases identify two distinct methodologies: phenomenology and supported by architectural ethnography.

Phenomenology questions the fundamental meaning of being (Lucas, 153), the role of body in experiencing the built environment. The initial studies discern the movement and sensorial experience of pedestrians induced by informal interventions of the street as fragments. And to illustrate experience, the on-site analysis of visual perception is to see how ad-hoc items have affected them subconsciously along a route and illustrates interactions of space and people through changing perception. Ingold states the formation of the world [the street] appears only when the perceiver [people] approaches (168). The visibility might have been the only focus yet the analysis yields beyond the sight, it sets the base for me to study fragmentation of other senses or how other senses unify as a complete experience, as Merleau-Ponty affirms, "*the visible is what is seized upon with the eyes, the sensible is what is seized on by the senses*" (7).

Architectural ethnography studies the quality and the way people use spaces, allowing fluid flow "*between different dimensions, between part and whole, between the empirical and the abstract, providing quality of autonomy to amplify situations on various scales*" (Kaijima, 10). Although this method usually requires longer time frame and higher level of immersion, in this research, it allows different scales of the interrelations of interventions, street and people (fig.4). By recording the flow of encounter and perception along a given route, we can produce an accurate description of how experience unfolds over the course of time (Lucas, 158). For instance, the position of interventions affects the movement of pedestrian, yet the latter impacts the dimensions and positions of the former and this cycle implies the interaction between people and the space.



(fig.4. Figure ground drawing depicting dynamics of informality in Old Bazaar, Skopje, with black circles indicating dimensions and scale of interventions. Drawing by groupmate – Hilary Yeung)

The combination of phenomenology and architectural ethnography expands the social depth of the research, from regarding quality of space to how it alters perception of people. Balancing the two studies would gain great impact for me to explore the medium between the city and people, not limited to bodily experience towards a static environment but a dynamic one.

III. Reflection on Balancing Subjectivity and Objectivity in Research

The concept of phenomenology is pinned down philosophically by Edmund Husserl, Jewish philosopher in the early 20th Century, that in order to study experiences, it is to study the “life of consciousness” which includes cognitive states and acts like judgements, and all other acts and states such as sensorial experiences, perception, memory and so on (Moran, 37). The elaboration of Husserl is then branched in two ways architecturally by Martin Heidegger who explores the inextricable relation between being and dwelling (Lucas, 157) while Maurice Merleau-Ponty focuses on the phenomenology of perception elaborated extensively in his publication of the same name in 1945.

My research question lies in the realm of Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation. Architecture is not simply perceived by sight, but other senses also recognize. In 1980, phenomenology is solidly identified as a method for architectural research by Christian Norberg-Schulz. He explains “*only when people experience the meaning of place and the environment, would they truly ‘inhabit’ the place, whereas inhabiting a place means the happening of living*” (5). Phenomenological

approach is the study of embodied experience, a return to the natural attitude towards senses, where architecture serves as the medium of harmony between people and object, people and the surrounding with empathy. Juhani Pallasmaa is also an important figure in stressing the importance of embodiment of all senses in architecture in his publication, *the Eyes of the Skin*.

Various architects embrace this approach and accentuates sensory experiences in architecture. For instance, Luis Barragan, strong visual articulation but respond not only to the eyes but “*with all our faculties of perception and imagination, thus evoking emotions*” (Van den Bergh, 1); Peter Zumthor converses with materials to create atmosphere; Tadao Ando devises body, movement, memory and sensorial perceptions in his concrete architecture. The method that these architects employed is the attention towards the intangible, using different kinds perceptions as the medium for people to encounter spaces. Yet, most of these approaches are achieved within the interior of a building, what is the possibility and parameter when it is on the outside, for instance, the street? Thus, the following methodology is considered.

Architectural ethnography can “*become a bodily grasping of our understanding of urban reality*” (Kaijima, 15). Through drawing patterns of human behaviour, one can capture the essence of space and unfold the complexity of transformations of space. Architectural ethnography is derived from ethnography which is a highly longitudinal, detailed and subjective study which is seldom utilized for school architectural projects. The development of this branched methodology can refer to *Made in Tokyo* by Atelier Bow-wow with an initial framework and further developed in the Japanese Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2018, categorizing 4 types of investigation, drawing of/ for/ among/ around architecture.

The major difference between ethnography and architectural ethnography is thus revealed. By categorizing into different aspects, the “completeness” of ethnography is divided and shared within architectural ethnography, where according way of drawing can be selected according to relevance, allowing flexibility in elaborating spaces. The method adopted in my case studies is drawing of architecture which describes “*patterns of human behavior and ways of life, with a focus on materiality and objectivity*” (Kaijima, 11).

Phenomenology and architectural ethnography are combined to read the site and the city. It is undeniable that the notion of perception is a complex issue. It is unwise to simplify the connection of body and space to arousal of emotions and senses nor is it rational to stereotype feeling and cultural identity to an area or people. The awareness of this complexity prevents generalization and brings in depth to the research. Carefully unfolding the type and way of perception occurred in space is crucial to setting up clear parameter for next stage of research.

The shortcoming of phenomenology also lies in its liability to inform the same results in another period as understanding of experience is ephemeral and subjective which could differ from time to time. The case studies, hence, do not only record the experiential aspect (visual fragmentation) but also the objective facet (dimension and position) on both macro and micro scale. To substantiate phenomenology, the aid of architectural ethnography, though also touches upon the intangibility of daily scenarios, brings in a more thorough and balanced picture to perceive also the pattern of the site.

The risk of adopting these two relatively subjective methodologies could lead to undesirable circumstances; however, the aim of my research does not merely seek to draw upon my personal perception towards the sites but to provide objective lens to read the site sympathetically yet remain unbiased. I opt to strike a balance in obtaining the significance of phenomenological results of architectural reading and an extensive social background apprehended through architectural ethnographies.

IV. Articulation of a Mental Task of Architecture

The case studies conducted inform that even the smallest alteration of size of interventions or slight turn of a street could fragment people’s perception. To unfold the intricate connection of the urban fabric and people, be it large or small scale, Havik mentioned in her lecture the possibility

of using literary devices to link dots from different scenarios and contexts. In *Writingplaces*, Havik states that through literature, different temporal perspectives can be put together, like a narrative which unfolds events in time and space (162). The idea of a narrative to elaborate intangible concepts in a more concrete and reliable way, thus, this also inspires me the need of the use of architectural ethnography in drawing narratives through the pattern of the streets and people. With the idea that small elements could bring about effect on people and the surrounding, it comes to be that architecture is a powerful tool to inform some more.

The talk on Praxeology states that the built environment is a stage for everyday practice and that study of praxis of architecture is to train the eye for the actual users of the building. Architecture takes part fully in human's life. Contemporary architecture builds on top of substances accumulated over the centuries yet often accompanied with a detached attitude. May it be bold or cutting edge, it shares little relation with the city or the people. What is the balance between innovative experiments and response to the urban fabric? Although praxeology is not adopted in my research inquiry, its emphasis on *actual users* stimulates me to consider the psychic role of architecture, with a similar concern towards phenomenology and leads me to contemplate the responsibility of architecture mentally.

In my discussion of research methodology, I interpreted Tim Ingold's understanding towards unfolding experiences through progressing the context. I ask myself: to what extent the impact of experiential absorption of the environment, regardless of senses and memory, remains in a person or in generations?

My research interest lies in articulating the medium between the built environment and people, through researching varied positions of perception to imply beyond feelings but also memory and guidance. In 1996, Pallasmaa published *the Eyes of the Skin* and criticizes "*inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of the neglect of the body and the senses, and an imbalance in our sensory system*" (21). This strong accusation reveals an emerging phenomenon of the modern society – the lack of consideration of human experience within the city. I believe there is a mental task for architecture. Architecture is not a standalone object which provides physical comfort but is weaved inextricably within the urban fabric. The existence of an architecture is never merely for its function, but it can also evoke collective memories, which makes architects important in considering themselves a mental task.

The medium between people and the built environment lies not only the building itself but also the progression (the route). Ingold also brings in the idea of Durkheim, that is sociology is a kind of psychology, the object of study must be the mind of society, not of the individual and this informs two grounds - the contrast between the ephemerality of sensations and the durability of representation (157). Hence, adding onto my reading of medium, it embodies a duality of a momentary but perpetual obligation.

Although I firmly argue the importance in incorporating phenomenological lens to sort out the role of body in experiencing space in the modern society, it is nevertheless even more important to associate with the existing social structure. There is also a social role of architects in order to configure a complete intervention. The philosophical investigation of architecture recognizes the humane side of the building, while phenomenology facilitates the act of reading places with a touch of sympathy, ethnographically reading the site or the city substantiate a solid backdrop for the research with empathy. Most importantly, one must recognize the complex relation between perception, people and the city.

The mental task of architecture is sought of in my research question, to seek the medium between the city and people by firstly dissecting knowledge and layers of perception and integrate them to create a better condition. Pallasmaa quoted from Frank Lloyd Wright in *the Eye of the Skin*, that standing up for integrity in your building is standing up for "socially a reciprocal relationship" (77). People should be treated with care, and I believe architects upholds the responsibility to achieve that. This is the mental task for architecture, and I pursue this position and articulate it through my thesis investigation.

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