

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

Narrating the Perception of Space

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Thesis "The Human Body in the Liminal"

“Every individual act of building is a process in which space gets differentiated. It is not a process of addition, in which preformed parts are combined to create a whole, but a process of unfolding, like the evolution of an embryo, in which the whole precedes the parts, and actually gives birth to them, by splitting.”¹

As architects, we design for other people, places, cities, and regions. At various scales, our design has to fit into the context to integrate itself into urban planning, to blend in architecturally and to adapt itself correctly to the habits of the users. To achieve this, the investigation into the composition of space and its occupation by people is indispensable.² Therefore, it is essential to understand, as I gained from Jorge Mejia Hernandez’s lecture, that there are different approaches that all are more or less valid to researching these issues. There is not only one strategy in architecture, in fact, different groups of people will develop different ways of thinking and research methods.

For me, one of the most important spatial analyses is the perception of the place. Different concepts such as the meaning or the identity of space³ are fundamental to be able to respond precisely to the user. In *Phenomenology of Perception* philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes how “individuals perceive their spatial surroundings through the senses, the acoustic and tactile experience of materials, forms and spaces. (...) Key architectural notions such as distance, character, and intimacy are measured not just with the eyes, but also with the entire body.”⁴ Every human being has their subjective perception. Therefore, it is especially important how we as architects approach the design process, as we want to try to understand the inhabitants of the city in the best possible way to be able to design for the different characters living together later. It is necessary to look at the space from different perspectives, but also as objectively as possible, for example utilizing a set of practices to analyse the space. To set a starting position for the space to be analysed, it is helpful to draw up a hypothesis. A Hypothesis “is a proposition that you are seeking to understand or prove.”⁵

For the Graduation Studio Methods and Analysis which is dealing with the city of Skopje in Macedonia this semester, I am studying liminal spaces. To understand this approach, I will briefly explain the process of our research. Skopje is a divided city, along ethnic, religious, political and cultural lines. It is a place of parallel realities. There is a contradiction at every corner, between image and reality, between utopian ideals of socialism and nationalism. Each utopia is expressed in the architecture of the city and physically manifests the conflicts and confusion of the people in Skopje. What happens where these differences meet and how can we negotiate these limits? By further investigating the space where different ideologies collide. The physical junctions between territories are explicit in the materiality, levels, and obstacles when passing through space. Edges and transitions are important for defining the sense of place. For certain people, these boundaries are permeable and open, for others they are difficult to pass through due to personal perception and connotations associated with the territorialised space.

We were interested in understanding how these different ideals and realities affect the lives of people living in Skopje. Through the research of different rituals, protests, and transgressive acts, we learnt that Skopje is a multitude complex of diversity overlapped and weaved together. But Everyday life continues amongst the complexity of the divides. Life goes on amongst these stresses, they take a background role in the everyday life of individuals, they are always there but easy to ignore, due to the divisions that are not so evident in reality, they are subliminal, hidden.

The perception, the sense of place is subjective, it depends on the individual and their experience, on the events and changes that come with the changes of time.

Skopje is in a state of liminality. The capital of the Republic of North Macedonia finds itself in an unstable status, in tension. We are studying places that we pointed out as liminal spaces. Therefore, we defined liminality as an in-between state of transition. We would hypothesize that by

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

transition, liminality emphasizes the sense of place. This results in the research question of “**How do we perceive space and how does the built environment influence this perception?**”

II DISCUSSING PERCEIVED SPACE

Our main interest lies specifically in how certain in-between spaces are perceived and how their characteristics influence the visitor's experience. That is why the research can be situated in the epistemological framework of **phenomenology** which is concerned with the question of how things appear to us⁶ “A defining quality of this work (phenomenology), as described by John Creswell professor for educational psychology, is that researchers (using a phenomenological approach) aim to clarify the essential or underlying meaning of experience, where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning.”⁷ Our phenomenological research while mainly focussing on the perception of space incorporated theories from different disciplines which then resulted in a very interdisciplinary approach; it was of etic and qualitative nature.

Only by first naming certain spaces as liminal can we then apply certain research methods to find out which properties are characteristics of liminal spaces. Since the liminal spaces we defined in Skopje were characterized by their unique perception, we first categorized them according to a pattern and deduced them as certain interspaces between inside and outside or two zones in connection with the architecture, but also in spaces that put one into a state of exception, a kind of sphere. Thereupon, we closely observed the selected spaces over a defined period, sometimes at different daytimes, and questioned and documented these **observations** in the form of various **experiments**.

Based on a context-led⁸ research as defined by Ray Lucas, we subsequently tried to determine “a typical context, which then provides an example of conditions found elsewhere. Examining a context as a case study of a *type* - particularly with reference to other circumstances following the same rules - allows a typology to be established: a repeating pattern.”⁹

With **Fold-Out Drawings**, we have tried to represent every spatial formulation in the smallest detail. In Jan Bovelet's essay *Drawing as Epistemic Practice in Architectural Design*, the philosopher and designer argues that “drawing is a specific epistemic practice for making architectural issues visible and thus allows for a critical examination and debate.”¹⁰ “Through the reduction of an extended two-dimensional plane, a drawing can reveal the relational order of different objects simultaneously, which enables the definition of differences.”¹¹ Furthermore, the true-to-detail representation leaves room, on an objective basis, for all subjective perceptions of the user. We only present the visible elements, but if you read them more carefully, materials, depths and, in some drawings, colours will also be depicted in detail. Digital drawings can “identify and inventorize the forms and properties of the designed objects and processes.” Bovelet states, “Digitalization led to an enormous success in what one could call the algebraization of drawing.”¹²

Though, it is limiting that the two-dimensional drawing, even if it is foldable, does not allow any depth. For this reason, the visual sense is primarily addressed. The tactile, as well as the acoustic sense, are rather neglected in this method. James Corner explains in *The Efficacy of Technique* that the viewer may first be disoriented by equally functioning fold-out drawings. It is not a common medium and the poly-directional arrangement offers the possibility to start from different directions with the re-building of the space. The general public is now accustomed to maps being north-facing and has developed a habit of reading them based on this. “Maps of this sort are still legible and ‘correct’ in their depiction of spatial relationship, but the reader must first learn the relevant mapping codes and conventions.”¹³

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

Furthermore, we developed a **light and shadow study** as a preliminary investigation before we would study the personal perception of the space. Light and Shadow are results of architecture. Light is an element that is present in all the transitional spaces, so we wanted to inquire into how it emphasizes with its contrasts the sense of space. “In the view of American architect Steven Holl, sensory perception is the core of the work of an architect: Architecture, more fully than other art forms, engages our sensory perceptions. The passage of time, light, shadow, and transparency, colour phenomena, texture, material, and detail all participate in the complex experience of architecture (...) Only architecture can simultaneously awaken all the senses – all the complexities of perception.”¹⁴ Light can guide the people through the sequence of spaces. “Sometimes the light is soft, reaching the walls indirectly, (...) giving a sense of enclosure; sometimes a hint is given of a continuity of spaces by means of light; at other times, a window brings in bright daylight, opening the perspective to the city. The choice of materials strengthens this effect.”¹⁵

In the two-dimensional representation, which is based on a modified photo, the different levels of brightness can be recognized significantly. Whether hard or soft light is hard to be read, and the influence of the architecture's texture is inevitably neglected. With our applied method it is also not possible to differentiate between artificial and natural light sources or even colours. Steven Holl states “because I use a watercolour wash right at the beginning, I’m forced to integrate the direction of the light and how it moves in the space. It’s how I get a feel for the light and it’s how I design with it. No matter what my first concept is about the design, light is always there.”¹⁶ Nowadays we are used to the simulation of spaces and light by computer programs and have established it as a convenient tool; I doubt our generation would intuitively take an approach like Holl's. He is able with the knowledge of what he has captured on site to make a drawing with an irreversible method, which not only makes the existing incidence of light clear but also how it could be advantageously utilized in a first idea.

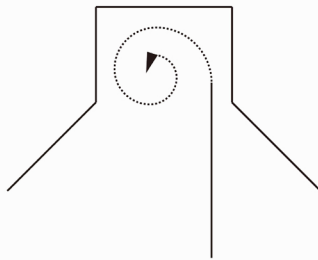


Figure 1 : Diagram: *Dwell* - Skopje City Archive



Figure 2 : Modified Photo: *Light and Shadow Study* - Skopje City Archive

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

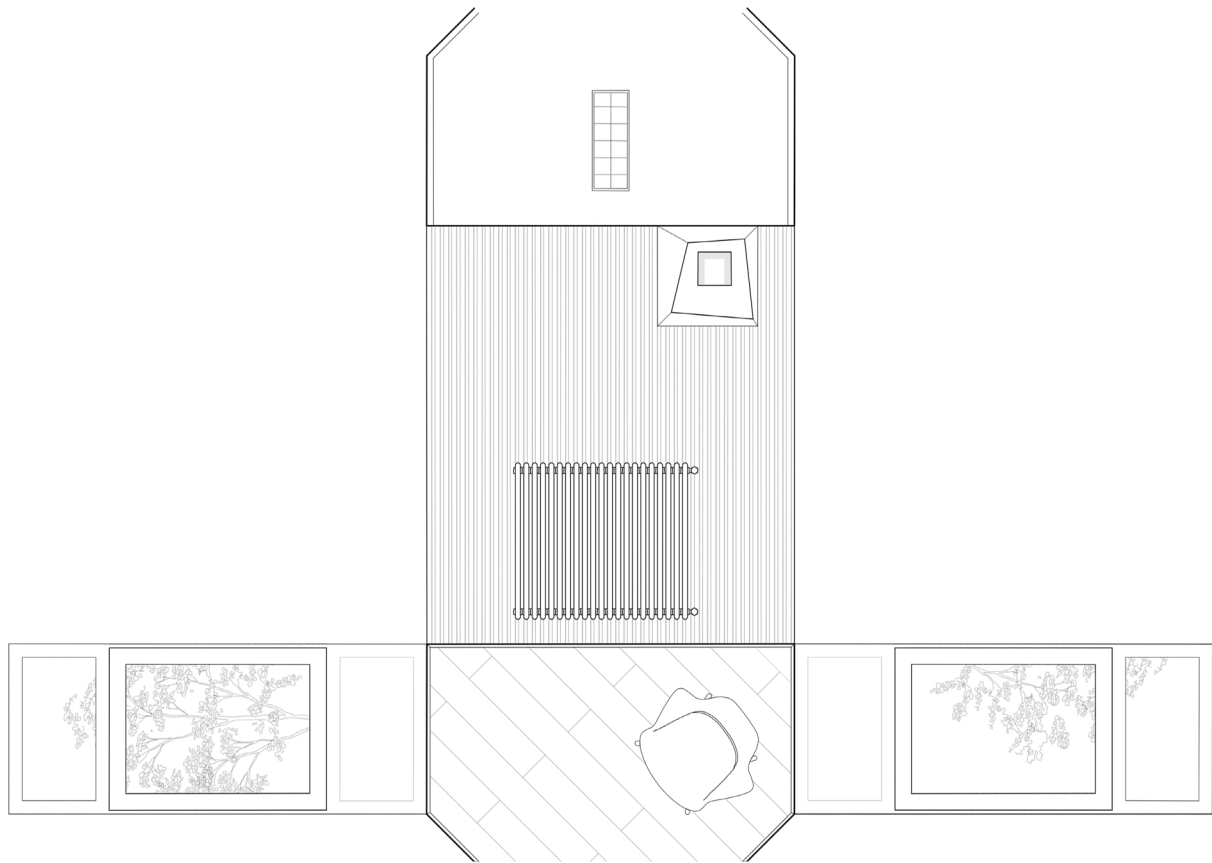


Figure 3 : Fold-Out Drawing: *Study on Liminality* - Skopje City Archive

Klaske Havik is „looking for a way to find a richer perspective from which to address the complexity of lived experience. Through literature, this work proposes another way of thinking about architecture and the city, and it offers tools to practice and educate their analysis and design.“¹⁷ She argues that „in literature, the experiences of space and spatial practice are often much more accurately described than in professional writings on architecture and cities.” The sense of place is subjective depending on the individual and on time. We tried to understand this by studying different characters and put ourselves in multiple city-dweller-positions by using the method of **storytelling**. From different perspectives, we tried to understand the space. All of these different layers add to the sense of place.

Since we are no trained writers, the part of artistic articulation will be omitted here, but we come closer to the perspective of the person concerned, which provides us with more precise insights into subjective perception. By additionally underpinning this narrative with drawings that contribute to it, it becomes easier to put oneself into the perspective. Indeed, *The Manhattan Transcripts* of Bernard Tschumi, which I elaborate later on in this essay, that have such a compilation of a literary narrative and associated drawings and images, tell a vivid story. It is still „open to interpretation, and it can be read in different ways. In that sense, the reader (or viewer) of the project participates in constructing the story”¹⁸ and therefore the perception depends again on the individual.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty mentions, that “key architectural notions such as distance, character, and intimacy are measured not just with the eyes, but also with the entire body.”¹⁹

“For Swiss architect Peter Zumthor (1998), the aspect of sensory perception plays a major role as his frame of reference, and as a core theme in his design practice. (...) His approach to architecture transcends the merely visual, and addresses the acoustic and tactile experience of materials, forms, and spaces.”²⁰ Childhood memories such as materials, colours, and smells represent a repertoire that he accesses when practicing architecture. Zumthor tries to incorporate these memories, which contain the deepest architectural atmospheres, into his designs. He questions how details and materials evoke poetic experiences and uses architectural elements to bring intimacy and warmth into his designs by subtly creating a tension between contradictions such as intimacy and distance as well as interior and exterior.²¹

A field of tension can also be recognized in the described liminal space. Due to the great differences between light and shadow and the transition from outside to inside or in-between space, the visitor is put into an intermediate state when entering. Despite this ability, it must be noted that if we want to design a liminal space in which visitors are taken to another sphere, it may be difficult to equate the individual experience of the designer with that of the general public. Since, however, the inhabitants of Skopje have a common history and shared memories of the architectural changes that took place in their city, we can assume that interventions based on this shared identity could have a significant effect on a large group of residents.

It is quite astonishing that Peter Zumthor claims about himself that he does not use methods for his design process²², but because of this statement it might be particularly worthwhile to figure out how he approaches designing. Initially, the first “reaction” is of primary importance for him. This is mostly connected with a memory, which often originates in his childhood and fits into the existing atmosphere. His hypothesis then manifests itself in a physical form, as an “aural phenomenon”. But his drawings also play a major role in his creative process. Let us assume his drawings as an individual method of research. His first sketches represent a “move through the organism” whereby his “initial impulse is always place and use”. The trend of his design drawings shows that he based on the drawing process carefully develops the “primary assemblages” of materials, that he identifies precisely how they constructively behave and simultaneously studies their internal characteristics.²³ In the process of his subsequent construction drawings, it can be seen that he opposes the clear separation of design and technical drawings. His decisions about materials and details take place in these construction drawings and lead to the conclusion that his research is closely linked to his design and execution. Furthermore, he builds models from the selected material to define more accurate properties. The tactile qualities of the different variations are also taken into account. All these precise characteristics of the space can also be derived from our Fold-Out drawings. Here we investigate the exact spatial conditions that you can as well observe in the development of Peter Zumthor’s different media.

Considering that Peter Zumthor designs spatial textures through constantly developing models and plans, his approach can be seen as practise-based research “whereby the practitioner is constantly critiquing their own actions, reflecting upon actions as they are taken and changing as appropriate.” He follows the “loop of reflective practise, acting and thinking as continuum.”²⁴ Peter Zumthor apparently does not oppose methods themselves, but rather the commitment to certain methods.

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

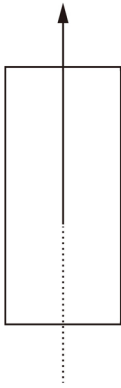


Figure 4 : Diagram: *Accelerate* - Skopje City Wall

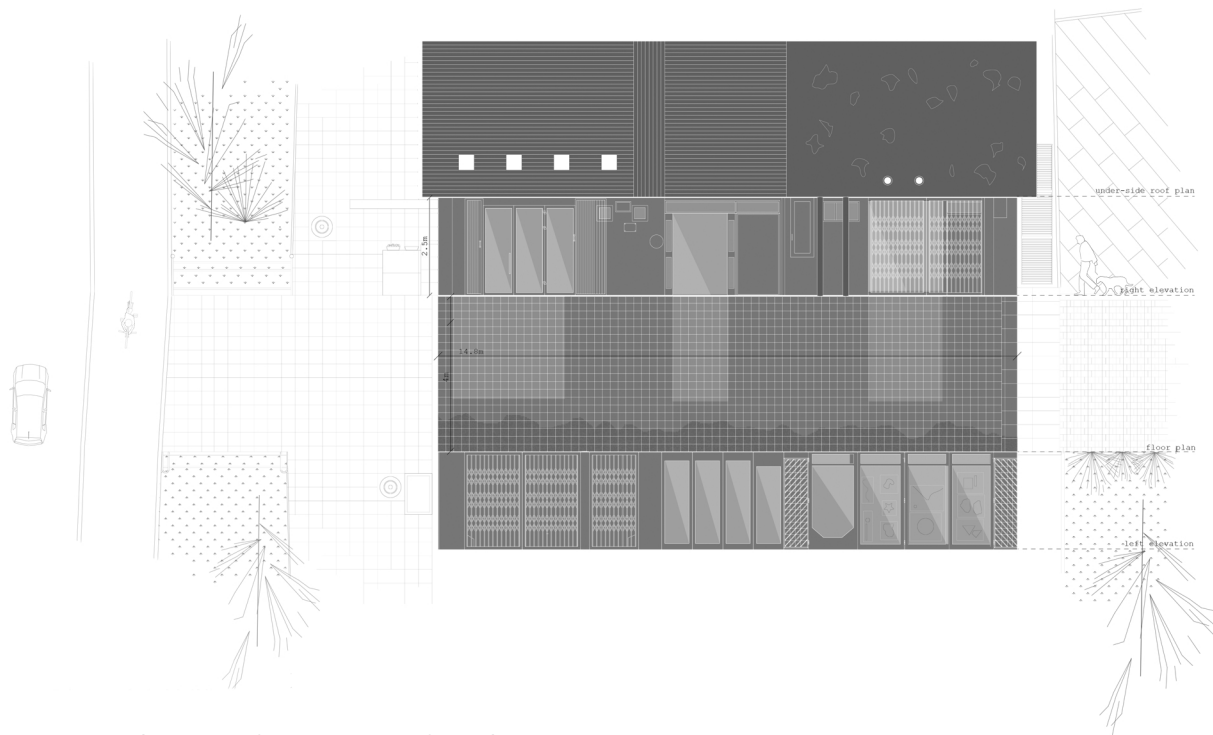


Figure 5 : Fold-Out Drawing: *Study on Liminality* - Skopje City Wall

Tim Kammasch, a professor of architectural theory claims (2013) that the character of the tactile is much more important than that of the visual for the pedestrian perception of the architecture of the big city. Thresholds are readable where they can be noticed as caesuras only in the behaviour of passers-by - in delaying, slowing down, stopping the step before entering a certain entrance.²⁵ In his article, he refers to Aldo van Eyck's work with the articulation of his playgrounds. "In the post-war period, it was possible for Aldo Van Eyck to place playgrounds in rather unusual places due to the numerous empty spaces and peripheral areas in the city. (...) They teach children how to anticipate and deal with ambiguous transitions in urban space. One example is the sandboxes, which have no clear separation between sand and lawn. Here the small children should have the opportunity to freely explore this tactile difference. Furthermore, he used steppingstones where there were edges but no clear separations."²⁶

In conclusion, we can say that the inhabitants of a city, whether they are children or adults referring to childhood memories, perceive the city based on its spatial texture.

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

Through the architectural formulation of the surfaces that make us feel the tension in space and thus guide us, we make a connection to the linguistic formulation - the literature.

Tschumi describes the 'paradox' of "architecture as the sensual experience of space and as a spatial practice"²⁷ versus "architecture as a product of the mind, as a conceptual and dematerialized discipline."²⁸

"While in architecture the visual and the formal dominate, literature allows us to describe other sensory perceptions of spaces, cities, and landscapes with much detail and intensity. Authors are capable of describing places on a level of memories and emotions. Other aspects of the "lived" experience, such as atmosphere, mood or memory, which are largely ignored in architectural discourse, also come to the fore in literary descriptions."²⁹ In *The Hidden Dimension*, anthropologist Edward T. Hall points at literature as a key to understanding human perception. He states that "literature is (...) a source of data on man's use of his senses".³⁰

Through the lens of different characters like the homeless, a construction worker, a blacksmith back in time and a child we tried to present their spatial perception in the same place. The different personal descriptions of the place allow one to read off the different spatial constellations that are important for the individual. The collages produced for this purpose are to be positioned between reality and imagination.

biography draft 09

Skopje, 10.10.2019

chapter 3: the winter of 2017 at skanderbeg square

Dear Roman, attached you find my thoughts:

two years ago I was still living in the streets of skopje. day in day out people were passing my spot directly in front of my nose. some of them did not even seem to recognize me. their heads were too high above the ground, I was invisible. down here you see things from a different perspective. my level were dogs and suitcases, children were actually the most interesting passengers.

winters were cold, benches were rare and the tiles were wet and frosty. finding a place for the night was always a struggle, people were fighting for the spots. during the day I tried to spend time in the church, but the government commissions the patriarch to keep the churches "clean" for the tax payers.

as someone who spends day and night on a square like skanderbeg I can say: it is hard. no trees, no roof, dirty staircases, the noise of the big street, and rarely people who linger. once in a while when there is a crowd of people it is mostly for a bigger purpose. a protest is one of these events. then they complain about their own problems. when they are coming you have to put yourself back. tourists are better. they leave you their pizza that they do not finish and coins. even if it is foreign ones, those people feel sorry.

I was lucky! One day when the rain was flooding our square and was too strong to disappear in the joints of the slabs a guy approached me that I had been seeing around. without saying a word he made me understand that I should follow him. we arrived at a hidden spot in the area of the old bazaar close

hours? sleeping!
feet? literally.
→ I was not really taking care of myself
- was I a dirty as the floor

↳ how do I make the reader understand
that children were the only ones I
can look into the eyes?

Nowadays I understand that, but back
in time I thought the church would
be there to help the poor people.

↳ I will tell about the spot that
we found which was warm and
where I spend the rest of the
winter!

47

Figure 6 : Storytelling: *Construction Worker* - Skopje Skanderbeg Square Area



Figure 7 : Storytelling - Collage: *Construction Worker* - Skopje Skanderbeg Square Area

illustration 4, draft, page 47

Bernard Tschumi applies a ‘transcriptive’ (transcribing, in the sense of writing another version) approach, as a research method on various levels in his work as an architect but also in his literary works. He follows an experimental approach when he is doing research, continuously questioning the limits of architecture with its different conditions by focussing on “the relationship between space, experience and social activity. This implies, next to a re-thinking of the limits of architecture, also a radical re-thinking of the concept of place.”³¹

The work of *The Manhattan Transcripts* “will show how ‘transcriptive’ techniques such as narrative, sequences, and experiments with the characters and spaces in the story result in an alternative theory of architecture.”³² The first part of this work consists of a linear narrative in which the story is told in a seemingly rational manner. Throughout the story, Tschumi uses different media to support his narrative. In the continuing chapters, his work goes from telling a story, to adding architectural drawings that show an evolution from plan to elevation, and results in images that show relationships between place. Choreographic diagrams depict the movements of people and fragments of newspaper photographs represent the events that take place. “Instead of aiming for a fixed image, Tschumi argues that architecture only then becomes interesting when spaces, movements, and events meet and even contradict each other.”³³

With a three-dimensional drawing and a study on the movement of people, we were investigating the space where different ideologies collide. The physical junctions between territories are explicit in the materiality, levels, and obstacles when passing through space. Edges and transitions are important for defining the sense of place. For certain people, these boundaries are permeable and open, for others they are difficult to pass through due to their personal perception and connotations associated with the territorialised space.

IV POSITIONS IN PRACTISE

In the graduation studio led by the Chair of Methods and Analysis, they introduced us to the term Heuristic which originates from Eureka, being defined as “involving or serving as an aid to learning, discovery, or problem-solving by experimental and especially trial-and-error methods”³⁴. There are three major procedures in Heuristics: exploration, evaluation, and discovery. The three processes are part of a never-ending cycle, clearly represented by John Creswell’s Data Analysis Spiral.³⁵ The exploration is related to information gathering, the evaluation with its process methodology and the discovery, which is the conclusion of the content of the second to last.

As Jorge Mejia Hernandez presents it in his lecture, it is advisable to do the research parallel to the development of a design in the studio.³⁶ So, the spiral of data analysis continues until we have completed a project. Using various methods, we constantly question the new findings on our way and can thus argue in which direction we have taken action. What I have learned is to take a look back at each step of my approach while navigating towards my architectural intervention and try to look at the step more abstractly in a larger context. First, I question why I made this decision. Next, I look for a method to challenge this decision and only once the outcome proves successful do, I pursue this approach.

On the one hand, the perception of space depends on sensory factors such as the tactile, the visual, the olfactory, the acoustic and the taste-based that can be seen as the objective part. On the other hand, the subjective component can be described as the atmosphere which is a very initial and immediate experience of space.³⁷ After trying to capture perceptions and atmospheres with different instruments, we discover that perceptions are more measurable than atmospheres which are more personal impressions. In the liminal spaces, we are investigating there may not be this special atmosphere for every visitor. The theorist Mark Wigley states in the issue of the architecture journal *Daidalos* 1998, that the discussion of atmosphere in architecture entails, by definition, a certain ambiguity. After all, atmosphere is something personal, vague, ephemeral and difficult to capture in text or design, impossible to define or analyse.³⁸ Nevertheless, we have tried to explain how space is perceived with different methods and from different perspectives. It can be an experiment based on adjusting drawings and constructing models like Peter Zumthor, but there is also the possibility of how Bernard Tschumi approaches this: from many directions simultaneously. I think it's rather challenging to use research methods like Zumthor in the preliminary stage, to rely on the first feeling that one has when entering a room. How we proceeded is to be regarded similar to the approach of Tschumi. In my opinion, it is more instructive to develop different approaches to the same topic when we ask ourselves how space is perceived and what influence the environment has on it. As Klaske Havik mentions in her lecture “each representational technique communicates a particular trajectory of knowledge”³⁹ I think, for example, that a collection of subjective narratives, drawings that try to remain objective, and a set of factual data could be a successful mixture.

In terms of the character of the tactile perception that is much more readable and therefore primarily more important than that of the visual for the pedestrian perception of the architecture of the big city, I agree with Tim Kammasch. One can say that there is a huge variety in people and how but especially what they perceive in space. From my point of view as an architect, I can clearly say that we belong to a group that is trained in spatial perception. What if you were to ask another group of people about certain characteristics of the built environment? A built example for the tactile perception is Aldo van Eyck's Playgrounds in Amsterdam. “The example of the park, located in the Buskenblaserstraat along a busy road, shows that Aldo Van Eyck preferred simple shapes for the playground equipment, which hardly give any instructions. The children then have to develop their own rules for their use. Although it can be seen that the sandboxes are clearly demarcated and set back from the road, the climbing scaffolds for the older children do not provide any protection of this kind. With this design of clear elements, the architect encourages children to develop the ability to anticipate and deal with danger which he does not explicitly try to protect the children from.”⁴⁰

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL



Figure 10 : Photo: *Playground Aldo van Eyck* - Buskenblaserstraat

When analysing the behaviour of children, it can be said that they act intuitively and will gradually do the right thing by a 'cautious approach'. However, the problem is the parents who are nowadays too worried and no longer allow such subtle architectural gestures. In the end, they are the ones who ensure that the city builds a fence that reflects and satisfies their part of the tactile border. These spatial boundaries, created by the inhabitants of the city themselves, lead to the fact that our cities consist only of infallible images such as the fences and we no longer perceive subtle formulated architectonic gestures. This, in turn, means that architects can no longer carefully incorporate them into their designs, as they are no longer recognised.

For the occasion that we would design a liminal space and want to make use of these very precise tactile formulations in space, we question if people are still capable of understanding and reacting on these. However, once we predefine this certain space to guide the users and try to provide them with a special atmosphere, do they absorb it that way? Ultimately, users will appropriate the spaces in their own way.

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

END NOTES

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FIGURES

Figure 1 : Diagram: Dwell - Skopje City Archive

Figure 2 : Modified Photo: Light and Shadow Study - Skopje City Archive

Figure 3 : Fold-Out Drawing: Study on Liminality - Skopje City Archive

Figure 4 : Diagram: Accelerate - Skopje City Wall

Figure 5 : Fold-Out Drawing: Study on Liminality - Skopje City Wall

Figure 6 : Storytelling: Construction Worker - Skopje Skanderbeg Square Area

Figure 7 : Storytelling - Collage: Construction Worker - Skopje Skanderbeg Square Area

Figure 8 : Storytelling: Three-Dimensional Drawing - Skopje Skanderbeg Square Area

Figure 9 : Storytelling: Movement of People - Skopje Skanderbeg Square Area

Figure 10 : Photo: Playground Aldo van Eyck – Buskenblaserstraat
Frontiers. Amsterdam: Rob Withagen and Simone R. Caljouw, July 4, 2017. Courtesy of the Amsterdam City Archive.
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01130/full>.

THE HUMAN BODY IN THE LIMINAL

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