

The perception of space within the field of architecture and heritage



Impression of the open space at Hembrug. Photo by author.

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I INTRODUCTION

Research-methodological awareness within the field of architecture is fundamental. The chosen method and approach influences the complete design process and henceforth the final intervention. Therefore, it is of great importance to understand the various methods and to be conscious about the numerous methodologies which are available to a researcher and designer. Also, it is essential to apprehend the effects of the chosen methodology to understand why different findings are what they are.

The course Research Methods has been enormously important to me in order to be aware of the different methodologies, what kind of impact it can have on a design process and what kind of impact it can have on the final interventions. It helped me grounding my understanding of the epistemology; they exist on a wide range with each of them relating to different aspects of architectural research. It also helped me understanding that all these several methods have their own advantages and disadvantages. It can't be stated that one methodology is better than one other. According to Charles Jencks, the field of theoretical research is interrelated within the field of context-led analysis. There is no hierarchy of importance, they are complimentary.¹ Using several methods should lead to a more complete picture of the context.

Within this thesis, the episteme of phenomenology will be analyzed. The perception of different research methods can differ for each person. This comes from the fact that every person comes from a different environment or school and that leads to different perceptions of methodologies. This means that research is never a value-free pursuit. Research comes with structure, based on elementary assumptions about how the world is working and about the methods knowledge is explored. In order to understand and communicate with each other, it is important to be aware of these different 'languages' and try to master them. These research and design languages can be seen as architectural tools and methods which can be applied in a context.

The context, which is related to this thesis, comes from the studio of Heritage and Architecture. Beside research being never a value-free pursuit, the context of the studio of Heritage and Architecture has been valued as well by different methodologies. Hembrug, near Amsterdam, is a former military terrain with an industrial character and lots of vacancy. This area will be transformed into a context containing recreational and residential program.²

Before transforming the area, it's important to know the area, its history, its buildings and the reason why things are what they are. Each graduation student has chosen an ensemble within the area of Hembrug to analyze. The area where I deal with is an ensemble located at the tip of the area, at the waterfront. It has unique spatial elements which differ from the rest of the area. Besides the fact that methodologies can be interpreted differently due to multiple schools of thought that any researcher consciously or unconsciously possesses and uses, space can be interpreted differently as well. One can say the open space lacks a mass while another one perceives the open space is an experience on its own. Not only the buildings needs to be valued, the open space as well. Research and design are interrelated and on both aspects is interpretation enormously relevant. Hence, the following question rises; what is the role of phenomenology in architectural research when exploring heritage?

¹ Jencks, C. *Architecture 2000 and beyond: success in the art of prediction*. (Chichester: Wiley academy, 2000).

² SteenhuisMeurs. *Hembrugterrein – Zaanstad. Cultuurhistorische analyse*. (Schiedam, 2010).

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

The site of Hembrug, for the studio Heritage and Architecture, needed to be researched. In architecture, phenomenology is the most relevant starting point regarding analyzing an urban context. Since the context of Hembrug is an historical context, it's important to research and intervene with sensitivity, based on context-led research and theory-led research.³ In a lot of cases, architects want to emphasize on their own ideals, at the expense of the cultural values of the context. According to Heidegger, it helps to build a more complete sense of place when the historical events and cultural values have been mastered.⁴

Since the site of Hembrug has a long history with many events, it makes sense to take the historical research method into account. According to Groat and Wang,⁵ history research brings into view something from the past. Since these events happened in the past, it is not empirically accessible, that means that the researcher must use various tactics for unearthing evidence from a time and a world which is not my own. From an emic state of mind, the area has been analyzed.⁶ Therefore, several tools have been used in order to collect data and gain knowledge. Before making a choice regarding the ensemble, several ensembles have been investigated by visiting them. From the seven ensembles, the student had to choose one ensemble to elaborate on. I chose the tip of the area because of the first experience, not because of the buildings which are located on this ensemble. Most relevant for my personal experience were the spatial elements. The area contains unique open spaces which cannot be found in other parts of Hembrug. These open spaces are experienced as peaceful and calm. This is my own perception of space. To observe the ensemble; several tools have been applied to describe the existing socio-spatial qualities. Sketches, photographs, mapping and diagrams, as well as creating a timeline to understand the historical context, were made in order to catalogue the emotions I experienced in the ensemble of Hembrug at macro, meso and micro scales.⁷ All this data is mostly visual based because architects usually have a preference for communicating by graphics instead of text. But, besides communicating in graphics only, it was needed to apply theory-led research as well to get a grip on the ensemble.

According to Kevin Lynch,⁸ there are five elements which can be noticed in a context which lead to a more concrete and objective analysis of the area. These five elements have been analyzed in the context of the ensemble of Hembrug. Therefore, it was clearer what the problems, qualities and properties are of the chosen ensemble; this seems as an objective analysis tool. Even though it seems as an objective tool, also theoretical research is about perception. For example, one of the five elements of Kevin Lynch is the *node*. One can see a node within the infrastructure of the ensemble as the node of the area, another researcher defines the stairs and hallways in a building as the node. These different elements have different zoom levels. Historical research seems more objective, since historical events are as facts. However, according to Groat and Wang,⁹ one important aspect of historical research is the interpretation. Just as an open space can be experienced differently between people, the researchers' point of view is a key part of history research and narration. There are two aspects within this research method. One of them is the theoretical aspect, the other one the technical aspect to the project of interpretation. When it comes to the technical aspect, the researcher must know where to look for the evidence from the past and how to look for it.¹⁰ From there, it's necessary to arrange the evidence in an interpretative framework which requires theoretical commitments to support it. To link back to a previous statement; also, in this case, the role of schools of thought becomes important since this can be interpreted differently.

³ Lucas, R. *Research Methods for Architecture*. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2015).

⁴ Heidegger, M. *Poetry, language, thought*. (New York, 1971).

⁵ Wang, D. and Groat, L. *Architectural Research Methods*. (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

⁶ Lucas, R. *Research Methods for Architecture*. (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2015).

⁷ Pallasmaa, J. *Inhabiting Time*. (Architectural Design 86.1, 2016).

⁸ Lynch, K. *The image of the city*. (MIT press: Vol. 11, 1960).

⁹ Wang, D. and Groat, L. *Architectural Research Methods*. (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

¹⁰ Duff, W. Craig, B. and Cherry, J. *Historians' use of archival sources: promises and pitfalls of the digital age*. (The Public Historian: 26.2, 2004).

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In order to get grip on the used research methods, it is important to have a clear overview of the historical-theoretical context. Knowing the historical-theoretical context could lead the researcher into a specific direction. Phenomenology plays a role both within the architecture in the creation and in the experience of a constructed work. The ancient Greek *phainómenon* means 'the visible' or 'appearance'. On the one hand, phenomenology plays a role in the 'appearance', on the other hand in the appearance of a built work.¹¹ Phenomenological inquiry derives from the German philosophers, such as Heidegger and Husserl. Beside these German philosophers, more recent versions of phenomenology influenced the social sciences. Alfred Schutz, sociologist, tried to develop a "phenomenological sociology" that would connect the traditional sociology and Edmund Husserl's philosophical phenomenology.¹²

Around the 1960s, a generation of architects came up with the idea that architecture should participate in the liberation of human experience from the constraints of the social status quo. During these years, modernism became very popular in the West. But these young postwar generation views its rigid regulated aesthetics as the symbol of an overwhelming and closed social order. The thought was that the individual experience got denied and became unimportant by the process of industrialization. At the moment the modernist ideology didn't seem to be the ideal ideology anymore, some members of that postwar generation attempted to reground the future of modernism in the premodern past. This direction of change required fundamental changes where the abstract ideas of space and form transformed into new notions of history and theory. The conviction that technology drove history wasn't the incentive anymore. New in the motive was the sense that architectural history was driven by the search for authentic and original experiences. This process of changes wasn't done by one group with an emblem. It was done by several individual architects whose achievements together can only be understood post factum as establishing a new formation which replicated history as the experiential content of modern architecture; architectural phenomenology. Therefore, this process took decades instead of years.¹³

When relating the before mentioned process to the context and research of the ensemble of Hembrug from the studio Heritage and Architecture, several similarities can be noticed. According to the modernists, space, forms and experiences were defined and standardized. Therefore, own interpretation wasn't present nor important at all. During the starting years of Hembrug, designs were made from a functional and optimal point of view to make the production process as efficient as possible. Hence, a rigid grid with standard dimensions was realized. But not only standard dimensions and materials; also, standard experiences and interpretations of the context. Routes, workflows and spaces weren't intended to create experiences. Moreover, spaces were designed to keep the focus of the employees on the work itself, rather than on the environment with its experiences and interpretations. However, the more recent thoughts about phenomenology describes that the architectural history was driven by the search for authentic and original experiences. This occurred in Hembrug the moment the military production processes came to an end and the area became vacant; squatters and artists occupied the area and gave new life to the area. They saw potential in the area. They noticed new and open experiences and interpreted the space differently. This provided new opportunities and challenges. After a long process of changing the state of mind, there suddenly was space and room for own interpretation and own perceptions. Looking through this new kind of lens resulted in exposing the hidden qualities of the area.

¹¹ Van der Wilt, H. *Afstudeerscriptie Interieurarchitectuur*. (Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academie, 2013).

¹² Wang, D. and Groat, L. *Architectural Research Methods*. (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

¹³ Otero-Pailos, J. *Architecture's historical turn: phenomenology and the rise of the postmodern*. (U of Minnesota Press, 2013).

IV POSITIONING

When considering my own position, it's necessary to recap the theory about phenomenology, its relevance and even its existence. Phenomenology is the research of essences. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is also philosophy, that puts essences back into existence. It places the certainties into a position to reflect on it, in order to understand it. Many things are 'normal' for the human being, but sometimes it's necessary to assume that they are not 'normal' to really understand the matter. The *être-au-monde* is central in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy; people are focused on the world and present in the world. One is not only 'on' the world but also belongs to it. The focus is that of the physical subject and not that of a separate consciousness.¹⁴ According to Edward Relph, phenomenology provides a method of seeing things in daily life clearly which were somehow overshadowed first. Seeing things which are common, but experiencing them in a way which is unique.¹⁵

However, not everybody agrees with the fact that there is such thing as phenomenology. Wittgenstein stated in his work *Remarks on Colour* that "there is no such thing as phenomenology, but there are indeed phenomenological problems". He disagrees with the statement that the universal logic could be derived from the phenomena, but he does use the phenomenological method. That would mean that phenomenological architecture doesn't exist, but a phenomenological approach does. Also, Jean-Paul Sartre states that essences and facts aren't comparable. And that the ones who start their research by looking at the facts will never end up with the essences.¹⁶ However, within the historical context of Hembrug, for the studio Heritage and Architecture, I embrace the statement that it is important to look at facts. Events that happened in the past are facts; they have been documented and are provides insight in the atmosphere and experiences which were there in the past. But, I agree with the remark of not ending up with the essences. Therefore, several methodologies have to be applied. One of the most important one is to apply a phenomenological approach.

When researching an historical context and from there start designing within a heritage context, several lenses can be applied. The social lens is derived from praxeology, the study of human action and conduct, focusing on how people interact with the space. This lens provides information about the way people use and inhabit space. A second lens is the ecological lens. This lens focuses on the interrelationship of organisms and their environments. As stated before, within the historical and urban context of the studio, the open spaces are valuable and open for interpretation. Researching the area through this lens provides information about ecologies that have evolved with or without intentional human interferences. The open urban spaces felt almost romantic, peaceful and calm. This experience is related to the phenomenological approach, starting to absorb the energy and atmosphere on the site itself. These emotions, which can differ from person to person, should be explained in order to understand them and, in a later phase, use them in a design approach. A next lens is the morphological lens which dives into the form and structure of the site's geography. A feeling could be explained by looking at the orientation of the buildings, which lead to the shape of the open space in-between the masses. Spatial characteristics can be derived when researching the area through this lens. A last lens I want to mention is the material lens.¹⁷ This lens provides insight in the character and meaning of the site. The material lens relates to the study of perceptual experiences in a subjective way. Furthermore, open spaces, symbols, materials, signs and weather condition reveals the interpretations triggered by specific objects and circumstances.

Phenomenology is about perception and interpretations. If one is aware of that, experiences, emotions and interpretations can be put into perspective. Even though not everyone agrees with the definition of

¹⁴ Van der Wilt, H. *Fenomenologie en architectuur*. (Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academie, 2014).

¹⁵ Evernden, N., Seamon, D., & Mugerauer, R. *Dwelling, place and environment: Towards a phenomenology of person and world*. (Geographical Review, 77(3), 1987).

¹⁶ Van der Wilt, H. *Fenomenologie en architectuur*. (Rotterdam: Willem de Kooning Academie, 2014).

¹⁷ Luo, S., & de Wit, S. I. *Unlocking Interstices: Multiple lenses enriching the participatory design of urban leftover spaces*. (Ghent: University College, 2018).

phenomenology, its usability or even its existence, I'm positioning myself where I embrace the phenomenology. Although phenomenology made me aware of the perception of space and the interpretation of several facets within the field of architecture and urbanism, I am aware of the fact that this isn't the only nor the best way to research a historical site containing heritage. Therefore, other lenses have been mentioned which can act as a tool to contain more information from a different perspective. The material, social, morphological and ecological lenses can provide other insights and new knowledge. But, researching through these lenses also can result in different essences of the area. This relates to the phenomenology as well, where interpretation and perception play a role. The individual is able to see things which another individual may not see or may see but interpret differently. Every human being has a different background, different experiences and different emotions. Therefore it makes sense that urban spaces, architecture and landscape can be interpreted differently. It is about the perception of space, the perception of the world.

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