LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT
Self-Assessment on Research Methods

EVENT- NESS
a phenomenological and performative approach to existential space

Silvia Leone
4744926

6 December 2018

EVENT- NESS
a phenomenological and performative approach to existential space

I - Introduction

Architecture is a body of knowledge that is constantly developing and which embraces a multiplicity of aspects, from history, geography, anthropology and sociology to theory, design and professional practice. This entails that the individuals who confront the task of appropriating some of this knowledge have to refine a set of tools and instruments, which allow them to take control over this multi-faceted discipline. As for every field, knowledge is gathered and developed not only on the base of information. Instead, that information must get corroborated by data, which are collected and tested on the basis of empirical facts and measurable experiences. This is what allows research to be valid as a science and therefore calls for a method, by which to observe the world and define the type of architecture that we want to build. It is likely that the product of this knowledge-producing research will not lead to an all-embracing theory able to answer everything conclusively. Therefore it is productive to welcome this complexity and to try conducting research one question at a time.

This is indeed the aspect that most intrigued me about the Research Methods lecture series. The possibility of unlocking new methods for architectural research, other than the traditional trilogy of context - history - typology, which guided my Bachelor studies, was extremely refreshing. With particular interest I followed "Spacial Narratives" by Klaske Havik and the introduction on heuristics by Jorge Mejia. The work of Havik, which proceeds from a phenomenological point of view, focused on the possibility that not only academic writing but also literature and personal writing are a useful instrument to capture all those subjective impressions and details of a place, which the traditional tools of architecture, such as drawing and photography, are not able to restitute. Telling narratively about architecture is a beautiful means to crystallise simultaneously landscapes, soundscapes, smellscapes, tastescapes and touchscapes with the simple but careful juxtaposition of words. At the same time, the introduction on heuristics by Jorge Mejia proved to be eye-opening in the way that heuristics allows to acquire a certain knowledge through an immediate and 'hands-on' approach. This idea of concreteness and interactivity was also stimulated by the lecture on material culture and Kenneth Frampton's theory of tectonics, where there is a certain attention to materiality and the poetics that can arise from the consideration of architecture as a manufactured and crafted object.

All these elements have therefore shaped the approach I have chosen for the research of my thesis. The graduation project sits within the chair of Methods and Analysis and is located in Bogotá. Colombia is a very heterogeneous context and Bogotá is a complex city, which lives on fragile social and political dynamics, easy to perceive as an outsider by difficult to deeply understand. The city is divided in *estratos*, different layers of income which catalogue citizens in rich and poor, while also determining areas and neighbourhoods. Guarded buildings, gated blocks and impenetrable neighbourhoods constitute the hard tissue of a culture based on distrust, violence and inequality, where public often rhymes with hardship, danger and corruption. The people of Bogotá, especially the least wealthy, are the most important agent in the urban public space. They define it by informally dwelling in it and using it for the most disparate activities. Bogotá has a desperate need for public spaces which can inspire safety, well-being and pride, but because of the extreme multiplicity of these social, political, economical and cultural grounds, it is helpful to first recognise and accept this complexity and then to identify a starting point for analysis. I started from the neighbourhood of Teusaquillo in the geographic centre of Bogotá and my interest is to analyse that particular architectural layer that is existential space. My research question is therefore to unfold in which ways urban public space is appropriated, shaped and distorted by the immediate and ever-changing lives of thousands of people who act and participate in it.

II - Research-methodological discussion

Analysing existential space implies an attention to sensuous aspects of life which also influence or are influenced by architecture and that are often disregarded in traditional architectural thinking. Existential space exists beyond the structural, functional and measurable characteristics of architecture; it is an overlay made of sensorial and psychological conditions which originate in the body. As stated by Kent Bloomer and Charles Moore "The most essential and memorable sense of three-dimensionality originates in the body experience and this sense constitutes a basis for understanding spacial feeling in our experience of buildings"[1]. The approach used for this research centres itself within the field of phenomenology and establishes the body as our first three-dimensional tool and the senses as a rightful apparatus to produce knowledge. This methodology proceeds in a circle: it draws upon phenomenological theories as a departing point, where the body as a multi-sensory device is central; then it focuses on the application of those findings through a heuristic approach by the use of performativity and human geography; this allows to map ethnographic traces and reconstruct a sort of sensorial archaeology of a place by putting together "fragments which appear to be disconnected and disparate, while knowing that it will never be possible to assemble all the parts"[2]. Finally, the methodology aims at using the tectonic theory of Kenneth Frampton and the attention to materiality as a project design tool, which does not betray the anti-ocularcentric premises of this research.

Phenomenology, because of the ever-changing conditions of what is manifest is always evolving and never constant. On the other hand, human geography, by studying the interactions of people and their culture, economy and community within a certain environment, supplies qualitative data about that layer of existential space which is so variegated and volatile. The combination of both can possibly help mapping the complexity of the lived urban space in Bogotá and offer a better understanding looking forward to a project proposal.

When approaching the world of phenomenology, Marcel Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* acted as a starting point for the philosophical framing of the subject and the exploration of the concepts of sensation, memory and body. In order to translate this theoretical background to the world of architecture, most of the works of Juhani Pallasmaa have been analysed in depth. Among those, *The Eyes of the Skin* probably provides the most extensive and complete argument of the theory of ocularcentrism, according to which the Western world and its contemporary society have elected sight as its predominant sense and neglected the others. According to Pallasmaa, "the inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of the negligence of the body and the senses, and an imbalance in our sensory system."[3] When shifting to the realm of urbanism and geography we also find an attention to the multi-sensoriality of the urban landscape in *"Sense of the city: an alternate approach to urbanism"*, a collection of essays edited by Mirko Zardini, where there is a critical analysis of the visual hegemony and an exploration of overlooked modes of perception. Royston Landau's *Notes on the concept of an architectural position* and Ray Lucas's *Research Methods for Architecture* provided a foundation reading on heuristics, while Adam Latham and Steve Pile explored the application of heuristics within the field of human geography, with particular emphasis on performance and emotional perception as new research tools. To narrow down and explore further the idea of performance as a heuristic technique, *Thinking through things* by Amiria Henare has provided an anthropological theoretical background to the meaningfulness of objects as ethnographic traces through which to encounter a new environment.

III - Research-methodological reflection

Phenomenology and the recuperation of body and sensoriality as a central concern in architectural discourse is a rather recent interest, as a response to a long history of giving vision predominance. Already in 1988 Italo Calvino describes our society as "a rainfall of images"[4] and points at the obsession that our society has with the acts of seeing and/or being seen. In the 90s Levin relates this hegemony of the sense of sight to a necessity of power:

> "the will to power is very strong in vision. There is a very strong tendency in vision to grasp and fixate, to reify and totalise; a tendency to dominate, secure, and control, which eventually, because it was so extensively promoted, assumed a certain uncontested hegemony over our culture and its philosophical discourse, establishing, in keeping with the instrumental rationality of our culture and technological character of our society, an ocularcentric metaphysics of presence."[5]

This ocularcentric quality of architecture follows a historical path. When building the Acropolis the proportion of the columns were adjusted in order to counteract, in the distance, the ocular distortion. In philosophical terms, in addition to the aesthetics, we can read in Heraclitus that "eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears"[6]. The hegemony of sight has grown since. Descartes in "*L'Homme*"[7] *(ca.1664)* draws a diagram of his theory of vision based upon the pineal gland. The gland, by unifying in one the images collected by the eyes, would defeat the duplicity of all other "organs" (two eyes, two hands, two nostrils, two lips, two ears) and therefore their fallacy. Vision is again considered the purest form of knowledge because, of the senses, is the one that never comes into contact with the object of knowledge. The introduction of perspective in the XV century has also greatly shifted the perception of the self in relation to the space and glorified the capacity of vision. The Modernists were also visual designers. Le Corbusier's numerous statements confirm his believes for a visual architecture: "I am and I remain an impenitent visual - everything is in the visual".[8]

In contemporary times, technology and the development of the image as the preferred form of communication has definitely consecrated vision as the most used of our senses, turning slowly our perception of the world into this ocularcentric perspective. The anthropologist Walter J. Ong retraces the origin of this shift from a culture where orality was the privileged form of transferring knowledge and creating memories to a purely visual one. "Though words are grounded in oral speech, writing tyrannically locks them into a visual field for ever [...] a literate person cannot fully recover a sense of what the word is to a purely oral person".[9]

Perhaps it is because of the fear of this irreversible process that "In recent years", Zardini explains, "the human and social sciences, from anthropology to geography, have undergone a 'sensorial revolution' in which the 'senses' constitute not so much a new field of study as a fundamental shift in the mode and media we employ to observe and define our own fields of study"[10] Nonetheless, "sensorial – specifically, non-visual – models have been and continue to be suppressed, Howes suggests, out of lingering fear that "an emphasis on sensation entails a loss of critical awareness and precipitates a slide into a morass of emotion and desire" – that sensation does not lend itself to intellectual distance, to critical investigation".[11] This led to a recent wave of history of emotions and human geography, where there is the recognition of this sensory method as a legitimate analytical tool. In human geography, particularly, this phenomenological approach has led to an appreciation of the event-ness of a certain environment and the influence that affect and emotion have in the unfolding of it. Adam Latham is interested in how 'place-making' is affected by "the work of embodied routine, routines of occupation, and use"[12], which brought to the development of a method where performance can be a tool to address the ephemeral nature of this event-ness.

The idea of shifting the focus on body-centrism has always informed my theoretical interest and design approaches. In particular, within the context of Bogotá it seemed appropriate to confront the complexity of the urban environment and social apparatus through the hands-on approach offered by the idea of performance suggested by Latham and Pile. Because of the big extent of the area of investigation - Bogotá and the quarter of Teusaquillo - the methods suggested by human geography were relevant to study a large area which was to be understood first at an urban level and then on an architectural one. Latham suggests in his own research the

utilisation of a diary to be completed by a selected pool of individuals and the subsequent interviews with the diarists as a way to record the intricate event-ness of a given environment. My approach proceeded by a similar method, but, because of the limited amount of time available in Bogotá, instead of the diary, film-making was used as a tool to record series of data. These data had to do with various soundscapes, touchscapes and landscapes in which different individuals would act. These recordings were conducted with the help of a domestic object, an old silver photo frame, as a physical instrument to guide movement and direction within the investigated area and also to catch the curiosity of locals, who were then interviewed. This idea derived from *Thinking through things* by Henare, according to which, rather than facing a new environment 'analytically' - implying a set of pre-determined criteria on the basis of which measuring the things/objects encountered, it is possible to use these 'things' as heuristic elements to unfold phenomena and produce new and unexpected encounters. The photo frame, indeed, helped noticing some details of the environment and discovering new objects, and it was used in a performative way to recreate scenes or approach people.

1 - Interview with Juan.
The full-length video can be seen at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5US_Yhz9uFE&t=21s

The theory of tectonics by Kenneth Frampton has instead proved useful to inspire some analysis work which was carried out after returning from Colombia. This attention to the materiality, in combination with the interest for hapticity coming from the phenomenological approach, brought to the exploration of some of the findings through model-making. This took shape as a haptic map of a selected area of Teusaquillo, where diverse unapparent sensorial qualities of the neighbourhood were recreated in the form of haptic, smelling or hearing sensations. This was done through the use of unconventional modelling materials, i.e. toothpaste, cloth, aluminium foil, coffee powder and cotton.

2 - Haptic map of a junction in Teusaquillo

In conclusion, the combination of film, models and interaction with found objects favoured the recording of a significant amount of information. This allowed to start answering my research question by recreating a partial yet unbiased picture of the given environment, which was able to restitute the intricate event-ness and chaotic nature of Bogotan spacial-social relationships.

IV - Positioning

My research position is corroborated by methodologies which span from the spheres of phenomenology, body-centrism, heuristics and material culture.

The realm of images we live in, whether in its architectural form or as an exposure to cinema, photography and mostly social media, had and still has today a fast growing impact on contemporary cities and lives. Ocularcentrism is tangibly affecting comportment in terms of individuality and interpersonal relations. The solitude, alienation and detachment of contemporary behavioural patterns can be addressed to this hegemony of sight and the consequent disability of the other senses. Sunsan Sontag states that "a mentality which looks at the world as a set of potential photographs has an incalculable effect on our ethical sensibility. Photography makes us feel that the world is more available to us that it actually is."[13]

Therefore the introduction of 'body talks' within the architectural discourse is a fundamental aspect, which should not be considered inferior to other more conventional and technical research fields and methods. In fact, this attention to the body and its sensual properties is also able to stimulate discussions on equality, gender and human rights, which can prompt the production of more accessible and meaningful architecture.

Nonetheless, I believe that traditional phenomenological approaches, such as those of Pallasmaa, leave room for some misleading assumptions about the concept of 'body'. That is the assumption of the existence of a universal body, which is able to sense unequivocally in the same way. It misses to consider the plurality of sensations and phenomena that different bodies, with different cultural backgrounds, physical abilities and social imprints are able to perceive in different contexts. In the case of Bogotá, a simple example is the huge difference between the 'insider' body and the 'outsider' body. The Bogotan body will perceive a set environment, whether social, political and built, in a completely different way than a foreign body, giving birth to two completely phenomenological pictures of the same place. If phenomenology is a useful method because of the fluctuating nature of what appears to a sentient observer, it works best in combination with the idea of a heuristic technique. The approaches of

Latham, Thrift and Pile can be a complementary method to be aware of and embrace the complexity and the existential layer of the urban realm.

That is why the space within bodies interact, architecture, cannot be unimportant, because it creates the scene for those interactions, where ultimately the body itself can be considered as an architectural system: a space within the space, where the senses are the epistemological parameters. They are in fact protagonists of our approach to knowledge, which is knowledge of the outside as well as of the inside, it is a conscience of the other as well as of the self. The scope of architecture is thus to be able to re-establish our connection with these parameters and to make us aware that the space we inhabit is not a viewing machine or a peephole, but instead the world we inevitably belong to and act in, not as spectators but as sensuous being.

The ultimate responsibility of architecture is to house people and host their social action. And to take care of people means, architecturally, to accommodate their bodies including a number of sensorial perceptions that convey comfort and, ultimately, pleasure. Pleasure, affect and emotion therefore direct that social action, dictating the configuration and metamorphosis of those same spaces that architecture set out in the first place. Bogotá is the perfect and worrisome example of this. The problematic aspect is that there seems to be a certain reticence within the architectural practice to confront these theoretical instances. Whereas there is a lot written about phenomenology and the importance of perception and affect, there is no trace of effective efforts to bring this discussion into the realisation of a building. Some architects like Steven Holl and Kengo Kuma have often expressed their sympathy towards these theories, but it is still difficult to see practical manifestations of it. Somehow, the Chair of Methods and Analysis tries to bridge this gap between theory and practice by considering them two parallel instruments to treat architecture, and therefore developing my graduation project within it, can be the appropriate place to try to overcome this dichotomy.

Sometimes, as architects or students, we feel the need to formulate a truth, an evident and irrefutable truth to justify our choices or actions or position taken. But after all, reality is much more complex, and architecture much messier than a unidirectionally developing discipline. Leaving aside technical aspects, architecture as humanities has to do with issues of humans and their ever-evolving and always diverse process of existence. Therefore it is definitely possible that my truth is perfectly consistent and evident next to someone else's truth, which has been equally and unequivocally proved.

As a result of my findings, I have understood that there cannot be only one way of analysing an environment, a human sample or a city; there is instead a multiplicity of orders, an over layering of perspectives and information which contribute all to the rendition of a specific context. Pretending to grabbing them all and defining them within an unified view or a catalogue of judgements, types and forms (whether architectural or social), it is a negative practice in the exercise of the architectural profession. The architect who tries, often as an outsider to a given context, to understand it all, as an all-governing god, is counter-productive to the realisation of meaningful and appropriate architecture. Therefore, it is instead by staying humble and trying to confront ourselves with the multiplicities and diversities presented to us that we, as architects, are able to make, sometimes perhaps small, but yet significant changes to the urban environment and eventually to the lives of others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adam Latham, "The possibilities of performance", Environment and Planning A 35, 2003, p. 1901-1906.

Adam Latham. "Research, performance, and doing human geography: some reflections on the diary-photograph, diary-interview method", Environment and Planning A35, 2003, p.1993-2017

Amiria Henare, et al., *Thinking through things: theorising artefacts ethnographically* (London: Routledge 2007)

D. M. Levin, "*Decline and Fall - Ocularcentrism in Heiddeger's Reading of the History of Metphysics" in Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press 1993)

David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (New York:Berg 2005)

Georgette Legée, 'L'Homme de René Descartes (Editions de 1662 et 1664): Physiologie et Mécanisme',Histoire des Sciences Médicales 21,4 (Paris: Société Francaise de l'Histoire de Medicine 1987)

Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Garzanti, 1988)

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Garden of Forking Paths* (New York: Penguin 2018 (1995))

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin* (New York: John Wiley 2005)

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand* (New York: John Wiley 2009)

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*. (Helsinki: Rakennustieto 2001)

Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Embodied Image* (Chichester: Wiley & Sons Publishers 2011)

Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in tectonic culture: the poetics of construction in nineteenth and twentieth century architecture* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 2001(1995))

Kent C. Bloomer, Charles W. Moore, *Body Memory Architecture,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Print, 1977)

Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture* (London: Architectural Press 1959)

Linda Groat, David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley 2013)

Mattern Shannon, "Silent, Invisible City: Mediating Urban Experience for the Other Senses" In: Frank Eckardt et. al. (eds.): Mediacity: Situations, Practices and Encounters (Berlin: Frank & Timme 2009) pp. 155-76

Mirko Zardini, *Sense of the City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism* (Montréal: Lars Müller Publishers 2005)

Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King 2016)

Royston Landau, *Notes on the concept of an architectural position* (London: AA Architectural Association School of Architecture 1981)

Steve Pile, "Emotions and affect in recent human geography" (Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers 2009) 5-20.

Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World* (London NY: Routeledge 1991)

ENDNOTES

[1] Bloomer, Kent C., Moore, Charles W., *Body Memory Architecture,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Print, 1977), p.X

[2] Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge (Tavistock, 1974, Editions Gallimard, 1969) cited in Royston Landau, *Notes on the concept of an architectural position* (London: AA Architectural Association School of Architecture 1981), p.4

[3] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin* (New York: John Wiley 2005), p.17

[4] Calvino, Italo. *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio.* Garzanti, 1988, p. 57

[5] Levin, D. M., "*Decline and Fall - Ocularcentrism in Heiddeger's Reading of the History of Metphysics" in Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993) p. 205

[6] Heraclitus. Fragment 101a, cited in David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, ed.,"Decline and Fall - Ocularcentrism in Heiddeger's Reading of the History of Metaphysics" in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) p.82

[7] Georgette Legée, 'L'Homme de René Descartes (Editions de 1662 et 1664): Physiologie et Mécanisme',Histoire des Sciences Médicales 21,4 (Paris: Société Francaise de l'Histoire de Medicine 1987) p. 381-96

[8] Le Corbusier, *Towards a new architecture* (London: Architectural Press 1959) p. 164

[9] Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World,* (London NY: Routeledge 1991) p.12

[10] Mirko Zardini, *Sense of the City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism* (Montréal: Lars Müller Publishers 2005) p.22

[11] Mattern Shannon, "Silent, Invisible City: Mediating Urban Experience for the Other Senses" In: Frank Eckardt et. al. (eds.): Mediacity: Situations, Practices and Encounters (Berlin: Frank & Timme 2009) p.160. Shannon quotes David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (New York:Berg 2005), p.6

[12] Adam Latham, "The possibilities of performance", Environment and Planning A 35, 2003, p. 1902

[13] Susan Sontag, *On photography* (New York: Penguin 1986) p.7,16,24