

LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Self-Assessment on Research Methods

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O UNDERSTANDING URBAN GREEN STRIPS IN BOGOTA WITH A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

I INTRODUCTION

When it comes to architecture, one may first associate the profession with “design” rather than “research”. However, no architect can design from scratch or make things up out of thin air. Before one can start designing, the knowledge of what to design and how to design needs to be acquired through research, which lays the foundation of a design project.

Research is defined as “the systematic investigation into and study of materials and sources in order to establish facts and reach new conclusions” in Oxford English Dictionary.¹ This indicates that a research project can not be only about expressing one’s opinions as no work can exist in vacuum. A research project should consist of a describable and consistent working process to validate, explain and evaluate the knowledge, theory or conclusion that is established in the research. The aforementioned “systematic investigation” and “consistent working process” is the key to any research – the methodology(ies).

A research methodology is a set of paradigms that will enable the heuristic process of making relevant inquiries and achieve elaborated conclusions. Architecture is a multi-disciplinary study that encompasses many different fields such as science, engineering, social science and etc. Being aware of the research methodology used in the project allows one to discuss and discover the relevant topics with authority and accuracy.

The research methods lecture series has clarified and reinforced some of the methodologies that are previously known to me. It has also exposed me to varies methodologies that are new to me. Dr. Klaske Havik’s lecture introduced me to the scriptive approach to architecture which is a methodology that examines architecture through literary writing and literary reading. This method provokes an emphasis on the experiential side of the architecture which has often been overlooked in the course of architectural research.

The methodology itself is interesting enough as it is an unorthodox, authentic way of understanding built environment from a very intimate and rather personal perspective. It also makes me realize that the field of methodology is ever-changing and open-ended. One should not only adopt methods that has been already tested out and examined but should also adapt from existing ones or invent new methods to suit one’s research question of unique interest and perspective. Moreover, architecture research should never be restricted in a singular field. It is more beneficial to extend the scope beyond the realm of architecture.

My thesis is situated in Bogota, Colombia. As a fast-growing developing country in Latin America, the city has gone through major urban changes in the past two decades. The specific site is Teusaquillo, where several layers and urban traces of the city can be identified.

Typical of Chair of Method and Analysis, the studio is characterized by an experimental attitude on the level of analysis of, and intervention in, a complex urban setting. The investigations are two-fold: the concrete architectural and urban figures; and the interrelated narratives of the city. The research

and design aim to explore architectural project as a 'common enterprise' meant to favor citizens' attainment of "situation". An emphasis on human actions in relation to the built environment is placed in terms of meaningfulness, appropriation and integration.

Within this larger theoretical and methodological framework, my personal interest lies in the green strips in Teusaquillo which are the dividing greenery belts in the middle of the road. My research will focus on how can they be perceived as a pause in spacial terms, what affordance do they offer for appropriations by the locals, what are the spacial qualities that allow for the spontaneous activities happening around them. And further, what architectural potential does this infrastructure have in terms of being transformed into a public space.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

My research has adopted several approaches within the methodological framework of phenomenology to examine the special spacial characteristics and qualities of the green strips and their surrounding contexts.

Phenomenological approach is arguably the most well-known and established strand utilized in architectural research.² One of phenomenology's greatest strength is seeking out what is not commonly noticed by questioning what is usually beneath the aware consciousness. Given the foreign context of Bogota, I find phenomenology helpful in pushing me to go beyond the superficial analysis of the research object and to go deeper into the significance and meaning of the green strips in relation to human perception, which is in line with the philosophy shared in the Chair of Method and Analysis.

The project starts with a very direct phenomenology approach where I use mostly my first-hand experience and engagement to investigate the site. During the two-week site visit to Bogota, an approach called "thinking through things" is practiced to throw ourselves into the foreign unfamiliar context of Bogota. The method is a provocative and active way of engaging with the site where I used a domestic everyday object – a blind fold - to experience and perform actions in the site. It allows me to set aside any prejudgments and rely on my intuition to uncover the uniqueness of the site. Photos, videos, maps and sketches are taken during this stage of the research as documentation.

After the initial stage of the data/experience gathering, the essence of the findings is deducted and induced to achieve a certain level of abstraction that can be associated with the experience of the green strips in Bogota. The experience of the green strips can be perceived as a pause in space and human movement. Induction, in this case, is a useful tactic as it allows for explanatory narrative for a larger architectural phenomenon than the observed green strips.

Another approach used to assist the understanding of green strips is the rhetorical tactic of analogy. An architectural object can be examined and explained based on the likeness between the attributes of its contents and the attributes of some other domain.³ Philip Steadman's *The Evolution of Designs: Biological Analogy in Architecture and the Applied Arts*⁴ is an example of this approach. Steadman examines architecture and design process with a series of analogy in the field of biology. To name just a few, there is the morphology and structure – an anatomical analogy, tools as extensions of human body, and design process that mimics a kind of biological growth.⁵

In my research the green strips are assessed further through the analogies of the comma in the punctuation system and the pause note in musical note. Extensive literature research is carried out in the field of linguistics, literature (experimental writing) and music to understand comma and pause. This forms the objective interpretive base of the analogy. Another literary exercise is experimented to gain a subjective human experience of pause in literature reading. The 18th episode of Ulysses "Penelope" is used to perform the exercise which the writer James Joyce wrote nearly with no commas in over 24,000 words. Extracts are taken from the chapter and commas are places based on

a set of self-created unconventional rules. People are then invited to read the punctuated texts and write down how they feel while reading the texts. The reflective scripts are then carefully studied to achieve an understanding of the different uses and functions of the comma. The experience of writing and reading is then used to analogize the experience of moving through a green strip – a spacial pause in the built environment in Bogota. By clarifying the deeper meanings, human perceptions of green strips as a space at pause, it opens up opportunities for future design interventions.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Phenomenology derives originally from the phenomenological tradition of German philosophers, namely Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.⁶ Much of Husserl's work was concerned with the problem of reaching an absolutely objective foundation of existence and how meaning was derived from or given to particular phenomena.⁷ While Husserl was interested in meaning through essences, Heidegger is more concerned with the ontological question: what is the meaning of being?⁸ Phenomenology also derives from more recent interpretations in the social sciences, among which, Alfred Schutz tried to develop a "phenomenological sociology" that would bridge the conventional sociology and Husserl's philosophical phenomenology.⁹

The use of phenomenology in architecture is not as long as its origin in philosophy. In 1963, Christian Norberg-Schulz, one of the first ones to attempt with phenomenology with architecture and space, published the book *Existence, Space and Architecture*.¹⁰ Later Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown discussed postmodernity in their book *Learning from Las Vegas* in relation to phenomenology. More recently, architectural scholars such as Alberto Perez-Gomez have attempted phenomenological readings in architecture.

In the field of architecture, a significant advantage of phenomenological inquiry is that consciousness is projected onto an object and the physical environment can be understood through human consciousness. In this sense, phenomenology can be seen as having more kinship with architectural research than other qualitative approaches that focus more on the people's behaviors and interactions rather than their relations with the physical context.¹¹

In the realm of environmental design, David Seamon, editor of *Environmental & Architectural Phenomenology*, has identified three ongoing approaches of the research over the past fifty years: hermeneutical; first-person; and existential.¹² Hermeneutical approach depends largely on the textual analysis of the classic phenomenological texts in architecture or related fields. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard uses textual analysis from literature and poetry to elaborate an analysis of dwelling. In first-person approach, the researcher uses his own experience as a basis for examining the specific characteristics and qualities of an object. The last approach, the existential approach focuses on the specific experiences of "specific individuals or groups in actual situations or places"¹³

All of the aforementioned three approaches can be found in my research.

Engaging with the site through the blind fold enables me to set aside presumptions and focus on the here and now as well as the immediate consciousness associated with each action taken on site. Textual analysis of pauses and commas is then exercised to weave an interpretive analysis of the spacial experience of the green strips. The comma doesn't carry any meaning itself, however it divides, structures and give meanings to its surrounding existences. And that is the very essence of the green strips. The literary exercise allows for my reading of other individuals descriptive narratives of the effects of comma and pause.

This existential approach bridges the gap that the-first person approach may have. The depth and intuitiveness of first-hand studies can be very insightful and inspirational. However, researcher can easily fall into the paradox of trying to develop an objective interpretive science of subjective human experience¹⁴. This is even more so when it comes to the subjective essence of a given space. In light

of the drawback of the sole use of first-person studies, the literary exercise is carried out as an existential approach add another dimension to the research. However, with the physical constraints, it is unrealistic for me to be in Bogota again and interview other individuals on their experiences on green strips. The attention of this method is then shifted from the physical object – the green strips- to its abstracted essence – pause and comma. The experiential monologues of individuals reading punctuated texts are thoughtfully analyzed and considered collectively and the findings are then used to draw associations between the experiential similarities of the greens strip and comma.

IV POSITIONING

My research approaches the physical space through the intangible human perception of the people in this space. It focuses on the relations between the objective built environment and subjective human consciousness it provokes in order to uncover the essence of the space. This is a rather unorthodox methodology in architecture research for a thesis project. Usually more attention is given to the morphology aspect of space, for example how does it look, what is it connected to, what other architecture objects are significant in its surrounding. This morphology aspect of the space is also examined in my research through detailed mapping and sectioning of green strips in different locations. However, these drawings only serve as supplementary material for my understanding of the perception of green strips. They are one of the steps on the way of grasping the meaning and essence of green strips.

Although architecture is not often examined through the scape of phenomenology, there have been some attempts to relate the two. However, at times researches tend to use phenomenology in the following two ways, which are considered misused by Adrian Light. Phenomenology is used as a metaphor or as way of promoting the use of senses other than vision within architecture.¹⁵ Adrian Light distinguished five themes – archetype, senses, experience, flesh and meaning from four writers who writes about architecture with phenomenology – Norberg-Schulz, Holl, Pallasmaa and Pérez-Gómez. Among the five themes, my research is situated at the crossroad of experience and meaning.

Within the Chair of Method and Analysis, the research is guided around the theme of “meaningfulness”. This position offers urban communities instruments and methods to improve their understanding of their built environment. The study of experiential aspects of urban places is highly encouraged to investigate the site-specific qualities that render meaning and identity to place.

Dr. Klaske Havik uses literary writing and analysis to express the experiential aspects of space. Going beyond the visual realm of architecture which is the prime means of perceiving architecture and pace, Dr. Havik’s methods emphasizes on deeper connection with space through bodily, neural and mental being. Architecture is first and foremost a formal object, but human experience revolves around conscious and emotion. The literary methods bridge the two and induce images of life and behavior, emotions and feelings which can be used as not only a conceptual tool but a practical tool.¹⁶

My research on the green strips in Bogota is carried out with a phenomenology approach to examine space with a focus on the experiential aspects. Several methods are used to reveal the essence and meaning of the green ships. First- person encounters form the basis of the research. Interdisciplinary literature research induces the analogy of the comma and pause. Literary experimental reading verifies the experience of comma and pause which are then used to reinforce the meaning of green strips.

Texts are read with pauses and relies on comma for clear structures and defined meanings. The experience of green strips in urban space is similar to that of commas in literary texts. It divides the traffic and slows people down. It is a pause with no specific meaning however it gives meaning to its immediate surroundings and allows for spontaneity of human behavior. With these empathic

recognitions of the mundane architectural instance of green strip, new meanings can be designed, new spaces can be imagined.

The research questions are well answered by adopting the appropriate methodology. However, as I proceed to the design stage of the project, I believe new research/design questions will come up. More methods need to be explored or even a shift in methodology may be needed. With the framework provided by this course, I feel well equipped in methodological research.

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- 1 *Oxford English Dictionary* (UK: Oxford University Press,1884).
 - 2 Linda Groat and David Wang, *Architectural Research Methods*, 2nd Ed (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 227.
 - 3 Groat and Wang, *Research Methods*, 401.
 - 4 Groat and Wang, *Research Methods*, 402.
 - 5 Groat and Wang, *Research Methods*, 402.
 - 6 Groat and Wang, *Research Methods*, 227.
 - 7 Adrian Light, "Bodily (Im)positions: A Phenomenological Recasting of Space and Architecture," *Master Dissertation* (2001): 315.
 - 8 Light, "Bodily (Im)positions", 318.
 - 9 Groat and Wang, *Research Methods*, 227.
 - 10 Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Existence, Space and Architecture* (London: Studio Vista,1963).
 - 11 Groat and Wang, *Research Methods*, 228.
 - 12 David Seamon, "A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment Behavior Research," in S. Wapner, J. Demick, T. Yamamoto, and H. Minami (eds.), *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research* (New York: Plenum, 2000), 157-178.
 - 13 Seamon, "Phenomenology," 9.
 - 14 Thomas Schwandt, *Qualitative Inquiry: A Dictionary of Terms* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE,1998): 223.
 - 15 Light, "Bodily (Im)positions",168.
 - 16 Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (nai010,2014), 13.