

## LEARNING FROM GENIUS LOCI

a phenomenological approach to formulate architectural succession

### I. INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 / Researches as prerequisites of design practices

Research and practice build a reciprocal causation in the field of architecture. At present, the increasing complexity of contemporary cities place architects in a challengeable context. Global issues consisting of growing urban densification, congestion, and cultural diversity demand for architects in practice to play an increasingly important social role. Contemporary architects, therefore, must design with the critical consciousness with the help of researches. In fact, researches have become prerequisite of design practices, serving for a more rational deduction during design process, and eventually, contribute to a socially responsible built environment.

The lecture series of research method has broaden my horizon of research methods and inspired me in many aspects. The one that interests me most is "Spatial Narratives" given by Klaske Havik. Havik questioned the neglect of literature as a research method in the current architectural education and proposed diverse ways to introduce narrative into design, which evokes sensitivities and empathy of architects and raise their spatial and sensual imagination of future scenarios. Inspired by it, I used writing as a research device during my whole investigation, which eventually contributed to shape my research theme.

#### 1.2 / Introduction of thesis theme

Msc 3 Prague studio emphasizes on the mutual relationship between architecture and city and encourages students to identify possible sites and themes based on city investigation. In general, the increasing complexity of contemporary city and the relationship between urban densification, green spaces, public building and public realm are the main focus of the studio, which comes with the general research question : "Alpha Global City Prague: Unravelling hidden underworlds and public interiors; How to construct future memories and identities?"

After one-week field trip, I deliberately selected a historic site on the hill as my research site. It is called Vyšehrad (“upper castle” in Czech), a highly symbolic location which is believed as the birthplace of bohemia dynasty from ancient myth. I was intrigued by its symbolic meaning, historical value, and most essentially, the sense of aloof. This rigorously preserved site has cautiously minimized “modern interventions” and remained only scattered historical buildings on the park-like green space. On one side, it plays a unique role as a witness, seeing the urban transformation of Prague for more than ten centuries; Whereas, from an opposite perspective, this detached spectator, which has survived from contemporary complexity, has been refusing to involve in the social evolvment of Prague. Hence, I’m curious about the possible social roles it can play in the present context, from which I derived my research question and developed it under the general research question of Prague studio: “how to construct future memories and reconstruct the identity of Vyšehrad beyond its symbolic meanings?”

## II. RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

### 2.1 / Research approaches

Before the field trip, multiple context-led research methods have been applied in Prague studio, starting with a historical analysis of the Prague’s urban transformation, morphology and building types. Findings were documented through collective devices including mapping, writing, and drawings. Particularly, the possibility of the constitution of a public realm within the interior of condensed urban blocks were explored by concentrating on the internal arcades and passage-ways within the urban palace in Prague. During the field trip, In-situ photography, writings and interviewing were helped to comprehend the use and meaning of public spaces.

The second half of the trip focused on individual investigation of the site, Vyšehrad. Located on the elevated terrain and preserved as a historical compound with its own administrative department in-situ, Vyšehrad is, to some extent, a place of autonomy; therefore, attentions are paid mainly within the site. ‘Poetic atmosphere’, ‘panorama view’ and ‘historical relics’ converge into an exceptional experience, which evokes my subjective consciousness of sensory and empathy, unconsciously leading to a phenomenological approach. The perception of sounds, views, spatial sequence were recorded in situ and reflected in a mental map accompanied by narrative after the trip. This phenomenological approach helped to constitute a comprehensive image of the site in an relatively intimate manner. Plus, fact-based investigation of the context were complemented to address the existential issues. In conclusion, My research method is based on the perception-led phenomenological approach with the combination of investigating physical truth; And to avoid perceptive bias, I shifted between an ‘etic account’ and ‘emic account’<sup>1</sup> during the whole research process.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 10.

## 2.2 / Literature Review of phenomenological methods

Phenomenological methods describe the extensive research methods related to phenomenology of architecture. Although it was derived from phenomenology of philosophy, architectural phenomenology actually never constitute a theoretical system as rigorous as in the field of philosophy. The most pertinent branches of phenomenology (philosophy) in the field of architecture are the enquiry of essential relationship between being and dwelling explored by Martin Heidegger and the phenomenology of perception elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>2</sup>. However, it's definition is hard to clarify as it is intertwined with varied emphasises of architects and theorists. Broadly, architectural phenomenology stresses architectural spaces as a historically contingent human experience. Based on that, some phenomenologists focus on identities of existential places and exploring how it can be translated to architecture with critical consciousness, such as architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz and Kenneth Frampton. Others including architects Charles W Moore and Juhani Pallasmaa amplify the relation between body and space and particularly emphasize the sensory perception of spatial experience.

In fact, contemporary phenomenological practitioners work based on the combination of both but with varied proportion of each.

“Subjective consciousness” plays essential role in all phenomenological methods. However, in some cases, psychology and praxeology are involved in phenomenological methods to achieve a ‘scientific support’ for the perception in order to minimize the ‘subjective consciousness’. Whereas, some architects experimentally amplify the ‘subjective consciousness’ by generating their designs directly from ‘sensory notation’<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, phenomenological methods are hard to avoid for contemporary architects, though it is not aware by all.

## III. Research-methodological reflection

### 3.1 / Historical & theoretical context of architectural phenomenology

Fighting sharply against Modernism, in particular the realised mass production of “mute boxes” after the war, architectural phenomenology emerged in 1950s, turning the architectural discourse back to the tension between “being” and “dwelling”, and subsequently reaching its apogee in late 1970s and 1980s, which has become even more influential today.

Christian Norberg-Schulz introduced phenomenology to the field of architecture in 1960s based on Heidegger and attempted to apply a holistic approach to construct a system of Architectural Phenomenology. In his most influential book *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980), “place” was defined as the totality of “gathering things” which eventually form the “Genius Loci”, the spirit of place. The accessible explanations that Norberg-Schulz provided enlightened architects how a phenomenological approach to architecture could be translated into design, which made the book an significant reference in architectural phenomenology in 1980s. In parallel with Norberg-Schulz, architectural professor Kent C Bloomer and architect Charles W Moore worked towards the relation between human body and architectural experience in their book *Body, Memory, and Architecture* (1977). Moore and Bloomer described that the shared boundaries of existential space surrounded us from house to larger communities resemble ripple-like layers, and what in the

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<sup>2</sup> Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 153.

<sup>3</sup> Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 160.

centre is the human body. These boundaries are considered as “a means of extending inner order outward, of making a world that is sympathetic extension of our sense of ourselves”.<sup>4</sup> Against ambitious Modernism, Moore and Bloomer suggested an urgent attention to spatial experience, a return of the body to its proper places. This experience-highlighted phenomenological approach has a generation of successors, including contemporary practitioners of Phenomenology of architecture, such as Juhani Pallasmaa, Daniel Libeskind, Steven Holl and Peter Zumthor.

Pallasmaa based his theory on Merleau-Ponty and reinforced the theme of experience and sensory aspects in a sequence of books, in which he argued the hegemony of vision when we experience architecture, and underlined the significance of the tactile sense. As a phenomenologist, Pallasmaa concluded the essence of a phenomenological method in a sentence: “creative works calls for bodily and mental identification, empathy and compassion.”<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Steven Holl proves the positive influence of phenomenological methods through his abundant works in practice. Holl is much concerned with both metaphysical and phenomenological connection between architecture and its location. “Architecture and site should have an experiential connection, a metaphysical link, a poetic link”<sup>6</sup>. The connections are evidential in his projects, as they commonly provide a suggestive and implicit grasp of the locations.

### 3.2 / Reflection on phenomenological methods

My research method relies mostly on the combination of Christian Norberg-Schulz's theory of genius loci and Juhani Pallasmaa's theory of sensory perception. I started the research with an etic perspective, analysing Prague as an all-embracing totality and attempting to distil its essence, the Genius Loci of Prague. Meanwhile, the main research methods applied for individual site investigation was much inspired by Pallasmaa, focusing on experiencing from an emic perspective with subjective consciousness.

Though phenomenological devices are widely applied in architectural research methods, the abuse of them can be dangerous. In fact, the inherited subjectivity of phenomenology is double-edged, which is indeed the prerequisite of creativity, but meanwhile featuring an tendency of obscurity, where architect's arguments become “self-referential and entirely enclose”. Moreover, the abuse of philosophical devices, in some cases, leads to “a logical game or exercise of pure rhetoric” instead of “innovations in design”.<sup>7</sup> We must notice that Phenomenology is not grounded merely on “perception” in effect, it is founded on the ‘facticity’. As elaborated by Merleau-Ponty, “Phenomenology is the study of essences and according to it all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness, for example. But phenomenology is also a philosophy that puts essences back into existence and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any other starting point other than that of their facticity”<sup>8</sup>. For architecture, this ‘facticity’ is the existence of location.

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<sup>4</sup> Kent C Bloomer and Charles W Moore, *Body, Memory and Architecture* (London: Yale University Press, 1977) 77-79.

<sup>5</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture and the Senses* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 1996) 13.

<sup>6</sup> Steven Holl, *Anchoring* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989) 9.

<sup>7</sup> Raymond Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 153-154.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002) ix.

## IV. Position

### 4.1 / position: learning from genius loci

Norberg-Schulz provides a much more concrete foundation for phenomenology methods in the book *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1980), where he established distinct causalities of nature and artificial space. Man-made places are related to nature in three basic ways: visualizing the nature in architectural language, complementing to nature by adding what is lacking in nature, and symbolizing an experienced meaning in nature to artificial places. The nature, man-made spaces, and the people who inhabited gathering together form the “genius loci”, which has remained as “living reality” during the history. Norberg-Schulz believed “architecture means to visualize the genius loci, and the task of the architect is to create meaningful place, whereby he helps man to dwell”<sup>9</sup>, most importantly, “to protect and conserve the genius-loci, in fact, means to concretize its essence in ever new historical context.”<sup>10</sup>

Finnish architect Reima Pietilä can be considered as a practitioner of Norberg-Schulz's suggestion, who pursued to form a morphological language of architecture deriving from Finnish landscape and conducted his research in a thorough phenomenological way. At the first stage, a series of methods including maps, cross-section drawings, photography and drawings are essential for sensory documentation. The architect, then, abstracted the form of the site through sketching, during which the rhythmic outline and form principles of the local world has been translated to practical languages of construction.<sup>11</sup> In parallel with his works of translating morphology, he also attempted to adapt the vocabulary and grammar of Finnish language for architectural thinking. Through his whole career, Pietilä was looking for architectural space to concretize the genius loci of Finland and geometricizing tradition of Finnish culture. Comparable works can be found among architects all around the world. Mexican architect Luis Barragan translated local landscape to architectural components in a highly simplified and symbolic manner. Chinese architect Shu Wang created a new spatial language to express the poetic essence of traditional Chinese scrolling paintings of landscape.

In fact, once basing on genius loci, no matter what specific aspects the architects intent to emphasis, the phenomenological methods are able to contribute to enlarge the local architectural language in an unobtrusive manner. As Steven Holl said, “architecture does not so much intrude on a landscape as it serves to explain it.”<sup>12</sup>

One of the current discourses in the field of architecture is the irresistible prevalence of highly personalized buildings. In the book *Interpreting Basic Buildings*, Maffei and Cantiggia criticized that the ‘urban aggregates consisting of highly personalized, scarcely related objects’ leads the “urgent crisis in architectural language”<sup>13</sup>, and proposed the solution as to distinguish “what is remains and is active in the continuity of typological process” and develop new languages upon this typological continuity.<sup>14</sup> In fact, phenomenological methods based on genius loci could be a more enlightening solution for this ‘crisis’, as it guarantees both metaphysical and phenomenological continuities, and evokes creativities in developing new languages upon them.

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<sup>9</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Lauri Louekari, “Architecture of the Forest”, *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research*, 20, 3 (2018), 104.

<sup>12</sup> Steven Holl, *Anchoring* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1989) 9.

<sup>13</sup> Gian Luigi Maffei and Gianfranco Caniggia, *Interpreting Basic Buildings* (2nd edn, Florence: Altralinea, 2017) 31-32.

<sup>14</sup> Gian Luigi Maffei and Gianfranco Caniggia, *Interpreting Basic Buildings* (2nd edn, Florence: Altralinea, 2017) 37.

#### 4.2 / Conclusive argument

Phenomenological approaches allow architects read the site and context as emic account, activate empathy and build emotional connection to the location, leading to the priority of spatial experience rather than the realization of ideal vision. However, architects should always be aware of the consequence of excess subjectivities. To avoid the tendency of obscurity and self-indulgence, a phenomenological method must always be tied back to the solid comprehension of the location. Therefore, learning from genius-loci can perform as a reasonable foundation to anchor the wide variation of phenomenological research methods, and contribute to the architectural succession in built environment.

Learning from genius loci plays an essential role in shaping my thesis project. As historically valuable the site is, modern interventions must be cautiously added to it. Concretizing the genius loci of Prague into new architectural language provides a positive response to its symbolic meaning, forming a phenomenological connection between Vyšehrad and Prague and eventually achieving a succession in tradition and culture.

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