

AN UNDERSTANDING OF
THE POLITICAL SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT
Integration of Historical and Phenomenological Methods

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I INTRODUCTION

1.1 The reciprocal relationship between research and architecture design

Design and research are two distinct activities while they embody many complementary qualities.¹ The design can make use of the outcome of research, and the research can also be further boosted or inspired by the design process. For architecture, research is both basic and important. The research for architecture has experienced a series of developments. In the 1950s, practical issues such as the climate design and the building system design had been the focus of architectural research, while in the 1960s, a wider range of topics had been covered in research.² More social issues, humanity topics have entered the field of architectural research.

The role of architect is tied with certain social responsibility, and we are not making art works merely out of personal preferences. Architecture is supposed to address and solve specific social issues or problems and to take on social responsibilities. Only when we have a thorough understanding of a place that we can make proper interventions.

Although research has been generally incorporated into academic systems, it would sometimes fall into a stereotyped process. Without a focused question or in-depth study, the research will end up with a general report of the site. Hence, formulating a clear and concise research question is the starting point of the research.³ In addition, reasonable research methodology design is vital to the implementation of research, which will further benefit and inspire the project design.

The lectures help me to have a more comprehensive understanding of the epistemology of research. Meanwhile, it managed to sort out the fragments of my previous research practices, and classify them into a more clear and systematic classification. There are many valuable research methods, with different working modes and different focuses. A reasonable research methodology design proves to be highly beneficial to the wholistic understanding of certain problems.

1.2 Introduce historical research and phenomenology in the research of contemporary political space

The topic of the interior graduation studio this year is to design a new city hall for the city of Brussels. Brussels is a city of heterogeneity, which is embodied in its political system, the diverse demography, and cultural constitutions. The designated site is located in the center of Brussels, where the parking 58 was located. Parking 58 was a modern parking structure built for the Expo 58 in Brussels, but was later demolished. To design a new city hall is to explore what's the meaning of political space and what kind of relationship it should be between government and people in the contemporary context. As society shifts and evolves, the nature of political space is constantly changing. Political space should be able to accommodate, direct or encourage various social interactions, debates, conversations and events, and it is a place where common people can gather together and have their voice heard. As a city with a diverse and sophisticated social context, Brussels gave birth to more possibilities of what a political space can be. This essay will explore what a political space can be and means in the contemporary society and how it ensures the freedom of social dialogues and democratic expressions. Under the epistemology of historical research and phenomenology, the research question will be explored from a macro space - time perspective and a context-based local perspective.

II EPISTEMIC FRAMEWORK AND SELECTED RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Epistemic framework of an integrated research methodology

Although the focus of research strategy is different from one another, the boundary between them is rather permeable.⁴ With a appropriate research methodology design, a combination of several

methodologies can maintain the advantages of certain research strategy while at the same time complement each other. Hence, in the graduation studio, I adopt an integrated research approach, which combines methodology of historical research and phenomenology. The former one carries out research across time period and space, while the latter focuses on contemporary phenomena.

The history of architecture is an evolving process, rather than a pure presentation of past facts.⁵ It is capable to provide insights for the understanding of contemporaneous environment. The study of historical precedents is not to use them as existing models, but to reveal how different architecture is shaped under different social realities. The graduation project is not merely a practical design of an office building for the government. There are several important issues embedded in the project need to be considered, including the meaning of politics to common people, the relationship between government and people, the position of municipal buildings in contemporary social context. The analysis of these issues needs to be put into a larger space-time discourse. Because they are constantly developing and changing across the time, focusing on a discrete space-time context is not enough.

Historical research focuses on environment and artifacts created in the past, which enables a macro understanding of the political space. While to design a site-specific project, we also need to pay attention to the specific social context. The research on the contemporary context is led by the phenomenological strategy. As a qualitative research methodology, phenomenological approach seeks to explore the essential quality and meanings of lived human experience.⁶ Compared to scientific and quantitative approaches, the phenomenological approach brings researchers back to the physical environment to truly see and experience the city. What the researchers get are mostly first-hand and experiential information instead of the accumulation of objective big data. Architecture is not an independent object that stands alone, we also need to consider the images and feelings of users.⁷ Phenomenology is then one of the most useful research methods for architects to get right on site and to understand a place.

One of the challenge of the phenomenological approach is that the reality of the city depends on the experience of the researcher and relatively subjective description and interpretation of the experience. The challenge for the researchers is to develop an objective interpretation out of the subjective human experience.⁸ It requires the researchers to set aside the prejudice and prejudgement to understand the place out of the intuition and direct feelings.

2.2 Selected Research Methods

Under the framework of a combined methodology, I implement the research from two different while interdependent perspectives. From a historical perspective, I try to trace the historical ideas and development of political space through the study of selected historical cases based on a chronological order from the middle ages to the twentieth century. A wide range of materials including archives, drawings, photographs are adopted to restore the image of the past. From the early forms of the agora as an implicit political space, the communal palace as the representation of power, to the reinterpretation of palace as people's palace in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, the notion of political space has been subjected to constant evolvments and encompassed more identities. Therefore, only when we looking into the past can we have a more holistic understanding of political space. The exploration of political space between the formal and informal, the explicit and implicit can broaden our cognitive territory.

From a phenomenological perspective, I mainly adopt the method of observation and first-hand practice. Observation is the fundamental, while also the most direct and effective way to get to know a

place. Under the format of photograph and sketching, I observed different types of public space in Brussels, including squares, streets, markets and so on. A series of analysis on these space was made to find how can these place embrace and direct political engagements. Particularly, a study of different activism groups in Brussels was conducted to observe the appropriations of public space for political activities. As a complement, the axonometric drawing was made to document the scenarios of activities of those activism groups, which shows how human and objects interact with the space. Interviews with people from the activism groups was made to engage the local people and to understand the place from others' view. In the method of observation, I positioned myself as a spectator, while by first-hand practice in political actions, the climate strike, I positioned myself as a participant to experience how the collective political activity works. The making of the banner, the assembly performance of the participants, the process of strike, the chosen route, all these experience benefit my understanding of common people's political engagements.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

3.1 Historical - Theoretical Context and Development

Historical research collects and processes materials of the past, which includes fact finding, evaluation, organization and analysis.⁹ The historical research enables researchers to learn from the past, and the historical findings that can be related to contemporary environments and settings contribute to the understanding of certain contemporary social contexts or issues.

In the 1950s, the western historiography underwent massive changes, shifting from traditional descriptive historical research to an analytical historical research. David Wang defined this change as 'Cultural turn', during which various social and cultural topics became key issues in the discourse of history research and the scope of research was greatly expanded. A spatial turn took place among architectural historians correspondingly, because the public history can not be detached from the engagement of space¹⁰.

Phenomenological approach derives from the phenomenological tradition of German philosophers, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Phenomenology places its foothold in the course of everyday life, focusing on pure phenomena and the direct feelings. It was Norberg-Schulz who explicitly applied the phenomenological thoughts and methods to the field of architecture. He perceived 'Genius Loci' as the main focus of architectural phenomenology and place is the externalized products of human activities¹¹.

Phenomenological research in the architectural field have witnessed new developments in 1960s. Jane Jacobs published the book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities' in 1961. The book presents a perceptive image of the city and everyday urban life. It is Jacobs' observation and experience of everyday urban life that leads to her understanding of urbanity.¹² The street ballet is her phenomenological understanding of the urban scene, where different characters, activities and space intertwined with each other to compose a vivid urban life. She claimed that the professionals and experts tend to interpret urban phenomena in their own ways, rather than what the city actually is. In the introduction of her own research method, Jacobs mentioned that the way to truly understand a city is to look closely with as little expectations as possible.¹³ Her method of urban research embodies characteristics that are closely related to phenomenology, which is to allow the city to reveal itself in everyday life and use the observation of urban life as a starting point to understand the essence of the city.¹⁴

Phenomenology of place was also widely used in the 1970s. The geographer Yi-fu Tuan, in his book 'Topophilia', discusses the affective ties of human with the physical world.¹⁵ In order to gain more empathy for the place, he turned to various literary works. He took literature as a source for space study, including various topographical poems, regional novels.¹⁶ These literature works can present how people with different experience or backgrounds perceive the place, and reveals something that might be overlooked by researchers. Objective reality of the urban environment, subjective reality of the researchers and literature works have all been taken into account to construct the understanding of the place.

3.2 Reflections

As architects, we should be conscious of the interaction between human and place. Any human activity is emplaced in certain place, and space is endowed with meanings by human actions. To understand and reveal the essence of a place, researchers need to really be on site to see through human perspective rather than to work through a "bird-perspective" that is disengaged from real life. The description and interpretation of phenomena should be placed in a relatively objective position. In some cases, architects will construct possible scenarios in their mind based on personal understandings and wills. The designed space is then based on designer's imaginary scenes, which might not be the case of real life. The Den Haag city hall was designed with a large covered atrium surrounded by public programs such as shops and cafe. The atrium is open to the public for different appropriations, which was intended to enhance the connection between civic life and government, and to turn the city hall into a place that can encourage collective public life. However, the atrium is not actively used by citizens in reality. An indoor covered space surrounded by private shops on four sides, with ten floors of small enclosed office rooms placed above failed to embrace the public life. The most dynamic and vibrant space in cities are usually bottom-up and self-growth. It is the daily practice of people and their interactions that contribute to the making of place. These seemingly mundane and ordinary moments may offer inspirations for the design.

To understand a city through a phenomenological approach, we need to first break through our stereotyped narrow cognitions. The political space is not limited to government buildings, parliaments or courts, and political engagement is not limited to demonstration, vote or strike. We should situate ourselves in the city to explore the ordinary, to construct our understanding of the place based on what we see and experience, while at the same time balance with the perceptions of the locals and other people via sources such as interviews and literatures.

IV POSITIONING

Havik's lecture on spatial narratives and Berkers's lecture on social and spatial practices inspires me a lot and offer some intriguing ways of architecture practices considering my own position and interest.

Havik's lecture introduced the role of literary tools in spatial practices. In terms of spatial perception, the physical characteristics of space can be recorded by sketching and data, human activities can be recorded by drawing or photograph. While space atmosphere, a very basic but indispensable part of space, is likely to be overlooked. Atmosphere is both objective and subjective, it is generated by reality but can further stimulate imagination.¹⁷ Atmosphere is the synthesis of spatial elements, sound, noise, maybe touch, smell, and subjectivity. Literary tools offers an approach to record and transform these experiences, memories and feelings into a form that is communicable. Just as Havik said that "Atmosphere description designates a vague entity in a precise way."¹⁸ Based on our first-hand experience, writing can evoke architectural images and relate our mental world to the architecture.¹⁹ Reciprocally, by reflecting on how different elements affect our perception, we can make designs

which evokes certain feelings or embodies shared values. Place making is more than geometry or form. More attention should be paid to the stories and atmosphere embodied in space.

Each place is composed of multiple identities, and different people will have different feelings and perceptions of the space. Diverse voices should also be included in our research. Jeff Malpas wrote that objectivity of place, self-subjectivity of observer, and subjectivity of others are interdependent in spatial experience.²⁰ Therefore reading literatures is an approach to understand the perception of others to complement the self-subjectivity. The literary tools offer me more possibilities in spatial practice, which I would like to further pursue and explore in future study.

Beckers' s Lecture put forward an important issue in the architectural field, which is the position of actual users in design. Beckers mentioned the case of the affordable housing in Casablanca, in which the actual users were involved in an open dialogue to help understand the place from local people's perspective. The attitudes of government and inhabitants towards the social housing are different, with the former gives more priority to the quantity while the latter will pay more attention to the public space, environment which is tightly associated with their own life.²¹ The architects then need to take on a social role to listen to the voice of locals and to understand their real needs.

Similarly, Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena believes that architects should engage with various social, political, and environmental challenges, and involve the local people in the process. In the reconstruction of Chilean city after earthquake and tsunami in 2010, Aravena acted as a bridge to connect local people, government and enterprises to develop solutions. In the design of 'half a good house', Aravena designed a building with a complete structure skeleton and utilities while only one half was completely finished with roof and envelopes. In this case, the actual users even took part in the construction process and finished the other half by themselves to cope with tight budget of the government. All these social practices mark a "social turn" in the practice of architecture. The attention gradually shifts from the ostentatious architecture designed by starchitects, the autonomous practitioners to the more localized interventions which response to the social realities and urban environment.

Architecture is a complex social product, which is created under various social, political, cultural, and ecological conditions of a society. An integrated research methodology which combines historical research and phenomenology approach enables me to develop a holistic understanding of the political space through a broader space-time context and through different perspectives. Historical research helps to retrace the developments of democracy, evolution of civic political engagements, changing identities of city hall, the formal and informal political space in the history. A narrative about ideas on political space throughout the history can be developed by research. The phenomenological study on the contemporary environment also benefits from the analysis of history research. Phenomenology approach focus more on now and here. It helps to reveal a previous unfamiliar urban and cultural environment through my own observation and experience. These are the source and potential inspirations for the design session. The political space in contemporary discourse, is no longer limited to government building, and sometimes politics is not even the explicit purpose of a space. Especially in Brussels, a highly heterogeneous city, political engagement and political space have richer expressions and forms. Even a cultural parade, bringing together people from different communities, nationalities to share the common world contains certain political meanings. A space to encourage social dialogues is a flexible space open to different appropriations, which endows individuals with freedoms and the right to the space. All these findings and understandings will be used as materials and inspirations for the design process to incubate a context-based design.

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END NOTES:

- 1 Wang, David, and Linda N. Groat. 'Architectural Research Methods' (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p. 5.
- 2 Ibid., p.7.
- 3 Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture*. (England: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), p. 25.
- 4 Wang, David, and Linda N. Groat. op.cit., p. 224.
- 5 Lucas, Ray. op.cit., p. 125.
- 6 Creswell, John W., and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2018), p.59.
- 7 Pallasmaa, Juhani, 'The Geometry of Feeling: A Look at the Phenomenology of Architecture.' 1996. In *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture*: pp.448-453.
- 8 Schwandt, Thomas A. 'Qualitative Inquiry: A Dictionary of Terms' (ThousandOaks,CA: SAGE, 1997). p.223.
- 9 Wang, David, and Linda N. Groat. op.cit., p. 207.
- 10 Ibid., p.176.
- 11 Norberg-Schulz, Christian. *Genius loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture*, 1980.
- 12 Seamon, David. 'A Jumping, Joyous Urban Jumble: Jane Jacobs' Death and Life of Great American Cities as a Phenomenology of Urban Place.' *Journal of Space Syntax*, 3.1 (2012), p.140.
- 13 Jacobs, Jane. 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities'. (New York: Random House, 1961), P.19.
- 14 Seamon, David. op.cit., p.140.
- 15 Tuan, Yi-fu. 'Topophilia: a study of environmental perception, attitudes, and values.' New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- 16 Tuan, Yi-fu. 'Literature and geography: implications for geographical research'. (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p.194.
- 17 Pallasmaa, Juhani, op.cit., pp.448-453.
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- 20 Malpas, J. E. 'Place and experience: A Philosophical Topography', (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p.143.
- 21 Berkers, Marieke, 'Investigating social/spatial practices Lecture'. AR3A160 Lecture Series Research Methods (2019/20 Q1). (TU Delft, 2019).

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