ouPHENOMENOLOGY AS A TOOL OF INVESTIGATING IMAGE

I INTRODUCTION

The way we conduct research as students, as well as design professionals is, in my opinion, very important and should be placed both as a starting point and foundation of the design process. Thorough and well curated research is essential, showing rigor and dedication to the design intention ensuring that enough thought and work has been put into the process for the most successful outcome for the design goal.

Through this course I learned the importance of research being an ongoing process that runs parallel and informs the design process throughout the whole project. Additionally to conduct research that is substantial and can lead to a grounded design project, whether speculative or realistic, the approach of the research has to be convincing to anyone that sees over the project. Moreover, I learned how important it is to conduct research consciously, using the specific tools that we have learned over the years of our studies. I also learned about questioning the research approach as well as curating it accordingly depending on the theme, field, availability of time and information and goal of the project.

The starting point for my graduation project is an investigation into one of the first department stores in Mostar, Bosnia. The HIT department store building was initially introduced to me through a postcard of Mostar that featured the said building as well as the iconic 'Stari Most' bridge of Mostar and one of the oldest mosques. The more I researched about the building the more I was intrigued by how little information I could find about it. More over the images I uncovered consisted mainly of photos taken from this very particular perspective, making my perception of the building quite 'flat' and one dimensional. Instead of taking that as a drawback I decided to embrace this lack of information and focus on the image of the building rather than the building itself. This lead me down the path of researching the themes of image, memory, imagination and history.

Another important idea that fueled my research was the idea of a false or fictitious narrative being imposed on an existing architectural landmark, to enhance certain perceptions and historical interpretations of events. The historical 'Stari Most' bridge in Mostar, was reconstructed in 2004 after its demolition during the wars of the early 90s and was celebrated as the symbol of unification and bridging of the two ethnically divided parts of the city of Mostar. This symbolic significance of the bridge is contested by many, arguing that the reconstructed bridge though identical in form to the 'Old Bridge' is merely an 'image' of the 'Old Bridge' and not identical in meaning for the people who live in Mostar.[1]

---

[1] Maĉkić, Arna. *Mortal Cities - Forgotten Monuments*. Zurich: Park Books, 2016.

With these two ideas in mind I decided to explore the methods that can be used to research and derive information on a building that no longer exists, and how can someone begin to understand the importance of the absence of the building for the inhabitants of the city.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION 626/500

The research approach for the project so far was split into two stages, before and during the site visit. For the research from afar stage I combined both readings of theoretical material as well as readings of research methods to plan for the site visit. Firstly I would investigate the concept of postcards as a representation tool of the city and as a research approach, and then I would focus on the ideas of image, memory, and architectural space, and test some of the theories and information I found on site.

Through the reading of 'Research Methods for Architecture' by Ray Lucas, in combination with various information from the lecture series, I was introduced to phenomenology, defined as the philosophical study of phenomena focusing on the perceptual experience of an individual.[2] Writing about phenomenology, Lucas introduces the idea of the 'sensation' as defined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as a way of describing and defining the experience at a place. It also emphasized the view of the senses as active elements in the perception of any event, experience of space as noted by James Gibson.[3]

With the theme of postcards, I started reading about the importance of postcards as a research methodology through the collection of Le Corbusier. In his essay Luis Burriel Bielza, argues that the postcards collected on site by Le Corbusier, enriched the more traditional research approaches like sketching and note-taking. This was achieved through connecting the physical object of the postcard and the depiction of the subject with the personal experience of acquiring the postcard onsite. 'This is a crucial aspect which allows him to re-encounter, revive and refresh this same spatial experience 25 years later in a completely different setting.'[4] This approach towards the postcard, accentuates the significance of the experience of the person conducting the research on-site. This insight into the

---

[2] Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/.

[3] Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016.

[4] Bielza, Luis Burriel. "Le Corbusier's Postcard Collection: Poetical Assemblage as a 'Porous' Classification System | Artifact." *ARTIFACT* IV, no. 1 (2016): 3.1-3.18.

importance of the experience on-site, for conducting research encouraged me to explore further a more experiential subjective approach.

On site I started by attempting to recreate the few photographs of the HIT I managed to collect. This was my first step in attempting to familiarize myself with the context and delving into the experiences of the people that took the photos when the building was still standing, while investigating the site through my own experience. By using the absence of the HIT, I attempted to formulate an approach by which one, through experiencing the site, also explores the building through the physical and mnemonic remnants in the built environment.

In a different lecture, 'Seeing, thinking, designing urban landscapes with epistemes', Ellen Braae and Tom Avermaete emphasize the importance of being explicit about the approaches used in research in order to strengthen the designer's point and aid in the cooperation and dialogue with actors from different disciplines.[5] Regarding phenomenology they introduce several examples from the investigation of the Acropolis in Athens by Auguste Choisy in 'Histoire de l' Architecture', to Kevin Lynch's use of mental maps, and with that different ways in which the perception and experience of space can be investigated. Through these examples I realized how the investigation of a subject or site, can be approached in various ways through the lense of phenomenology. From creating mental maps through interviews with people, to documental personal perception of space in the form of photos, diagrams and sketches.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL 752/750

Modern phenomenology in its philosophical sense, was popularized by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl in the beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless many have practiced phenomenology through time, from the Hindu and Buddhist philosophers reflecting on states of consciousness achieved through meditation techniques, to more recent analytic philosophers of investigating issues of consciousness and intentionality.[6]

In the field of architecture phenomenology, has been used in various studies through time and in different ways. In *Histoire de l' Architecture* (1899) Auguste Choisy investigated the Acropolis in Athens, as mentioned earlier, through drawings and sketches, focusing on the experiential aspect of

---

[5] Braae, Ellen, and Tom Avermaete. 2018. "Seeing, Thinking, Designing Urban Landscapes with Epistemes." May 1.

[6] Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/.

the procession rather than the purely morphological qualities of the temple.[7] During the 1960s, two architects also used phenomenology in two very different ways, to explore the relationship of the people with their cities. In his book *Townscapes* (1961) Gordon Cullen illustrates and analyses the city through the eye of the pedestrian user of the city, through a combination of perspective and diagrammatical plan drawings.[8] Kevin Lynch uses a different technique to construct the 'mental maps' in his publication *The Image of the City,* combining drawings and photography with the maps. What differentiates these 'mental maps' is that the information presented is derived from interviews conducted with the public, to get an insight into how the public uses, perceives, and experiences the city.[9]

To investigate this perception of the HIT site, as an image, I relied mostly on photography, sketching and video and audio footage that I collected and created on site. I felt that this was the most appropriate approach not only because image is such an integral part of my initial research question, but also because I believe that through the creation, recreation, and editing of the material a lot of information can be unearthed and discovered. This methodology was used mainly as a tool to carry out site analysis through in-situ investigations but also through post-situ revisitings and exploration of the findings.[10]

Drastic technological advances in the modern day have improved the potential for capturing and recoding information onsite. Though this is often a double-edged sword, with the temptation of being drowned in endless, unsorted and scattered data and photographs, these technological advancements when used efficiently can aid substantially in research. The use of devices such as smartphones allowing the rapid taking and editing of photographic material on the spot, as well as sending or even printing. In addition, they allow recoding of both video and audio information, something that is useful when it comes to 'revisiting' or being immersed in the atmosphere of the site, similar to the effects of a postcard bought on site.

Various applications also exist that when utilized appropriately can have great value to site analysis. An example are GPS tracking applications that one can use to map how the observer approaches and moves around the site, but can also record exactly the location where photographs, or other visual and audio material was taken. All this information along with the editing and retracing

---

[7] Braae, Ellen, and Tom Avermaete. "Seeing, Thinking, Designing Urban Landscapes with Epistemes." May 1, 2018.

[8] Braae, Ellen, and Tom Avermaete. "Seeing, Thinking, Designing Urban Landscapes with Epistemes." May 1, 2018.

[9] Braae, Ellen, and Tom Avermaete. "Seeing, Thinking, Designing Urban Landscapes with Epistemes." May 1, 2018.

[10] Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016.

techniques and in-situ drawing attention sketches, plans, aimed to not only collecting on site information, but also further investigating and exploring the ideas developed on site on site post-situ. Moreover, they allow a more clear and communicative representation with the capability of digitally collaging drawn information with photographic and audio material, as well as various other external sources.

In comparison with the work of Kevin Lynch I avoided basing my findings on interviews of people for several reasons. Firstly, the limited time that we had available on site in Bosnia, in combination with the language barrier would, in my opinion, make any data collected really fragmented and not particularly objective, which would defeat the purpose of this approach. Additionally, to make an interview-based research a great number of participants and data must be collected, for the research to be valid, something that I deemed rather limiting in our short site visit, and it is for these reasons that I chose to focus on techniques other than interviews for the research.

IV POSITIONING (ca. 880/750 words)

Several of the talks sparked a response for me and my research approach. Firstly, the talk by Jorge Mejia Hernandez, emphasized for me the importance of research as an ongoing process and not as a fixed step that you go through at the start of a project. I found that talk a great introduction into looking at research more consciously and considering the methodology by which I choose to conduct the research.

In one of the readings, *Notes on the concept of an architectural position* by Royston Landau, I was intrigued by the ideas of Michel Foucault in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). Foucault argues for a distancing away from the notion that all evidence must be coming together to form a coherent and continuous history.[11] I found this turning away from the quest for an 'objective' truthful history, fascinating as well as liberating. When conducting research, I am often getting caught up in the quest for the truth and the real facts when in reality, at least according to Foucault, discovering the truth through analysis of past events is a futile act.

According to Foucault history will never be objectively reconstructed and that any attempt to do that is in itself an act of constructing a version of that history. This convinced me to not approach the research as a quest for answers, the truth or the solution when it comes to the issues of division in Mostar. Knowing that all research, especially research in such a short time frame, is bound to be subjective, I decided to embrace that subjectivity and conduct my research through the lenses that respond to what I found most interesting about the site of the HIT department store.

---

[11] Landau, Royston. "Notes on the Concept of an Architectural Position." *AA Files* No.1, no. Winter 1981-82 (82 1981): 111–14.

The ideas presented around material culture also stood out for me. In their essay, *Commodities and the Politics of Value* (1986)*,* Arjun Appadurai investigates the flows and movements of objects in the same way that one considers the migration of people, and through such a concentrated analysis of the 'biography of things' [12] one can have a very different outcome to their research. Unlike Apadurai, my approach through the mapping and sketching of the current conditions on the site was partly to identify all the different 'things' on the site and investigate their relation with the idea of the image of the HIT. As the destruction of the HIT left the site culturally and emotionally charged for the people of Mostar, a temporary metal fence as well as various other elements, including vegetation, billboards and numerous advertisements were inserted or allowed to grow wild, in order to obstruct the image of absence of the building. All these elements altered and continue to alter the image, both mental and physical, of the site through the obstruction of the view to the site and the projection of new images. It is through adopting the ideas of material culture that I observed all the elements individually, differentiating them in terms of life duration, construction methods and intent, but also analyse them in their context and in relation to each other.

The role of image continues to be a strong point of discussion within the modern discipline of architecture, particularly in our time of endless rapid exposure to images in social-media news feeds, billboards and screens everywhere. The effects of this obsessive image culture on society have been noted by many writers and philosophers in the past few decades, with Guy Debord calling it "the society of the spectacle", and Italo Calvino "the unending rainfall of images".[13] Without getting into the discussion of the danger of the role of the architecture being reduced to maker of glossy images, my intent is to investigate further a relationship of image, perception and experience through the case study of the culturally and mnemonically charged site of the HIT department store in Mostar.   I am more interested in how image can be a starting point of an architectural intervention rather than an end point or a selling point of the project.

In my opinion the claim that architecture students and in many case architects, can visit a site for one or two weeks, do research for that time, and arrive at a design that reconciles a community, or provides a single solution fix to societal problems, is more often than not an illusion. Through this course I have understood and appreciated the importance of research as an ongoing process during a project. It also made clear how to make conscious research methodology choices depending on the

---

[12] Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture*. London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016.

[13] "Quick Tour through Phenomenological Thinking in Architecture, by ABIBOO Studio | ABIBOO Studio." Accessed December 4, 2018. http://www.abiboo.com/arch/quick-tour-through-phenomenological-thinking-in-architecturequick-tour-through-phenomenological-thinking-in-architecturequick-tour-through-phenomenological-thinking-in-architecture/.

research question, but as the research question continually shifts and morphs throughout the design process so should our research methodologies.

At the time of writing this essay I have various fascinations and questions regarding the HIT site. The importance of image is at the core, but I am looking into memory, experience, perception, obstruction and projection, and through the various readings and methodologies introduced, I feel equipped to curate my researching of these questions more consciously and effectively.

Bibliography:

Bakshi, Anita. "A Shell of Memory: The Cyprus Conflict and Nicosia's Walled City." *Memory Studies* 5, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 479–96. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698012449785.

Bielza, Luis Burriel. "Le Corbusier's Postcard Collection: Poetical Assemblage as a 'Porous' Classification System | Artifact." *ARTIFACT* IV, no. 1 (2016): 3.1-3.18.

Braae, Ellen, and Tom Avermaete. "Seeing, Thinking, Designing Urban Landscapes with Epistemes." May 1, 2018.

Eric Dodson. *Husserl & the Adventure of Phenomenology - In 12 Minutes.* Accessed November 23, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjknxljepKA.

Landau, Royston. "Notes on the Concept of an Architectural Position." *AA Files* No.1, no. Winter 1981-82 (82 1981): 111–14.

Lefebvre, Henri, and Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space.* Nachdr. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2011.

Lucas, Ray. *Research Methods for Architecture.* London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016.

Maĉkić, Arna. *Mortal Cities - Forgotten Monuments.* Zurich: Park Books, 2016.

"Mortal Cities: The Irreversible Disappearance of Mostar - Failed Architecture." Accessed November 4, 2018. https://failedarchitecture.com/mortal-cities-the-irreversible-disappearance-of-mostar/.

"Quick Tour through Phenomenological Thinking in Architecture, by ABIBOO Studio | ABIBOO Studio." Accessed December 4, 2018. http://www.abiboo.com/arch/quick-tour-through-phenomenological-thinking-in-architecturequick-tour-through-phenomenological-thinking-in-architecturequick-tour-through-phenomenological-thinking-in-architecture/.

Ricœur, Paul, Kathleen Blamey, and David Pellauer. *Memory, History, Forgetting.* Paperback ed., [Nachdr.]. Chicago, Ill.: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010.

Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/.

———. "Phenomenology." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/.