

MEANINGFUL ENCOUNTER WITH NATURE

A Phenomenological Methodology with the Tool of Watercolor Drawing, Writing and Photography

I INTRODUCTION

Architectural design is a complicated activity that involves many disciplines like psychology, politics, engineering and etc.. Acquiring knowledge, which is quite essential in both architectural profession and design practice, is achieved through research.¹ However, design and research have more complex relationships. They are understood as different activities sharing some similarities.² They have some qualities that are complementary or overlapping. While research provides information for design practice, the design practice always leads to new research fields. Due to the reciprocal relationship between design and research, the research-methodological awareness is quite important. A specific research methodology would affect the course of research, the ways to solve problems and finally the design results we get. Knowing the available methodologies could help architects to simplify their thinking process, while defining appropriate methodology would ensure the design results to be aligned with original intention.

I learned a lot of things from the course. First of all, I got to learn different methods and methodologies systematically from both the lectures and literature that were provided. I realized that my understanding of some methods or methodologies before were not complete. Because I only know a few representatives who worked on specific methods or methodologies. For example, my understanding towards typology is mainly from the theory of Aldo Rossi and Ungers, even though these are two inspiring figures, I never knew the historical discourse of the development of such concept. Secondly, I also learned that there is a possibility to apply the methodologies from other disciplines. However, what interested me the most should be the collective work with my fellow students. We organized the Q&A session after the Material Culture Lecture. Although it was not very successful, it really helped me to understand the theory, the methods in actual practice. I also got to learn from my fellow students.

In my current research, a complete system of certain methods or methodologies would be studied. Their practical application would also be considered. As far as I am concerned, architecture is multifaceted as a discipline and no single approach could help architects to get all the needed knowledge. Moreover, in different projects, the methods could also be different according to the aims.

This position paper will mainly focus on Phenomenology. I am in the Transitional Territories studio, which focuses on the context of the North Sea Area. In the first month of our studio, mapping was a tool that was used in a quantitative way in order to study the basic information of the North Sea. According to James Corner, '*the function of mapping is less to mirror reality than to engender the re-shaping of the worlds in which people lived in.*'³. In our analysis process, mapping was not regarded as a simple tracing activity but also a tool to reveal and realize potentials. Through mapping, we found the relationships and facts that were not realized and some of us got to decide which topic they are going to focus on. After the mapping in the first month, students will follow different research methodologies according to their own different research questions.

The topic of my graduation design is 'Meaningful Encounter with Nature'. Many areas around the North Sea are delta areas. These areas are fluid and continuous in their original status, however, due to the safety issues many dikes and dunes were introduced. This leads to a phenomenon named Delta Paradox, namely the paradox between the highly compartmentalized landscape and the nature of delta. In these areas, buildings are behind the dikes and residents are separated from the nature. Under the

topic of *Meaningful Encounter with Nature*, my aim of graduation studio is to design an architecture that can seduce, kindle and extend people's perception towards nature. The site I chose is in the Dutch Wadden Sea area.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Literally, the word 'Phenomenology' means the logos (meaning) of phenomena. Phenomenology is a qualitative research method. In architecture, this methodology is based on the observation and interpretation of human experiences and human behaviors towards physical sites by analyzing the sensory influences.⁴ Phenomenology argues that human experiences and consciousness should be integrated in architecture.

Aiming at creating a place that can seduce, kindle and extend people's perception towards nature, users' experience will be stressed in my design project. Phenomenology, a methodology based on the observation and the interpretation of human experiences, suits my need.

Under the framework of Phenomenology, my research process could be divided into 2 parts: On-site Research and Case Study. In both of the 2 parts, the research work tightly sticks to the phenomenological principles. On the one hand, I am not only focusing on my own subjectivity, but also trying to pursue a kind of intersubjectivity,⁵ as perceptions from others are also involved in the on-site activities and case studies. On the other hand, I have to abandon my preconceived assumptions and biases while observing, describing and documenting⁶. This is the same as Husserl's method which was '*bracketing the status of real world and objective qualities of things and concentrate on a non-thematic field*'.⁷

Ingold said that there is no perception without context, the act of perception is very relevant to the location, the time point and the conditions.⁸ During the on-site research in the Wadden Sea area (especially the Texel Island), I tried to experience and observe the topography, the sound, the flying birds, the ever-changing tide with my own body⁹. It was at that time that I really got to know the charm of nature as well as the sense of joy that one can get from the nature. The tools I mainly used to document were photos and writings in order to document different senses of human beings. Videos and sketches with notations were also involved. The two case studies I chose were the Canglang Garden in China and the Stampalia Querini Foundation in Venice. The tools I used were the same as those I adopted during the field trip.

In the later stages, I will interpret the information in the photos and my written narratives with the tool of watercolor drawings. In these drawings, specific spatial qualities that I am planning to focus on are identified.

After the short introduction of my own methodology, I'd like to talk something about the state-of-art of the Phenomenology itself.

The relationship between being and dwelling established by Heidegger and the Phenomenology of perception established by Merleau-Ponty are the most widely used in the architectural domain. By stressing the importance of dwelling, Heidegger stated that dwelling is not only residing in a place. It is more about comfort, homeliness and the temporality of maintaining a home. And according to Merleau-Ponty, when looking for the perceptual experience in architecture, we are dealing with sensations instead of stimuli. The subjective perception instead of objective things. He is always considered the philosopher of the body. Based on these 2 branches, many researchers and architects worked on the relevant fields with their own understanding of Phenomenology. For example, Seamons considers perceptual awareness as a lived aspect of innate material experiences.¹⁰ Hsu, Chang and Lin argued that phenomenological experiences create sensory experiences through poetical and emotional aspects of geometric aesthetics.¹¹ While Pallasmaa (also an architect) pointed out that every touching

experience in Architecture is multi-sensory.¹² In terms of architectural design practice, Peter Zumthor (who is famous for his considerations towards material, site and spatial quality) and Steven Holl (who always stresses the importance of light in people's perception towards space) are the most representative ones.

Some challenges of my own methodology should be realized. First of all, when adopting Phenomenology, there is always a danger of focusing too much on my own subjectivity. I have to keep in mind that intersubjectivity is required. Secondly, using watercolor drawing in the interpretation stage might lead to a translation that is different from the real state. This situation should be avoided.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Phenomenology refers to a movement in 20th century philosophy based on the work of a German philosopher: Edmund Husserl. On the basis of Husserl's theory, Martin Heidegger expanded the reach of Phenomenology and created a more poetic approach, in which semi-conscious and unconscious mental activities are included. Then, Merleau-Ponty founded the applied Phenomenology rooted in perceptual dimensions.¹³ Christian Norberg Schulz is the one who introduced Phenomenology to architecture domain. He always stresses that “*the environment influences human beings, and this implies that the purpose of architecture transcends the definition given by early functionalism.*”¹⁴

Phenomenology of architecture is quite different from the rational research methods that focus on buildings' function, efficiency and form. It stresses the importance of human being's living experience and emotional forces. Moreover, the researcher is always an active participant in the process.

In architectural field, different researchers and architects are conducting phenomenological researches, designs practices or studies in different ways.

In Kevin Lynch's *The Image of City*, a book which is quite essential when talking about the knowledge of the urban cognition and behavior, explored the urban public space in a phenomenological way. He used the mental-map mapping in order to express the way that people are guided in the urban environment. In Gordon Cullen's *Townscape*, the *Townscape* concept was introduced in order to organize the quality of cities with perceptual concepts. His method could be named as Serial Vision. By perspective drawings, he illustrated the sequence of the perceptual revelations and happenings during people's movement. Christopher Alexander, who invented the Pattern Language, was also considered to be working in a phenomenological way. Though with some differences, their representation methods are all visually based.



[Figure 1. This is the inner page of the book named Atmosphere written by Petter Zumthor. He is documenting and describing of his experience and perception with both photo and writing. Image downloaded from <http://www.marinalencinas.com.ar>]

However, Peter Zumthor's works informed me another method to document while observing and interpreting. Although he didn't work on the phenomenological theory study or research systematically, it is not hard to figure out phenomenological principles in his design practice. He is always arguing that architectural design is not a form-making practice. Instead, atmosphere, light and the material are more important.¹⁵ In his book *Atmospheres*, he used the combination of literary narrative and photos to describe his experience and perception. (Figure 1.) In the photos, one can feel the light, the shadow and the texture. While in his writings he depicted the sound of footsteps, the sound of birds and the sound of conversation. The temperature and smell are also included in his writings.

In the interpretation process, Steven Holl's method inspired me most. Being influenced by the works of Merleau-Ponty and Pallasmaa, Steven Holl's ways of using materials, colors and textures are always considered as phenomenological. Watercolor drawings are quite important in his design and research process. In terms of specific projects, he considered watercolor drawing as a tool to unlock phenomenal and experiential potential of a site and a project. (Figure 2.)¹⁶ I find watercolor drawing is helpful and efficient in transforming the experiences and perceptions I got into a more integral and more subjective description of the site while keeping a certain space for imagination. With this interpretation, the design project would start to emerge.



[Figure 2. This is Steven Holl' s drawing when designing Polychrome Summer House, by interpreting the site with watercolor drawing, he managed to give shape to the design project. Image downloaded from <https://de.phaidon.com/agenda/architecture/articles/2016/august/01/steven-holls-summer-house-for-a-19thc-painter/>]

Personally, I think all the methodologies have their own advantages and disadvantages. The purpose behind the research is essential when deciding which methodology to choose. In terms of my project, in the observation stage, a combination of photography and writing will be adopted in order to document not only visual experience but also olfactory and acoustical experience. In the interpretation stage, watercolor drawings will be adopted in order to spatialize a more intellectual image of the site and step forward a physical architectural project. At the same time, writing will also work to provide the aspects that lost from drawings.

IV POSITIONING

Phenomenology in architecture emphasizes on the experience of users and also considers the social, cultural and historical context of architectural intervention. In Phenomenology, there is a need to observe the sensory sensitivity and the integration of Phenomenology in the architectural research process shows the respect towards users. I do like this kind of methodology. I always think that architecture is designed to meet the needs of human activities. As a result, experiences and perceptions of users should be the most important aspects in architectural design.

The lecture we had about Spatial Narrative during the lecture series is quite relevant to my position. In the foreword of the reading material (with the name of 'Urban Literacy') we got from the course, Pallasmaa stated that writing in architecture help in evoke an awareness of a specific architectural

phenomena or mediate sensations of architectural experiences. Architectural design is not only a discipline of the eye and the visual media. The nature of architectural experiences is actually quite multisensory, embodied and existential. In Pallasmaa's another book named *The Eyes of the Skin*, he wrote: *Every touching experience of architecture is multi-sensory; qualities of matter, space and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose and skin, tongue and skeleton and muscle.*¹⁷

While the visual representation can only document a part of human beings' visual experience, the left over parts (smells, sound and etc.) could be provided by writing. An example of Louis Kahn's poetic writing was introduced in the foreword of the literature to illustrate that writing enables readers not only see but also feel the space.¹⁸

Considering the specific topic of my graduation studio I am going to focus on multi-sensory experience and perception. A combination of visual and literary tools will be adopted. The only visually based methods of Kevin Lynch and Gordon Cullen are not very suitable for me. The nature is filled with all kinds of views, sounds, smells and etc. As a result, in my project, with the aim of seducing, kindling and extending people's perception towards nature, all the senses of human beings have to be taken into consideration. In this sense, a single visual tool is not enough as it cannot deal with the sounds, the smell and etc..

Consequently, in my research process, a combination of photography (and also some sketches) and writing like what Peter Zumthor illustrated in his book 'Atmospheres' will be adopted in the observation stage. In the following interpretation stage, a combination of watercolor drawing and writing will be adopted in order to create a more integral and subjective understanding of experiences and perceptions. The drawings and writing in this stage will serve as source of inspirations in order to serve the following design process.

To summarize, my position towards the methodology of my graduation project can be concluded as: 1. Phenomenology is considered as a philosophy based on observing and interpreting human experiences and behaviour by analyzing sensory influences. It stresses the importance human experiences and consciousness in architecture. And the multi-sensory perceptions or experiences would be stressed in my own research process. 2. This methodology would be adopted in both site analysis and case studies. 3. When observing, biases and preconceived assumptions should be set aside. A kind of intersubjectivity rather than pure personal subjectivity is required. 4. In the observation stage, a combination of photography and writing are adopted to document. In the interpretation stage, a combination use of watercolor drawing and writing will be presented.

¹ Masson O. & Stillemans J. *Doctoral Education in Architecture: Challenges and Opportunities* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

² Groat Linda & David Wang, *Architectural research methods* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), VI.

³ James Corner, *Agency of Mapping* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), 213.

⁴ Reisner-Cook Y, *The Troubled Relationship between Architecture and Aesthetic: Exploring the Self and Emotional Beauty in Design* (Australia: Royal Melbourne,)

⁵ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to A Pure Phenomenology and to A Phenomenological Philosophy.* (First Book. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 35.

⁶ Husserl, Edmund. *Ideas Pertaining to A Pure Phenomenology and to A Phenomenological Philosophy.* (First Book. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 136.

⁷ Husserl, Edmund.. *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology (Vol. 1).* (New York: Collier Books, 1913)

⁸ L.M. Ingold, *The Perception of the environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

⁹ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Phenomenology of Perception.* (New York: Humanities Press, 1981) 3-51.

¹⁰ Seamon D and Mugerauer R, *Dwelling, Place and Environment* (London: Croom Helm Publishers, 2000), 4.

¹¹ Hsu H L, Chang Y L and Lin H, 'Emotional Architecture: A Study of Tadao Ando's Genius Loci Design Philosophy and Design Syntax', *International Journal of Chemical, Environmental & Biological Sciences*, vol 3 no 6, 456-463.

¹² Pallasmaa J, *Theorising a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/merleau/#SH3a> (Accessed 05 July 2017)

¹⁴ Norberg-Schulz. *Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture.* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979) 5.

¹⁵ Peter Zumthor. *Thinking architecture*, (Boston: Birkhäuser 2006) 85-86.

¹⁶ Kipnis, J., 'A Conversation with Steven Holl', *El Croquis*, vol 93,36-47.

¹⁷ Pallasmaa J, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, (Chichester: John Wiley,2005) 41-45.

¹⁸ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* ,(Rotterdam: nai010,2014)6-17.