

# LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

## Self-Assessment on Research Methods

### REWRITING THE EXPERIENCE OF HYBRID SITES

A phenomenological approach to nature, life and ruins

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#### I INTRODUCTION

##### *On research-methodological awareness*

When we approach design in the architectural discipline, we are confronted with a series of social, spatial and economic issues that need to be sorted. To achieve this, we look at precedents, study texts, carry *research*, but the method applied often goes unnoticed. If we define research as “a systematic inquiry directed toward the creation of knowledge”<sup>1</sup>, it becomes clear that it is necessary to know the path we are following for it to be systematic and oriented towards a clear direction. Taking a position in the ontological, epistemological and methodological perspectives is, as highlighted by Ray Lucas<sup>2</sup>, important to contextualize our research, relating it to previous works and inscribing it in the bigger framework of the discipline. Moreover, the awareness of the method we are using means we can understand our thinking process and be certain of the epistemological nature of our inquiry. It means knowing the ground we are departing from and the tools more suited to help us reach our objectives.

##### *On the importance of the method-methodology*

The introduction to research methods in architecture was eye-opening in many ways, helping to clarify the nature of research that is carried in the discipline and the various paths it can follow. It showed how the production of knowledge in architecture can come from the act of making a building, but also how a theoretical exploration can be expressed through architectural means<sup>3</sup>. Concerning the research process itself, it was revealing to think that different methodologies can lead to different views on the same issues and, consequently, define the outcome.

The recognition of research methods as inscribed in wider systems of inquiry and schools of thought<sup>4</sup> was useful to understand that they respond to a way of looking at reality, which is likely to influence how research is carried. At the same time, the knowledge on existing methodologies was helpful to identify the many steps taken in the design process as part of an encompassing framework. From the ideas above comes the realization that the choice of a method is closely related to the nature of the project carried, but also that both the application of a method and the positions towards it can change throughout time.

##### *On the project*

Mostar is a city in southern Bosnia that became a symbol of the war that hit the country in the 90's for the particularly destructive effects it had there. Over two decades after it ended, the numerous ruined structures disseminated around the city still remind us of the brutal attack on the urban fabric. However, as the years go by, they have started to transform into more than that. Architectural remains and vacant lots have been reclaimed back by nature, which has grown in, on and through the ruin and debris, creating strange hybrids of material, vegetation and life. Time has seen former libraries, parks and cultural centers turn into spaces for the return of nature to the city, for a new postindustrial landscape to emerge: the urban wilderness.

To understand the processes that have developed in these sites in the last 20 years, it is important to see them as more than material reminders of the trauma. Instead, we should think of them as places of opportunity, where new relations between the natural and man-made environments can be explored. Then, the questions of how to deal with them, how to embrace their qualities, whether to intervene or not and if yes, to what extent, remain open for us to answer.

## II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

### *Approaching hybrid environments*

Our relationship with the environment has long been defined by the division between the urban and the wild. Nature has traditionally been considered an “outside”,<sup>5 6</sup> while we, humans, remain in the city, separated from all other living organisms. Nevertheless, when nature starts taking over the city from the inside, as it happens in Mostar, the boundaries become blurry, creating sites of enormous complexity that don't belong to one realm or the other. For this reason, I chose to position my research from the perspective of posthumanism, a way of thinking that recognizes man, nature and culture as parts of the same system<sup>7</sup>, where they constantly cross, interact and engage in the formation of new relations.

At the beginning, a theory-led research was important to help set the framework from which to start the exploration. This approach “employs an established form of understanding in order to determine the deeper meaning”<sup>8</sup>. The study of literature on posthumanism and across fields as architecture, geography or ecology, allowed to build a lexicon and find relevant ideas to guide posterior stages of the research. Notions as time, terrain vague, heterarchy and coexistence became crucial for the project and for the choice of methodologies used.

Understanding the symbiotic environments found required acknowledging that they are made of things that are different at first -matter, nature and life (human and non-human)-, but which become so intertwined that are perceived as a whole. For this reason, the project is developed by way of the intersection of two research methods, as it is also encouraged by the studio: On one side, material culture, as the study of the biographies of things<sup>9</sup>, is useful to think of the elements that compose the site. With this, the focus is specifically directed to the effects of time upon them, their simultaneous evolution and decay and the hybridization this entails, as exemplified by the sight of a tree growing through the window of a ruin. Simultaneously, a phenomenological approach is used to understand these places in their immaterial dimensions through the way how they are perceived, seeing them as spaces of opportunity where the novel and unexpected can be experienced. It is on this second method that I will extend further on this paper.

### *Contemporary views on phenomenology*

Phenomenology is generally understood as the philosophical study of phenomena, as it is given by the human experience of the world. It relies upon perception through our senses and the description of reality this gives<sup>10</sup>, an idea that has influenced many disciplines. Contemporary phenomenology of architecture, as approached by Juhani Pallasmaa, argues that the primacy of sight in approaching the built environment has made the discipline excessively concerned with image and too little with the sensory and the symbolic<sup>11</sup>. In “The Eyes of the Skin” Pallasmaa claims for a sensory architecture that appeals to our entire body, considering that “architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses.”<sup>12</sup>

The relation between phenomenology and architecture is also reflected in the quest for representation techniques that convey more than the traditional mediums of architecture – the plan, section, elevation and perspective. Klaske Havik argues that these alone are insufficient, for that they fail to address the complexities and ambiguities of the architectural project<sup>13</sup>. Instead, Havik explores narrative techniques as a tool to “highlight aspects of embodied perception, memory and everyday spatial practice.”<sup>14</sup>

A recurrent concept in phenomenology is that of atmosphere, which has been discussed by both Pallasmaa and Havik as that what makes up the singular experience of a physical place. Gernot Böhme explores further on this topic in the book "Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces", where he defines atmosphere as "what is experienced in the bodily presence of humans and things, or in spaces."<sup>15</sup> He continues to characterize them not as things but as something mediating between things and subjects, which means it is not possible to directly create an atmosphere. What we can do is to arrange a set of conditions that propiciate its emergence<sup>16</sup>. This task has been taken by architects like Peter Zumthor and Steven Holl, who try to incorporate the notion of atmosphere to architectural practice by designing buildings that replicate specific sensations. By using material, light, temperature or spatial play, they create spaces not to be seen but to be experienced with our entire body.

Recently, phenomenology has also been posed in an inseparable relation with places by anthropologist Tim Ingold, who claims that "processes as thinking, perceiving, remembering and learning have to be studied within the ecological contexts of people's interrelations with their environments"<sup>17</sup>. Ingold's thought brings together natural and social sciences by placing humans as one more component of the environment where we live, consequently making perception embedded in and conditioned by that context.

### III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

#### *Historical development of phenomenology*

The origins of the modern concept of phenomenology can be found in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. For Husserl, the world was to be understood through our experience of it, drawing from how things appeared to our conscious awareness. From this view, the world is there before, and our experience is separate from that reality<sup>18</sup>. This notion was to be later refuted by Martin Heidegger, who saw individuals as beings-in-the-world, therefore related to their historical context. In Heidegger's work the world emerges as we perceive it, and in the act of dwelling we come together with that world. This last idea, developed in "Building, dwelling, thinking", had a great influence in the architectural discipline, linking it to his existential phenomenology.

Following, Maurice Merleau-Ponty continued working with these ideas, stressing the role of the body in how we approach the world. In his treaty "Phenomenology of perception" he poses that "the body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment."<sup>19</sup> For Merleau-Ponty all our senses work together through our body to grasp sensations, which then become the basic mechanism of our perception.<sup>20</sup> James Gibson's argument also places perception as an exploration within the environment, for which the senses act as perceptual systems that constantly seek for sensations. "Looking, listening and touching, therefore, are not separate activities, they are just different facets of the same activity: that of the whole organism in its environment."<sup>21</sup>

The emphasis on exploring and experiencing as a way to comprehend the world, was important for the advance of Minimalism and Land Art at the end of the 60's. The phenomenological approach (among other factors) posed "the challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of its context"<sup>22</sup>, making the artwork at once related to the viewer and the site. Artists as Richard Long, Richard Serra and Robert Smithson tried to answer this by creating interventions that ranged between architecture and landscape, between the minimal object and the pure experience, an action that turned site into a vector: changeable and discovered through movement<sup>23</sup>. With this, movement was rediscovered as a way of perceiving and transforming the territory.<sup>24</sup>

Around the same time, phenomenology would also be explored in different ways in relation to architecture. One of the best well-known applications was proposed by Kevin Lynch in 1960, who

engaged with people to create mental maps of the city drawing on their individual experience. This subjective mapping allowed him to discover unique elements in the city, with which, he claimed, the architect should work to increase its legibility. The American architect Lawrence Halprin also used phenomenology, but in his case, the focus was on finding alternative representation techniques that could convey perception, movement and experience in approaching public space. Halprin devised a system of scores to depict processes over time, accounting for the non-visual qualities of spaces. His scores showed how dynamic and eventful those places could be, while also being useful to think how the space could influence the actions happening in it. Likewise, Gordon Cullen worked on a way of representation he called serial vision, which uses a narrative approach to communicate the experience of moving through a place by way of a sequence of images. With this, he also touched upon other aspects as the occupation of space or the interaction with it.<sup>25</sup>

### *The tools of phenomenology*

As seen from the examples above, the application of a phenomenological approach can follow very different paths depending on the strategies used and the objective pursued. For this project, the research started from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and the posterior contributions of Juhani Pallasmaa and Tim Ingold on the body, the senses and the environment. Within this framework, I attempted to understand the urban wilderness as a singular environment that can provide experiences that are difficult to find somewhere else in the city.

To start, I tried walking as a way to get in touch with the spaces I am interested in. The exploration of the area that was the former frontline led to the discovery of places where the ruin and void have disrupted the structure of the city, opening spaces for nature to penetrate to its core. The act of walking was accompanied by a detailed soft mapping of the area visited, where I gathered information on all the sensations that caught my attention, from the sounds of birds, to the textures of the ground, to the smells of fruit trees. This was done in the form of a plan with annotations and drawings, where I also positioned the ruined and abandoned spaces. The overlay of these two allowed me to relate certain experiences to the spaces in question, while also comparing with the experience of other parts of the city.

Once I selected the sites where I would continue the research, I studied them with more detail and proceeded to document in writing, video and sound recordings the experience of being *in* them. This careful observation already hinted at some particular qualities that should be kept in mind when judging their presence in the city. The overall sensation was of being somehow outside the city, even though the spaces visited were right in its center. This evoked the notion of the *terrain vague* as spaces that fall out of the daily routines of the city, "apparently forgotten places, [where] the memory of the past seems to predominate over the present. Here, only a few residual values survive, despite the total disaffection from the activity of the city. These strange places exist outside the city's effective circuits and productive structures."<sup>26</sup>

## IV POSITIONING

### *Narratives, environment and time*

The fact that strange and undefined spaces coexist side-by-side with the normal rhythms of the city, giving radically different experiences in a short portion of space, reminds of the idea posed by Klaske Havik in her lecture that often architecture doesn't tell a single story. Havik's way of thinking was key to approach the sites without a predefined idea of what they are or what would be found in them. Instead, the exercise was to move away from the narrative of war, division and loss, to try to find the alternative stories that site can tell. This, for example, led to the discovery of the urban wilderness as a site of increased biodiversity in the city. Moreover, her use of literary tools to read space as a narrative was illustrative of how space can be shown as more than the matter defining it, and how to establish the link with more evasive concepts as time and event.

At the same time, Tim Ingold's idea of perception as taking place *in* the environment provided an important guide to understand the urban wilderness through a phenomenological perspective, without forgetting that the body and mind we approach it with are also part of that place. He departs from a posthuman view to contextualize human perception in relation with nature, what differentiates him from previous scholars who focus only on perception in the built space. Furthermore, this embeddedness is extended to the man-made world, to the buildings we produce, "for as long as the building remains standing in the landscape, it will continue – as it does now – to figure within the environment not just of human beings but of a myriad of other living kinds, plant and animal, which will incorporate it into their own life-activities and modify it in the process. And it is subject, too, to the same forces of weathering and decomposition, both organic and meteorological, that affect everything else in the landscape."<sup>27</sup> Then, the hybrids of ruin, nature and life as seen in Mostar are just the continuation of that cycle once the human component stops dominating the other two.

Another interesting idea that comes from Ingold's take on phenomenology is the importance of time in the interrelation between us and the world. From his perspective, life is seen as a myriad of simultaneous processes acting in and upon the environment, making it dynamic and mutable, which is part of how we experience it. Successively, he argues that the same as organisms have written inside the processes that created them, the environment could do it too<sup>28</sup>. This conception could also be extended to the partly-artificial landscapes of ruins, which in their unfinished state already carry a strong notion of temporality. Then, the perception of these hybrid environments, the reading of their material and immaterial properties, implies not only understanding them now, but also thinking of how they came about and how they will continue to change.

#### *Current relevance of phenomenology*

The social, political and ecological challenges witnessed in Mostar are directly related to the history of the city, to a series of conditions that are very particular to this place. Their spatial manifestations however, are far from being unique. The destruction of the urban fabric as a war strategy is common to many armed conflicts around the world, and so is the complexity of dealing with the ruin once the conflict is over. The discussion on the best way to engage in the reconstruction has seen the two extremes, between total reconstruction and tabula rasa, without finding the right answer. That's why the next stage of ruination, the ruin-nature-life hybrid, is seen as a chance to find another viable solution.

Analyzing these places from the perspective of experience, from being in them without thinking of preconceived definitions, can arm us with a higher and unconventional sensitivity, bringing us closer to situations that we might otherwise overlook. A phenomenological approach can help us ask new questions by confronting us with the unexpected, allowing us to write a new narrative that doesn't depart from the trauma but from the opportunities and challenges presented by the space as it is now. This is especially necessary in places like Mostar, where the dominant narrative of the space is so rooted in the understanding of the city that is hard to uncover others. This also connects with the starting point of the studio Neretva recollection, which seeks to un-do the war processes and find un-war spaces, "spaces of disruption of the shame, as an episteme for an open understanding".<sup>29</sup>

#### *Conclusion*

On the first lecture of the course, Jorge Mejía introduced the notion of research as a cognitive practice, linked to the concepts of ontology, epistemology and methodology, defined as what we know about things, how we know about things and the ways to find that out. This start was highly influential to change the way I approach research, now thinking of it as a learning process as valuable as the final goal. This is what allowed me to fully immerse myself in the context of Mostar and be open to the discovery of things that weren't necessarily part of a script.

One of the most important findings was that the sites proved to be a source of new experiences, experiences that could hardly be found in another type of space in the city. There was, on one hand, the material leftovers, the traces of past occupation and the framing of a space that is neither inside nor outside. On the other, there was untamed nature, plants finding their own place, appropriating man-made objects and creating structures that complement the space. It was as being “outside” in the nature, only that nature has incorporated alien components in a symbiosis that makes it yet something else. At the same time, they also gave a very tangible feeling of time, showing how an open system can exist in an unfinished state, changing, adapting but still persisting there, in a never-ending process.

Another surprising discovery was that of people making their way in these environments without disrupting the processes already taking place. Human occupation happened in between the ruin, nature and non-human life, with intervention limited to a minimum in the interstices left by those. This speaks of coexistence between species in a way that is very close to posthumanism. Nevertheless, it also needs to be said that some of the uses given were aggressive and transgressive: from dumping garbage to taking drugs. That is why I insist in learning from the positive qualities of those spaces, while also acknowledging the need to act to stop the harmful practices taking place. Then, the task for my design assignment is finding the measure of that intervention, contributing to the exploration of alternative ways of designing that result in free and flexible spaces that can stand the pass of time, but also engaging with the subject of how to find spaces for nature in an increasingly urbanized world.

## V ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural research methods* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ray Lucas, *Research methods for architecture* (London: Laurence King, 2016), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Idem, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Groat and David Wang, op. cit., 10.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Ingold, *The perception of the environment* (London: Routledge, 2011), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid geographies* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Cary Wolfe, *What is posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Ray Lucas, op. cit., 13.

<sup>9</sup> Idem, 103.

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), vii.

<sup>11</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Idem, 72.

<sup>13</sup> Klaske Havik, Acts of symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmons and Alvar Aalto in *Montreal Architectural Review* (4, 2017), 43.

<sup>14</sup> Idem, 44

<sup>15</sup> Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 20.

<sup>16</sup> Idem, 161

<sup>17</sup> Tim Ingold, op. cit., 171.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., xi

<sup>19</sup> Idem, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Ray Lucas, op. cit., 158.

<sup>21</sup> Tim Ingold, op. cit., 261.

<sup>22</sup> Miwon Kwon, One Site After Another in *People, Place, Space Reader* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014), 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes: El andar como práctica estética / Walking as an aesthetic practice* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2001), 142.

<sup>25</sup> Saskia de Wit, *Hidden Landscapes* (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Ignasi de Sola-Morales, Terrain Vague in *Terrain Vague: Interstices at the End of the Pale* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Tim Ingold, op. cit., 206.

<sup>28</sup> Idem, 193.

<sup>29</sup> Armina Pilav and Saskia de Wit, *Neretva Recollection: Materiality of War, Flowing Memories and Living Archive* (Methods and analysis graduation studio booklet, 2018), 17.