

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE “GENIUS LOCI” OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

Student

Yaying Zheng (4901398)

Chair of Urban Architecture

Thesis “Working & Living”

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

I INTRODUCTION

Design-methodological awareness in the field of modern architecture has continually been developing and gradually reaching maturity. From Bauhaus to the present development of High-Tech, Structuralism, Deconstructivism, Postmodernism, and Minimalism, although there are various design methods, they all play an essential role in the development of architectural diversity. No matter in the field of education or architecture practice, we have tacitly agreed that a proposal should start from the initial research and investigation of the site so that we can collect as many elements as we want that can be utilized for design. To meet the practical functions, research also needs to be elaborately conceived as design. Doing research should not only discuss architectural problems theoretically in the academic field but also need to conduct by a specific research question, which has been well considered and clearly defined. It should build a theoretical framework to help architects realize the transition from architectural ideas into reality. Research methodological awareness is an instructive way to form a research solution that can answer the research question and thus improve the efficiency of design. This is the materialization process from "imagine" to "reality" in architectural design, and it is to achieve relatively optimized results through reasonable approaches.

Modern society is in a relatively impetuous state, and most people gear towards pragmatism and a desire for quick returns. Design results are important, but so are processes and methods. This series of lectures systematically introduced different architectural research methodologies to us at a moderate speed, which can be said to have constructed my understanding of epistemology. From the first heuristic lecture, I began to think about the research methods of architecture. Through subsequent lectures, I learned more kinds of methodology, whether from the objective perspective of anthropology for observing others' behaviors or from the subjective narrative in the phenomenology considerations, those seemingly contradictory research methodologies can be combined as an auxiliary tool for conducting a research. Architects cannot and should not stick on one fixed method of research; instead, they should be comprehensive using several research methods to tackle design problems holistically. This new epistemology gave me a lot of inspirations. Especially in Havik's lecture on narrative space, I was fascinated by the poetic shaping of the atmosphere in space. I must confess that these personal, exquisite descriptions, rather than the theoretical and empirical research that meets the scientific standards, can better valorize the architectural existentialism and poetic essence in my mind. Simply, due to the essential existential content of architecture, the design cannot be a smooth rational problem-solving process. In architectural design, questions and answers come together at the same time; all buildings that move us are usually closer to personal confessions than problem-solving. (Architecture as Experience, Juhani Pallasmaa)

This thesis will mainly explore the episteme of phenomenology. The graduation studio of the chair of Urban Architecture encourages to explore Brussels - this mixed city, a place where the individual dwelling, the collective domain, and urban life meet. How we can accommodate the difference in dynamics between living and working and avoid nuisance is the main topic. Therefore, through the basic knowledge of phenomenology, this thesis will explore how to understand the "GENIUS LOCI" of a site, then explore a way to visualize it. So as to better understand the site in the context of the city, and respond to complex urban development problems through specific architectural intervention. During my research process, the main question which I want to answer is, "How can we visualize the 'Genius Loci' of a specific place based on the theory of phenomenology?" If we persist questioning in the way of phenomenology, we can get three following sub-questions: In contemporary architecture, does memory as an embodiment of the historical sense of the human world exist and how? Does the materiality of architecture as the embodiment of human perception exist, and how? Moreover, does the body as the subject in architectural experience still exist in the building, and how?

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

In order to design within the city, it is essential to have a sensitive perception of the site. The concept of "Genius Loci" root in phenomenology is the perfect method to grasp the characteristics of the site fully. The phenomenology of architecture discussed in this thesis focuses on Heidegger's theory of "Place". Norberg-Schulz's four works, "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture." (1979), "The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture." (1985), "Intentions in architecture." (1965) and "Existence, space, and architecture." (1971), constructed a complete theoretical system of architectural phenomenology. My research method primarily based on the concept of "Genius Loci" from the field of phenomenology. Phenomenology in architecture field probe into the relationship between the forms of architectural environment and the creation of atmosphere. "Genius Loci" explore first how people derive beneficial experiences from environments of different forms and characteristics, and further the complicated relationship between the meaning of dwelling and building. The concept of "Place" in phenomenology will be described in detail in the next chapter. Here I intend first to make a simple definition: "Place" is not an artifact which can be created by human. "Place" exists naturally; what the architects can do is to find a way to reap "Place". Making a place means visualizing "Genius Loci". In my graduation project, understanding the site and excavating the main body belong to the research part, visualizing "Genius Loci" and anchoring the main body to the site belong to the design part. The process of visualization is the bridge connecting my research and design. To reach the goal, capturing the different characteristics of both living and working environment, exploring the historical context, as well as the reasons for historical development and formation, is the first step. Then to figure out whether the people dwelling the site would change their activities in correspond with the shift of different atmosphere of the environment. By doing the mentioned research, I wish to recreate the memory of the past in thy way of recreating an atmosphere on site.

The site in Anderlecht is the starting point of the research period in my graduation studio. This medium-scale urban site needs us to critically read and assess the given situation with relatively rational research methods. The design theme of the graduation studio is Spolia. A term from archeology, spolia are the left-overs or 'spoils' of a building, which find themselves back in a new structure. It means that we need to switch from a macro perspective to a relatively micro perspective, not only from a structural and material perspective but more importantly from an emotional perspective to find an atmosphere that evokes people's emotional resonances, in another word, "Genius Loci". The position of the building relative to existing structures, its role in delineating private, public and collective realms, the city's different scales and material relationships should be focused in the following research.

The research period involved a field trip in Brussel, as a division line, most of the deskwork undertaken before going to the site. The whole studio split into five sub-themes, namely "Unstable city", "Zenne", "Living & Working", "Whose neighborhood" and "Bricolage", in order to document research holistically both qualitatively and quantitatively. (Lucas, 2016, pp.36-37) My research topic was "Living & Working". In general, the pre-excursion research starts with qualitative research approaches of reading historical atlas, mapping the site, summarize the development patterns of selected blocks. This process also involves the research methods strived from typology. Three different blocks in Anderlecht are selected to compare, in order to specify their typical relations between working and living in the urban planning scale. It comes out as INSERT, CONTAIN and EXCLUDE. In the following part, basic information, such as programs, location and Historical evolution of each block, helps us to get the first impression. So to speak the preliminary research craved to answer the question of "what to keep". After that, an awareness of its material presence, its layering and specific character in the site came out clearly in my mind.

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE “GENIUS LOCI” OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

Analysis of the site begins with a personal reconnaissance, which permits a grasp of the essential character of the place and allows the planner to become familiar with its features. Later, then, she can recall mental images of those features as she manipulates them. (Lynch and Hack 1984) When we were on the site, two types of observations were carried out alternately. One called the direct investigation of which observer immersing in the environment; the other is the indirect investigation similar to that adopted by Tuan in *Topophilia* (1974), which interprets the experience and cultural system of other people through interviews, observations, and records.

Phenomenology in architectural theory requires attention to how things form. Architecture initially only concern space, volume, wall, ceiling, layout, etc., according to the requirements of phenomenology, architecture should also attach great importance to the personal feeling related content, such as light, the psychological feelings of material, color, in particular, the symbolic sense of people feeling caused by these factors. They together form the meaning of sense.

Through the qualitative description of the building facades by a series of image collages, we attempted to awaken people’s consciousness in a phenomenological method and reflected on how the facade reflects the atmosphere of the hidden space. (Figure.1) In each block, one street facade is selected to analyze, based on the different conditions of mix-use. The facades present their programs behind, by different compositions, different materials, and the signs on the facade. The classification according to the programs could help to figure out the connection between the facade and the programs. Another goal is to define the existence of the body in the place, the study of boundaries was introduced at this moment. In this part, we zoom in and see how working and living coexist in one small area. Some solutions working as the spatial buffer zones could help to avoid interference between each other. Furthermore, the logistics of different buildings also show the condition of coexistence between the factories, companies, and communities.

After we came back from the field, observations were distilled in narratives, drawings, models and even comics to reinterpret the atmosphere. (Figure.2) By combining traditional section drawing with a physical model (Figure.3/4), together with notes and illustrations, we succeeded to juxtapose a large number of descriptions from the interviewee in many different perspectives, to be able to represent their different activities in daily work and life routine. In this act of observation, we were actually experiencing the experience or customs of the residents in Anderlecht and then discussing those parts that can be validated by our feelings.



Figure.1 Facades collage of a street in Anderlecht.

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PALCE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?



Figure.2 I also used comics to reinterpret the atmosphere in Anderlecht.

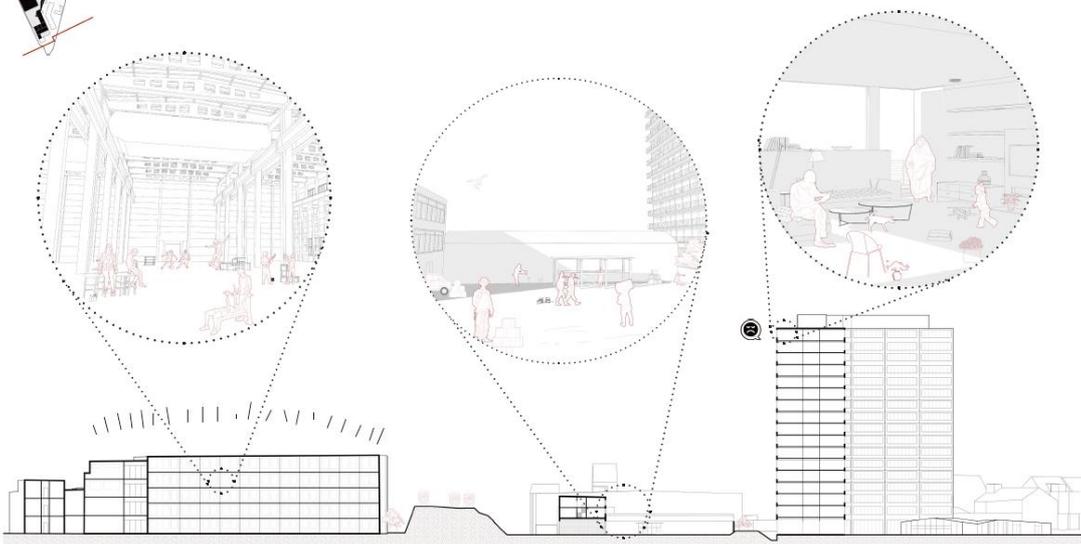


Figure.3 Narrative section to show activities in daily work and life routine.



Figure.4 Narrative section to show activities in daily work and life routine.

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Emerging in the 1970s, architectural phenomenology was developed by a group of scholars engaged in the study of human geography. Influenced by Heidegger's philosophy of existence and Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology, they gradually expanded their research into the fields of the human environment, regional environment, urban planning, landscape design and finally architectural design. In the thesis "Geography, Phenomenology, and the Study of Human Nature" written by American geographers Yi-Fu Tuan (1971), the experience of human in a specific place was for the first time related to philosophy explanation of "Being-in-the-world" (in-der-welt-sein) and "Poetic Dwelling" which come up with by Heidegger. After further development by Norberg-Schulz, Pallasmaa and Steven Holl, phenomenology as a complete theoretical framework and methods in the architecture field has formed. Since then, architects have stepped out of the narrow space of previous studies to explore the relationship between the form of the built environment and the creation of specific atmosphere, to study how people obtain beneficial experiences from different forms and characteristics of the environment, as well as the complex relationship between the meaning of life and architectural space.

"The bridge swings over the stream...It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream. The bridge designedly causes them to lie across from each other. One side is set off against the other by the bridge. Nor do the banks stretch along the stream as indifferent border strips of the dry land. With the banks, the bridge brings to the stream the one and the other expanse of the landscape lying behind them. It brings stream and bank and land into each other's neighborhood. The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream...." (Heidegger, 1971)

Norberg-Schulz defined the word "place" in "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture": "a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and color. Together these things determine an 'environmental character', which is the essence of a place. In general, a place is given as such a character or 'atmosphere'." (Norberg-Schulz, 1979, pp.6-7) In his opinion, the place should not be treated in a too abstract way but should be a qualitative totality of a complex nature. Schulz's theory starts from a more microscopic point of view, which is the sense of the person, to get the atmosphere from the collection of things. In conclusion, feel the "Genius Loci" of a place, feel the atmosphere, and then create the atmosphere become the new commission for architects.

Kimberley Dovey put forward in "Putting Geometry in its Place: Toward a Phenomenology of the Design Process": The most important thing in phenomenological approach to environmental research is to distinguish between "Geometric Space" and "Lived Space". (Dovey, 1993, pp. 247-269) For Dovey, the former defined as a kind of space that has been measured, which is abstract and precise, while the latter is a space that can preserve common social memory. Only in the "Lived space" can people encounter the real meaning of human life, and the subtle atmosphere of the place.

Steven Holl was the first practice architect who applied "place" theory as a design strategy. According to Holl, it is the participation of humans that makes meaning to a "place", to be more precise, by the engagement of humans, the original abstract and uniform "spot" transformed into the "Place" where the actual and specific human behavior takes place. He examines human beings' existence, which means set up both "the conceptual and experiential anchoring of the building into the site and the situation." (Yorgancioglu, 2004) Holl went a step further than Dovey, and he has elevated the understanding of "atmosphere" from the noun property of "Lived" to the verb property of "Anchoring". The materialization of "anchoring" is shown as "intertwining between site and building". (Holl, 1998)

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE “GENIUS LOCI” OF A SPECIFIC PALCE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

	Meaning (metaphysical)	Structure (physical)	The discovery of “Genius Loci” (from physics to metaphysics)
Heidegger	Poetic dwelling	build	“Poetic dwelling” can be felt the by “building”.
Norberg – Schulz	Atmosphere	Totality	“Atmosphere” can be acquired from “totality”.
Dovey	Lived Space	Geometric Space	“Lived Space” derived from “Geometric Space”
Holl	Anchoring	Intertwining between site and building	The situation of “Anchoring” is constructed by “Intertwining between site and building”.

Figure.5 Summarize the way to visualize the “Genius Loci”.

To summarize the way to visualize the “Genius Loci” through a diagram (Figure.5), what we have discussed above about “Genius Loci” all standing from the perspective of an experienter. Architects should pay attention not only to the discovery of “Genius Loci”, but more to the (re-)creation of it.

As mentioned above, the recreation of places is to visualize the "Genius Loci". The application of phenomenology in the field of architecture in my research methodology based on the understanding of the “Genius Loci”, and through the systematic integration of its elements, people can obtain the sense of place identity from space. Cause I am facing adding new programs into a complex urban context with multiple functions, how to integrate a new space into the original site becomes my biggest challenge at the early stage. Space is the carrier of collective memory, and the creation of atmosphere is an important expression in order to visualize “Genius Loci” of a space, which plays a prominent role in phenomenological research. Today's buildings are suffering from amnesia, losing consciousness, and memory of the body-subject. They can rarely enter the realm of poetry or awaken the mental images of the world. Contemporary architecture focuses more on visual impacts, Architecture should ask it again on the material and practical function and existence to reach deep human consciousness, hit dream and emotion – like what Tarkovsky, Pallasmaa and Merleau-Ponty reveal that to make it become the indispensable scenery in art. “Return to things” (Zurück Zu den Sachen Selbst) was the first act of the phenomenologist and could also be an important method for artists and architects. When architecture enters the field of phenomenology, how to define the interaction in Anderlecht, such a complex block, among the three components of “history, perception and body-subject” through the research methods of phenomenology, is the problem I want to solve in the research process. History is about time and memory, perception is about intuition and materiality, and the subject is about the physicality of the person in the field. History" is about time and memory, "Perception" is about intuition and materiality while "body-subject" is about the human and activities dwelling in the site. Therefore, after coming back from the site, I adopted a variety of more subjective methods such as narratives, drawings, models and comics to find the way to make these three elements relate to each other in the site to create the “Genius Loci” of the site in the following design stage.

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

IV POSITIONING

As a way to understanding the world, phenomenological principle helps people to realize the richness and complexity of space consciously. However, for architects, it can only become a method of reading space, rather than a methodology of architectural design.

In order to recreate the multiple complexities of space corresponding to the theory of phenomenology in the way of architectural design, Steven Holl has developed a unique design method - "Flashback". Based on his accumulation of spatial experiences over the years, Holl accustomed to pre-set a conceptual vocabulary or description to define the atmosphere of a space, presupposes the perceptual experience, and then materializes the space, by doing so anchoring and presenting the multiple perceptions of the space. This method lies in the abstraction of words or descriptions and the relevance of multiple perception levels of the body so that the meanings of a word can be quickly explored and expanded. For example, "acuteness" can be extended from the shape at the visual level to the harsh feeling at the auditory level, and even to the pain at the tactile level and the anxiety at the psychological level. Alternatively, as in "boundary", the limitation of the visual layer can be extended to the barrier of the tactile level, and even to the echo of the auditory level. Utilizing architects' manipulation of vocabulary and exploration of the abstractions of word meanings, multiple perceptions can quickly construct the complexity of spatial atmosphere.

Havik's lectures about narratives coincide with Holl's "Flashback", in which she stressed on the role description and written documentation can play in enhancing our perceptions of space. I realized that using subjective description by words could be a useful way to define a certain atmosphere, through detailed descriptions. Havik categorized literary writing into description, transcription, and prescription. (Havik, 2014) I was interested in the description part, which referred to experience and decided to develop upon it in my graduation design research.

Peter Zumthor published "Thinking Architecture" and "Atmosphere", in 1998 and 2006. In it, many details of an ordinary object are concentrated, which exactly proved to be the recording of the places. For example, "Thinking Architecture" begins with a series of recent memories about aunt's garden: the door handle, the sound of the gravel, the soft gleam of the waxed oak staircase. (Zumthor, 1998, pp.7-8) The relationship between place and mind characterizes both books. Zumthor reveals the essence of architectural thinking with plain words. First of all, Zumthor emphasizes the direct grasp of architectural elements, including building materials, crafts, and architectural drawings. He even suggests that people should think less when experiencing architecture. This immediacy is the "ties of matter" on which phenomenology depends; Second, in Zumthor's description, architecture provides users with a series of perceptual elements, and the direct contact between users and architecture forms users' feelings towards architecture. Perception of architecture space is contained in the awareness of the environment described in phenomenology; Third, Zumthor's self-examination and his review of the design process are consistent with the discussion of motivation in phenomenology.

The body-subject of the description in Zumthor's literature, which refers to the specific material culture. The lecture on Material Culture by Eireen Schreurs helped to give a further understanding and shape my position of research and design. Architecture is a culture of making that represents itself. The lecturer pointed out the close relationship between an understanding of culture and society and the study of material properties. In other words, materials with their properties like usage, size, and position. (Carl, 2011)

In "The Geometry of Feeling" written by Juhani Pallasmaa, his treatises return to phenomenological consciousness and thus involve an important architectural concept: experience. (Pallasmaa, 1996) This is when the architects begin their practice of phenomenology. As a result of the focus on experience, architects began to pay attention to the visual, tactile, olfactory and auditory characteristics of buildings. In "An Architecture of the Seven Senses", Pallasmaa further emphasized the significance of multilevel perception for spatial cognition: In Renaissance times, the five senses were understood to form a hierarchical system from the highest sense of vision down to the lowest

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

sense, touch. The system of the senses was related to the image of the cosmic body; the vision was correlated to fire and light, hearing to air, smell to vapor, taste to water, touch to earth. (Pallasmaa, 1996, p42) The multiple perception fields are not independent of each other, but show intertwined and mutually confirmed relations, and reproduce the sense of space of the world through a complex common feeling. As Pallasmaa said: "...Qualities of matter, space, and scale are measured equally by the eye, ear, nose, skin, tongue, skeleton and muscle. Architecture involves seven realms of sensory experience which interact and infuse each other..." (Pallasmaa, 1996, p42) Through daily experience, we can also confirm the above discussion. The fragrance of fruit echoes its sweet taste; The brightness of the sun is superimposed on the warmth of the skin. Compound perceptions together define our complete understanding of everything in the world. Similarly, for architecture, all elements of the place are defined by the body of the experienter, forming a specific sense of space relative to the experienter. Therefore, we can clearly recognize the cognitive significance of the immersive environment in architectural space. The experience brought about by any media is only for a certain level of representation of the space, even if the most vivid media, such as film, still can only reproduce the flow of images and recording voice, not so as for the smell of the place, the material feels, the temperature of the air. The absence of multiple perceptual levels weakens the strength of the shock, which made it challenging to present the real architectural space in the complexity of multiple cognitive aspects.

Phenomenology was conceived as a philosophy adopting the method of "return to things" to explore the essence of the world. It has important implications for the relationship between humans and space and even the world. For architects pursuing the nature of space, it is of more unique significance. However, it should be made clear that phenomenology, as a general principle of human understanding of the world, cannot itself become a methodology of architectural design. If architects claim to use architectural phenomenology for architectural design, they must construct a set of a relatively personalized workflow. However, this kind of design method, in a way, could establish the phenomenological cognition and the architecture operation bridge, which has unique research significance.

The eternal mission of architecture is to create a materialized metaphor that can reflect and construct human existence. If one day, architects could be able to awaken a collective memory of human, as Aldo Rossi called it, then we would have found a way, through phenomenology, to a future marked with the imprint of memory.

HOW CAN WE VISUALIZE THE "GENIUS LOCI" OF A SPECIFIC PLACE BASED ON THE THEORY OF PHENOMENOLOGY?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Carl, Peter. "Type, field, culture, praxis." *Architectural Design*, 81(1), 38–45. 2011.
- Dovey, Kimberley. 'Putting Geometry in its Place'. In: Seamon, D. (ed) *Dwelling, Seeing and Designing*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1993, pp. 247-269.
- Havik, Klaske. "Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture." Nai010 Publishers. 2014.
- Heidegger, Martin. "Building Dwelling Thinking." New York: Harper Colophon Books. 1971.P47
- Holl, Steven, 1998 (first published in 1996), *Intertwining*, New York: Princeton Architectural Press
- Lucas, Raymond. "Research Methods for Architecture." Laurence King Publishing. 2016.
- Lynch, Kevin, and Gary, Hack. "Site Planning." 3rd ed. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press. 1984.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture." Rizzoli. 1979.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. "The Concept of Dwelling: On the Way to Figurative Architecture." Rizzoli. 1985.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. "Intentions in architecture." MIT Press.1965.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. "Existence, space and architecture " Littlehampton Book Services Ltd. 1971.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. "An Architecture of the Seven Senses," in *a+u Architecture and Urbanism: Questions of Perception*, ed. Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, and Alberto Perez-Gomez (Tokyo: a+u Publishing Co., Ltd., 1994), 42.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. "The Geometry of Feeling: a look at the phenomenology of architecture." *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture, An Anthology of Architectural Theory*. Nesbitt. New York, pp. 447-453.1996..
- Tuan, Yi-fu. "Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values." New York: Columbia University Press. 1974.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Geography, Phenomenology, And The Study Of Human Nature." *Canadian Geographer*, 15: 181-192. 1971.
- YORGANCIOĞLU, DERYA. "STEVEN HOLL: A TRANSLATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY INTO THE REALM OF ARCHITECTURE." 2004
- Zumthor, Peter. "Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects." Birkhäuser. 2006.
- Zumthor, Peter. "Thinking architecture." Birkhäuser. 1998.