

LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Self-Assessment on Research Methods

O TITLE

A phenomenological understanding of the intangible value of an existing heritage

I INTRODUCTION

According to Groat and Wang, “research is systematic inquiry directed toward the creation of knowledge.”

¹ Admittedly, architectural research is important. It is a heuristic tool to stimulate the innovation in architecture design and technology. In all ages, the fundamental question for architects is how to create a better built environment. The researches can help architects to define and solve the problems in architectural design. In addition, today, architectural practice contains many unknown fields, which have exceeded the scope of knowledge and ability of a single architect and the experience of traditional professions. Research can help architects to have better understanding on the complicated projects.

The research method course helps deepen my understanding on the philosophy of methodology and research methods. The definition could be according to Ishak, “Methodology is generally a guideline for solving a problem, with specific components such as phases, tasks, methods, techniques and tools.”² In addition, there are a number of different methodology apparatus. Under the guide of a specific methodology, architects could analyze and cope with certain problems more systematically. The lecture series introduced several mainstream methodologies and exemplified their practical applications. This enables me to find the appropriate research methods for my graduation project and further explore the school of thought I was interested in.

The study object of my graduation studio is 20C heritage. It is inevitable that redesigning the heritage architecture requires much more upfront research than designing a new building. The general approach in architecture and heritage studio is value assessment by analyzing tangible and intangible layers of the building. In other word, the historical building renovation contain many layers which include the restoration in physical layer and inheriting in historical and cultural layers. The meaning of these cultures requires us to analyze people’s memories, feelings and other subjective experiences. My graduation project is to renovate an office building called the Beursgebouw in Almere. Almere is the youngest city in Netherlands. The Beursgebouw was the first office building in Almere stad which witness the city development. As the first building people can see when arriving the Almere stad, the Beursgebouw always represent the city image. The building is commemorative unintentionally for citizens in Almere. How to inherit the intangible value of the building is vital for renovation. The intangible values could be atmosphere, spirit of place, city images, culture, history etc.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The general research approach in heritage studio is the value assessment metrics based on different layers analysis. Steward Brand gives the study framework in his well-known study ‘How buildings learn’. There are 7 layers, site, structure, skin, service, space plan, stuff and human souls. Our studio conclude the human souls to be the spirit of place that refers to the intangible features of the places as layers which is invisible but could be sensed and described. According to different projects, the research methodology could be different. According to the introduction of my graduation project, the research focuses are on intangible aspects. Therefore, based on the heritage research framework, my main research methodology is phenomenology. As John Creswell explained that phenomenology is to “clarify

¹ Groat, Linda N., and David Wang. *Architectural research methods*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013, 6

² Ishak, Irny Suzila, and Rose Alinda Alias. *Designing a strategic information system planning methodology For Malaysian institutes of higher learning (ISP-IPTA)*. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2005.

the essential or underlying meaning of experience, 'where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning.'³ The phenomenology guide the study on intangible aspects research of heritage. Spirit of place is difficult to grasp because it is decided by the subject's own experience. It is abstract and subjective. According to Kuipers, "It is generated by perception and association. This spirit makes the observer aware of interrelationships between: stories and stones; spaces, light and shade; sounds and smells; time and movement; distance, volumes and scale; openness, transparency and closed-ness; climate and use, and so on. The 'spirit' unites the essential qualities that make a heritage building a place with a distinguished identity; in short, the 'spirit' imbues a place with a soul..."⁴ The concept of spirit of place comes from phenomenology. Therefore, the study of phenomenology is inevitable methodology for researching the intangible features of the existing building. Another reason for choosing the phenomenology is that according to Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology is the study of essences; and according to it all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example."⁵ The content which phenomenology study is related to the heritage design philosophy. As Wessel said, architects need to clarify the essence of the heritage and try not to lose it when redesigning it.⁶

The research approaches were interview with the surrounding residents and visitors first come to the city about the impression of the building. Also, mind drawing will be used. In addition, the photography, sketches, diagram and writing were used to grasp the atmosphere of the building. How people used the building was also sketched.

The phenomenological thinking on the value assessment will helps me to grasp the essence of the building which will guide the future intervention and transformation. In addition, this research methodology will make the future design focus firstly on the intangible aspects. The design strategy may focus on how to enlarge the intangible value of the building. For example, how to strengthen the image of the building. How to redesign the building which reflect the city characteristics. The methodology will decide the design order. The start point will pay more attention to the spatial quality and experience and the interrelationship between people and the building.

Genius Loci-Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture (1980) by Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz proposed the idea of spirit of place. *Image of the city* (1964) by Kevin Lynch provide the research methods of mental map. Steven Holl use elements to analyze the spatial quality in *Questions of Perception* (2007) also inspire me in research. However, these methods are relatively subjective. Therefore, the historical research like data collection, contextual research such as literature review are also be conducted but they will be not discussed in this thesis.

Therefore, the research of phenomenology helps me to understand what could contribute to forming of spirit of place and what specific methods I can use in the research process.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Phenomenology was proposed by German philosopher Edmund Husserl in 1917. He emphasized the observational description on the phenomenon. The current phenomenology theory in the field of architecture is broadly divided into two categories. One is based on the theory by Husserl's student Martin Heidegger. In 1927, he related the phenomenology to architecture. He proposed the view of 'existence' which explore the inner relationship between human beings, nature and artificial environment. Another one is based on the theory proposed by Maurice Merleau-ponty in 1945. The book *Phenomenology of Perception* talked about the body influence on existence. He emphasized the importance of body to percept the environment.

³ Groat, Linda N., and David Wang. *Architectural research methods*. John Wiley & Sons, 2013. p. 228

⁴ Marieke Kuipers, Wessel de Jonge, *Design from Heritage: Strategies for Conservation and Conversion*, TU Delft, 2017. P. 61

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, M. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge, 2002, p.vii

⁶ Marieke Kuipers, Wessel de Jonge, *Design from Heritage: Strategies for Conservation and Conversion*, TU Delft, 2017. P. 101

The book of Kevin Lynch *Image of the city* and *View from the road* were based on the Heidegger's theory. Lynch use mental map and diagram to analyze the city image which inspire me to use the same methods to record the building image for citizens.

Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz according to Heidegger's theory proposed the concept of *genius loci* in his book *Genius Loci-Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture* in 1980. In the book, he defines 'place' as the "totality material substance, shape, texture and color. Together these things determine an 'environmental character', which is the essence of place."⁷ In order to investigate a place, he first observed the phenomenon of the place from the following five aspects: things, order between things, emotional characteristics, light, and the pace of life.⁸ He mainly used the method of description and photography. In his theory, he provides the guide to study the place of spirit. In addition, According to Guo, spirit of place is the unique atmosphere and characteristic of the place. People recognize and understand the specific character of space by perception, cognition and identification.⁹ In terms of perception of spirit of place, people percept the place to shape an abstract and mental image about the space by different sensory such as smell, vision and touch etc.¹⁰ Cognition of the spirit of place needs to analyze and integrate different elements of environment. To strengthen the formation of environmental image, we must consider the understanding of the material composition of the environment, the environmental form, and the connotation of the environment. Identification of the spirit of place means that the place with certain atmosphere can affect people's emotion and create psychology connection with people.¹¹ According to the theory spirit of place, it is understood how to define the spirit of place by analysis of human patterns and perception, cognition and identification of the space to gain its identity.

After establishing the structure of his architectural phenomenology, Norberg-Schultz said that what he needed in the future was to continue to study the architectural elements by phenomenological methods. His student, Norwegian architect Thomas Thiis-Evensen's book *Prototype in Architecture* (1987) filled this gap. Basically, the book can be regarded as a "dictionary" to interpret the meaning of various architectural elements based on the scale of human existence. Its purpose is to establish "a common formal language that we can immediately understand beyond personal or cultural boundaries". Thiis-Evensen divides all architectural elements into three categories: "floor", "wall", and "roof". It should be noted that he does not care about the structural significance of concrete walls or brick walls here, but classifies them according to the role of each element in giving shelter to people or in creating 'inside' and 'outside'. Then he inspected the various geometric shapes and materials of the typical examples such as the roof in the category of flat ceiling, dome ceiling, mirror ceiling and so on. He interprets the existence meaning of a prototype according to the motion, weight, and material.¹² For example, he depicted the different feelings of wide and gentle stairs and narrow and steep stairs. The former means welcome and easygoing and the latter suggests the particularity and mystery of the space at the top of the stairs.¹³ It indicates that different elements of space will give people the different feeling and sense. Also, it provide the method how to diagram with the description of the feeling.

Steven Holl published a book *Anchoring* in 1996 which marked the beginning of his study on architectural phenomenology. This book was affected by Heidegger's theory. He emphasized the importance of spirit of place. In his opinion, he thought the spirit of place is the foundation of architecture design. Then, in his book *Questions of Perception* (2007), He analyzes and summarizes the phenomena that can be felt by people's perceptions. He calls them "phenomenal zones" such as enmeshed experience, perspectival space, color, light and shadow, spatiality of night, time duration and perception, water, sound, detail etc. the phenomenological discussion was first turned from architectural theory research to an operational application method discussion. He said it is not the form of construction that

7 Norberg-Schulz, C. *Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980, p. 6-8

8 Norberg-Schulz, C. *Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York: Rizzoli, 1980, p. 42-48

9 Guo Linlin, spirit of place research on the reuse of old buildings. Diss. Beijing Jiaotong University, 2011

10 Guo Linlin, spirit of place research on the reuse of old buildings. Diss. Beijing Jiaotong University, 2011

11 Guo Linlin, spirit of place research on the reuse of old buildings. Diss. Beijing Jiaotong University, 2011

12 Thiis-Evensen, Thomas. *Archetypes in Architecture*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1987, p. 21.

13 Thiis-Evensen, Thomas. *Archetypes in Architecture*. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1987, p. 89-103.

expresses the meaning, but the perception of construction that makes the building meaningful. His methods inspire me to analysis the intangible aspects of building by physical elements.

IV POSITIONING

According to the previous discussion, my research position is to research how to inherit intangible values of the heritage building by phenomenology based on the general heritage value assessment metrics. The research approaches base on the phenomenology of perception are adopted because although it is a subjective study, it tries to analyze based on the physical elements to some extent. The methods are sketches and writing to record the spatial experience. In addition, different elements in the space such as light and shadow, material, color, spatial order will be diagramed and listed with the feeling description to analyze what to constitute the atmosphere of space that I may maintain in the future intervention. In addition, the theory of the spirit of place help me to understand the identity of the building. Based on the understanding on the spirit of place, I research the human pattern on the site and sketch how people use the place. Then, I interview the residents nearby and the tourists first come to the site in order to understand the meaning of the building for people. I also asked interviewees to draw the mind drawings of the building which represent the building image for people. Therefore, the site, space plan, spirit of place of 7 layers are researched by phenology. However, the phenomenological research is inevitably subjective. Therefore, it is not only research method for heritage building research. The historical research or contextual research may conducted on other layers which is objective. In addition, in order to avoid the subjectivism of phenology, group works in research can avoid the excessive subjective phenomenological research.

In the heritage design studio, all the researches are based on the value assessment metrics. According to different projects, the research focuses and research methods will be different. The important task for the heritage design is to capture the essential quality of the building and inherit it. However, nowadays, more and more heritage designs seems to be the repetition of some design strategies. For example, some architects blindly emphasize the contrast of old and new in form but never consider the essence of the building. The phenomenological research is valuable that helps me to better understand the intangible elements such as the spirit of place of the heritage building so that the essence of the building could be inherited. Paying attention to the intangible aspects, spirit of place when evaluating the heritage building is key to building transformation. Italian Carlo Scarpa rebuild the Museo di Castelvecchio. The design strategy is a careful blend of the old and new. Although there is new intervention, Scarpa inherit the original spirit of place and create new place for the building. He convey the classical spirit of the historical building with the modern expression.

Coming back to my initial research question: how to inherit intangible values of the heritage building the Beursgebouw. The phenomenology as the main research method guides me to define the intangible aspects of building like spatial quality, atmosphere and spirit of place which are the essence of the heritage building that I will inherit and develop in the intervention design.



Museo di Castelvecchio, Derive from: douban.com

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