

SPATIAL NARRATIVES OF THE EVERYDAY PRACTICE

A phenomenological observation and visualized interpretation of the city's margin space

I INTRODUCTION

There is a hierarchy of the relationship between architecture, epistemology, and research. The architecture itself is an ontology about what a thing is and how things can be disposed of by skill and cooperation. Following the epistemology, an overall idea of how we perceive and understand the enormous information in the outer world, which functions in a conscious level as an instruction for future research and design. While the research serves as a tool or method to improve our knowledge of the things, based on our particular methodologies. In general, research is a fundamental step which digging into the context mainly through observation and experiment, in the meantime, giving chance to make clear our personal structure of principle based on the acknowledges and thoughts during the research, eventually, contribute to the next step of design and practice on building technology. Thus the methodology of research becomes a critical decision, which macroscopically defines the overall logic of our design process, the certain way that we observe and think, the particular aspects and qualities that we concern, the theoretical and social attitudes towards our interventions, and ultimately reflects in our final design outcomes.

While there is a wide catalog of episteme and relevant method provided, it is necessary and helpful to neutrally learn different methods as varied as possible in the first step, which is exactly what the lecture series offered. Though the introduction of the research methods in the lecture and the system of inquiry and methodological practice proposed by Linda Groat and David Wang¹, I've learned how to systematically carry out my work and establish my own design logic: firstly determine my episteme, then find the relevant school of thoughts and appropriate methodologies according to my personal interests, follows by the exact strategies and tools. Also, there are several methods and plenty of cases provided in each lecture, whether experimental or practical, illustrated how research and design can benefits each other, and what findings or progress can be brought along through research. I realized through these various references that though there are different school of thoughts with different starting points, such as logical, idealist, self-conscious, intuitive, etc,² their respectively research methods are not limited in their own fields, because after all the method is a way about how a person understands everything objectively and subjectively on site. In the meantime, the collaborative report in lecture helps a lot for me to learn deeper into a particular method and find relations to my personal study, while the talks and preparations of the topic are heuristic exercises for me to think divergently and understand the episteme behind methods.

This thesis of the research-design process will be conducted in a phenomenological view, carrying out the study of the city's margin space. The research question is to dig into the role and the possible contribution of the phenomenological spatial narratives when dealing with the study of the city's margin space. Through a series of visualization techniques, establish a particular set of spatial narratives, try to conclude their spatial qualities and identities as heuristic materials for further design. In addition, there can be different epistemological frameworks adopted in some particular part of the research, such as praxeology will be the main episteme when dealing with the observation and analysis about the specific human involvements in the chosen locations. In relation to the general approach of my studio – the border and territory condition along the New Silk Road – which also suggests us to build up our own theoretical logic structure and imply into our on-site research, afterward, reproduce the research documents through narratives image-based methods. In other

words, “*theoretical research, coexists with contextual led analysis*”³, but in an overall phenomenological framework of thinking. In the following parts, I will mainly discuss the phenomenological-based study of spatial narratives and its contribution to my design project.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Before the on-site research, we had a preparation period of one month, mainly based on positivistic approaches. We studied into the macroscopic political, economical, cultural, geographic contexts in the vast relevant regions of the New Silk Road project, gradually narrowed down the target area through analysis, and determined the final six locations along a branch of the New Silk Road with a long-term strategic significance, following by detailed study as well as prediction in different scales from the view of multi-region cooperation to the view of the specific area of one city. Despite the study of context, we also searched for the online information about the local spatial condition, eventually came up with a set of pre-visit mappings with our research protocols, interests and expectations. These mappings were also brought along during the research trip as guide maps of what to expect, as well as the neutral base maps, which allow us to add multiple new layers of remarks and notes overlaid during our research on site.

The research on site was fundamentally based on observation and documentation in the phenomenological view. A series of methods were devised in the research, such as an enormous amount of photography and video filmed, sketches, writings, and mental maps. These offered a variation in the qualitative data recorded⁴. While during this objective process, I always kept a consciousness of overall awareness and divergent association, also kept considering the first-hand truths and facts in relation to the local real-life contexts. In other words, attached importance to the interactions and reciprocal influences between the inhabitants and outer urban dwellers as well as the bigger social conditions.

When dealing with the issue of human involvement, I combined the phenomenological and praxeological aspect to some degree. I basically observed and investigated the human activities and spontaneous constructions (which were mostly informal) on site, since the study of trivial day-to-day activities can reinforce a deeper understanding⁵ of an area. The structure of De Certeau's research on the everyday life⁶ was referred to as a guideline. However, more attention was paid to the phenomenological aspect, especially the impact of human participation and influence on the condition and quality of space.

The production of the site research consists of multi-media images about real contexts and everyday practices, documentation of my personal perceptual experience, along with a catalog of subdivided types of the margin space on which my project will concentrate. In this stage, the works are to narrate things as they are, show the many-sidedness of the space in research.⁷

In the following research and the transition from research to design, I worked with the methodology of interpretation. I tried to research into the productions from the site, through analysis, deconstruction, reuse and re-composition, set up my own structure of understandings of the site in the method of spatial narratives, try to reveal my position towards the specific spatial qualities and identities. The visualization technique such as collage drawing was implied to this process. Because of its high degree of freedom and flexibility, architecture participants are able to use this method to translate the real world into their own conceptual understanding of the site, through processing and secondary creation on the raw objective materials. The beneficial thing is that the usual complexity and vagueness of this method offers a sufficient vacancy for misread and reinterpretation, which always leads to more inspiration and potential possibilities. While the challenge of this method is more reflected in the process of somehow envision the non-existent super-reality with the use of surrealist techniques, montages and scenarios.⁸

The phenomenological thinking has been widely applied in contemporary architectural discussion and practice by theorists like Juhani Pallasmaa, Kenneth Frampton, Peter Zumthor and Daniel Libeskind. Among the multiple phenomenological methods, the spatial narratives based on drawings and collages has been experimented and developed in a long-term history of modern and postmodern architecture. Libeskind is a representative example who is good at translating the perceptual elements into a more architectural interpretation. It has been proved by many precedences that it is an effective method to not only set up a better understanding towards the research progress but also push the process from the research stage to the conceptual design stage.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The philosophical base of the phenomenological research is the theories of Husserl and Heidegger in the early twentieth century. Later, Norberg-Schulz defined phenomenology as “*a method well suited to penetrate the world of everyday existence*”⁹, indicated that the phenomenology could be conducted as a way of how we view, perceive and understand the outer world. The phenomenological theory emphasizes the importance of human consciousness and perception, suggest architects take the experiential aspect into consideration when doing their architectural practice.

In the contemporary field of architectural theory and practice, the phenomenological view is being widely conducted in many relevant stages of architectural work, including research, design and theoretical study. And it is generally agreed in the phenomenological field that the participation of human sensory experience should be thinking about as a critical part of the design, and even architecture should be considered as a place that interacts with the dweller or visitor. The experience of the place should be integrated into the form of architecture. Moreover, as Pallasmaa argues, the architectural practice should build up “*an experiential background for grasping and understanding the dialectics of permanence and change*”¹⁰. Since the experiential background consists of multiple kinds of sensory, it is a challenge for architects to investigate and consider in multiple aspects of experience, while translating those into their own interpretations and concepts (which can still be based on multi-media, but) result in the end as a practical construction plan.

Zumthor's way of thinking and designing clearly epitomized on the principles of phenomenology. Inspired by Heidegger's philosophical theory, Zumthor has a strong intention to put the experiential qualities to the first place of considerations, try to make architecture as a place not only a space for staying but also a place for living¹¹. In his process of formalizing an architectural project, Zumthor focused on the sensory aspects of architecture, the materiality, the atmospheric space, the light, the color -- not the specific practical techniques but the human perceptions of those things, tried to build up a physical and mental dialogue between human and the surroundings¹². (Fig.1) He believes that the space waits for the activities and everyday performances of the dwellers¹³, thus people must experience (and I think should even live for days or weeks within) a building by themselves if they want to really understand a building. I think this is also the thing to be emphasize in my personal project, not only in the research process but also in the transition to further design.

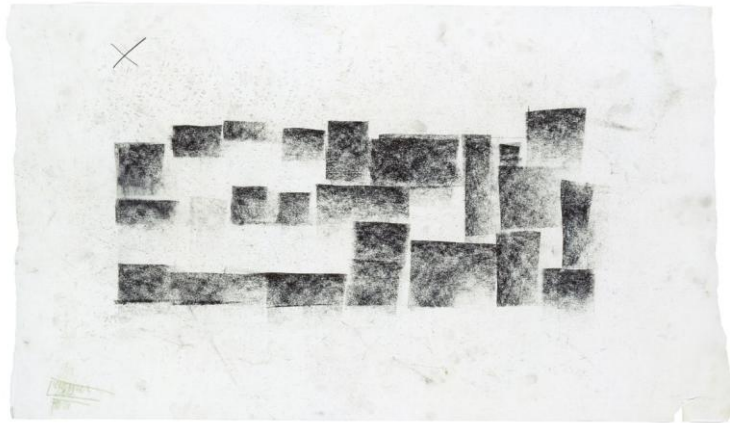


Fig. 1 Conceptual drawing: Thermal Bath of Vals by Zumthor¹⁴, showing the perceptual qualities (of the materiality and the light) rather than the practical space of architecture

While Zumthor's approach is more relating to the subjective observation of the space, Libeskind's strategy of design is well-known for the interpretation from that experiential information into his own understandings of spatial narratives, basically through the technique of visualization. Developed further from the initial artistic and ironical usage, the collage drawing was given the spatial meaning. In Libeskind's drawings, it goes beyond Kandinski's composition of "point, line and surface", intends to present and interpret his perceptions of both physical condition and cultural / historical atmosphere which potentially lied behind the real world. (Fig.2) Continuously, through this interpretation, he is able to develop steps further and eventually materialize a building that people emotionally feel attach to.

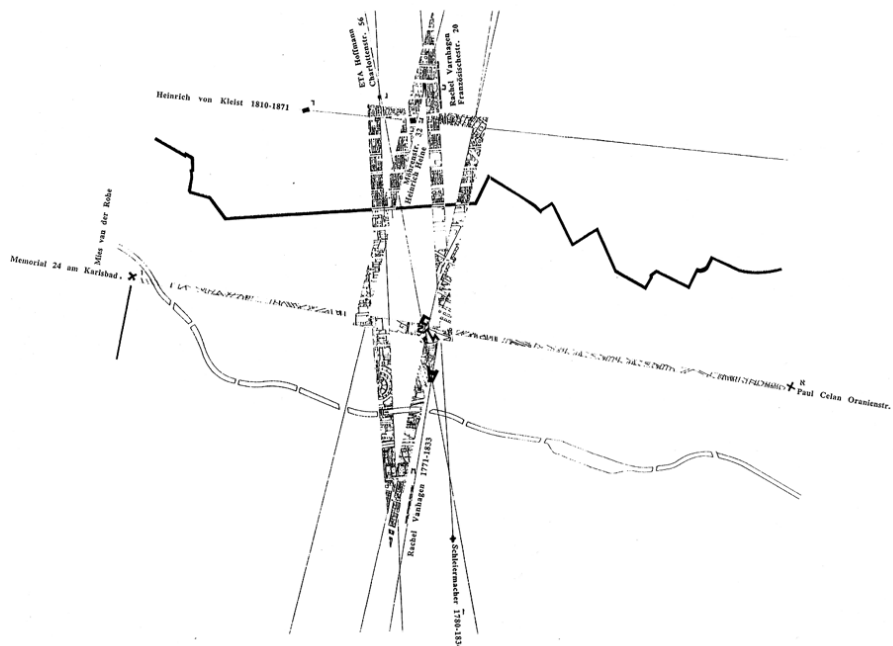


Fig. 2 Site Mapping: Competition of Berlin Museum by Libeskind¹⁵, linking abstractly the iconic buildings in a line, also showing the metaphoric cultural lines of both sides of Berlin being departed by the Berlin Wall. These things also reflect in the architecture design, creating a collective sensory of that dark period of history.

Relating to my research, I adopted Zumthor's sensitive experiential-based approach when observing the site, then referred to Libeskind's method and technique when interpreting the site. As my theme is about the informal everyday practice in the city's margin space, it is effective to not only observe and experience but also visualize my perceptions and understandings of these kinds of space.

IV POSITIONING

I am going to explain my position of how to carry out my own research in the following three parts, all relating to the phenomenological view of architecture.

Phenomenological observation of everyday practice

According to Eckartsberg and De Certeau, phenomenology is eventually considered as an interpretive study of human experience, with the purpose to “*study the meanings of human experiences in situations, as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life*”¹⁶. Related highly to my personal project, the observation towards the city’s margin space and the (mostly informal) human involvements will also emphasize on the study of the lived experience¹⁷, which are, in other words, activities, practices and atmosphere.

There is an argument about the “*life-world*”. According to Husserl, it is “*the locus of interaction between ourselves and our perceptual environments*”¹⁸. This point out the importance to find the subjective aspect from the objective world -- not only the practical truths and facts but also those qualities and ephemeral experiences. Especially in my case, as the topic is about the city’s margin space, which is always been ignored by the majority of urban dwellers, it is meaningful to reveal the hidden qualities of these life-worlds in margin space¹⁹ by the phenomenological study. And I make the plan to mark down the spatial qualities and vivid appearances in the life-world between the margin space, its inhabitant and me as an outside observer, intentionally bring them to the academic attention or even to the attention of society. While “*life-world is the world as we find it*”²⁰, it should be rather carefully treated about the position and attitude during the site research, which can determine one’s personal perception. Thus I try to keep a neutral view and don’t judge the reality I’ve seen during the research, pay more effort on the documentation of this life-world, but in the meantime make my primary interpretation through the selection of the information.

Visualized interpretation of the perceptions

After the on-site observation, the interpretation is a critical following step to translate the documented perceptions into a more subjective and personal understanding of the space. Using techniques of spatial narratives, such as drawings, to solidify the phenomenological things from inside the mind to the visible materials -- a set of spatial narratives, especially focus on everyday experience and action. As Libeskind talked about drawings, this kind of (visualized) art, which has abundant indications, makes people aware of the things which are invisibly hiding behind the reality²¹. The outcomes of the interpretation are should serve as an inspiration, but stay ambiguous for the space of misread and free understanding.

Recompose the objective reality through subjective experience

Both the observation and the interpretation will eventually contribute to the design practice. The phenomenological methodology will be beneficial especially in the sensuous perception, which is more sensitive and subjective, providing humanistic consideration and poetic view in the design process. Through the process, architects are able to derive qualities from the reality, operate with their own experiences and understandings, finally feedback to the recomposed reality, namely, the phenomenological design.

- ¹ Groat, L.; Wang, D., *Architectural Research Methods* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2013), 10
- ² According to the diagram *Evolutionary Tree of 20th century* by Charles Jencks, 1971
- ³ Jencks, C., *Architecture 2000: Prediction and Methods* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), 20
- ⁴ Lucas, R., *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 36
- ⁵ Ibid., 37
- ⁶ De Certeau, M., *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988)
- ⁷ Heidegger, M., *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, from: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), 344
- ⁸ Havik, K., *Urban Literacy : Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam : Nai010 Publishers, 2014)
- ⁹ Norberg-Schulz, C., *Architecture: Presence, Language, Place* (Milan: Skira, 1997), 53
- ¹⁰ Juhani Pallasmaa, *Inhabiting Time*, From: *Volume 86, issue 1* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, January/February, 2016), 50-59
- ¹¹ According to Heidegger: "Architecture has evolved from being just a built form that one inhabits, but to one where someone dwells."
- Heidegger, M., *Building, dwelling, thinking*, From: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), 343
- ¹² Zumthor, P., *Thinking Architecture* (Switzerland: Lars Muller Publishers, 1998), 11
- ¹³ Zumthor, P.; Mostafavi, M., *Thermal Baths at Vals (Exemplary Projects)* (London: Architectural Association Publications, 1996), 6
- ¹⁴ Zumthor, P., Sketch drawing, From: *Thermal Baths at Vals* (London: Architectural Association Publications, 1996), Source: http://www.ms2.co.jp/news/topics/img/Drawing_for_Therme_Vals_by_.jpg
- ¹⁵ Libeskind, D., Mapping of the site, From: *The drawings of the competition of Berlin Museum* (1987), Source: <https://libeskind.com/work/jewish-museum-berlin>
- ¹⁶ Eckartsberg, R., *Introducing Existential Phenomenological Psychology*. From: *Phenomenological Inquiry in Psychology* (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 3
- ¹⁷ Ibid. "lived experience and life-involvements"
- ¹⁸ Eckartsberg, R., *Introducing Existential Phenomenological Psychology*. From: *Phenomenological Inquiry in Psychology* (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 4
- ¹⁹ Spiegelberg, H., *The phenomenological movement: A historical introduction* (Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 118-123
- ²⁰ Eckartsberg, R., *Introducing Existential Phenomenological Psychology*. From: *Phenomenological Inquiry in Psychology* (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 4
- ²¹ According to Libeskind: "... The visible art of architecture makes us aware of that which is not visible."
- Libeskind, D., *Jewish Museum*, From: *Berlin: Architect, Daniel Libeskind* (Amsterdam: G & B Arts International, 1999), 35