

# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL OVERLAPPING OF SPACE

## Perceptual Re-creating over Territory

Student

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Chair of Border Conditions along the New Silk Road

Thesis "Seeing Tashkent City through Water, A City Defined by Water"

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Methodology in research is the cornerstone in architectural profession. One should learn what is being before knowing way of doing. Methodology largely decides the design process and approach, so this ideology is crucial for architecture students to learn from.

I am most interested in the territory part of the course. The views on mapping, territory and landscape broaden my understanding of mapping as a researching and designing practice and help me shape my position in the graduation thesis. Mapping, instead of depicting objective fact, is a subjective analyzing and re-creating. On the one hand, it is an exploration through the process based on individual perception; on the other hand, there are developments of mapping instruments which may lead to revolution.

My thesis topic is Seeing Tashkent City through Water, a City Defined by Water. The research wants to explore the relationship between water intervention and development of Tashkent City through history. This is based on subjective perceptual experience along the main canal going across the city under the frameworks of phenomenology. And it is mainly done through mapping (especially overlapping) the essence of water in all aspects - technically, politically, psychologically, socially and culturally.

The Chair of Border Conditions along the New Silk Road adopts the general approach of mapping in order to define the territory and border. It regards mapping as “an act from ‘measuring’ into ‘exploration’” (studio booklet 14). Mapping doesn’t repeat the reality and it is already a representation of the reality: mapping cannot include all the reality on one panel because of the limited scale, and it doesn’t intend to do so because one map has one certain theme, thus unwanted layers are excluded. “Ambiguity, complexity and openness are key to the category of mapping that the studio has been exploring”(studio booklet 14). No preconceived outcomes are expected. The investigation motivates improvisation and complexity, and allows for deviations. Students are asked to explore “an overlapping of experienced spaces and encountered events, alongside hunches and à-priori knowledge, to form an ad-hoc reading of the city”(studio booklet 21).

My research focuses on subjective interpretation of water’s essence and relationship with city, which largely relates to phenomenology implied in the course. I adopt mapping as a heuristic technique, within which overlapping is found to be the most appropriate specific method.

## 2 RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Phenomenology and overlapping

This is a theory-led research that adopts the methodology of phenomenology and utilizes specific method “overlapping”, whereby first-hand perceptual experiences are explored.

Phenomenology is “the study of the essence of human consciousness through the subjective experience of phenomena” in architecture field (“Post Structuralism & Phenomenology Concepts in Architecture”). The spatial elements in my research are not limited to physical ones, but extend both in time and space: they can be the current presence, or that ever existed in history but finally disappeared, or the proposed utopia; they can be within short physical distance or perceptually and semantically nearby.

Overlapping is the specific approach developed in the process of mapping under the framework of phenomenology. It is a ceaseless process of superimposition/ juxtaposing/merging/synthesizing/assemblage of diverse layers/elements. It is layering, or a hybrid game that creates a “heterogeneous and ‘thickened’ surface”( “Agency of Mapping” 235) . Each element has its own essence and the best way to be represented. Besides, overlapping is related to the strategy of urban drifting, the so-called Dérives. It is an open-ended adventure, with no unpredictable conclusion before more layers are added. The correlation and the weight of the layers are unclear at the beginning. They are like stars scattered in the sky and the map maker is the one to find the constellations through the act of mapping.

The reasons why I choose phenomenology is that the research is a subjective perceptual exploration to the water's essence and characteristics. It largely relates to the essence of human consciousness studied by phenomenology.

The reasons why I choose Overlapping are as follows: Firstly, Water's essence and its relationship with Tashkent city are too complex and extensive. The spatial essence contains many aspects and the perception of experience is multifaceted. Thus the research needs a specific method capable of handling such a complexity and multiplicity under the epistemic frameworks of phenomenology. Overlapping is the crucial approach with large exploring potentials. Secondly, the research is like an unconscious and impromptu derives, or an open-ended adventure, so the approach should similarly have no specific orientation like the content.

Overlapping is a practice that happens within imagination rather than reality, because each layer may truly exist on the mapping, but may not coexist with others at the same time or same place under certain circumstances.

Overlapping is an approach practiced in wide fields. For example, city planning is seen as a discipline of "regulating overlapping flows at different scales". It follows a "network logic of overlapping infrastructural communication systems"(Wigley 5).

### 2.2 Current relevance and challenges

Phenomenology is thought to be more related to architectural research than other qualitative approaches that have a more exclusive focus on people's interactions from the physical context(Wang and Groat 228).

Phenomenology has its challenge when researchers need to understand the objective essence of the "experience that transcends individual subjectivity"(Wang and Groat 229). Besides, as everyone has his or her individual perception to one experience, phenomenological studies may have many subjective conclusions and thus may not yield sufficient insight for designers faced with the dynamics of a complex, multifaceted design project(Wang and Groat 229).

Besides, one of the views on phenomenology is that our perception is the result of our previous experiences. This indicates people tend to depict the city's essence based on their former subjective experience in one familiar city when they experience a strange city. This means what they depict may well not be the actual case. This, indicates the phenomenology has its limitations as an approach.

## 3 RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

### 3.1 Phenomenology historical context

Phenomenology is created by Edmund Husserl during the 1800s. "Architectural phenomenology acknowledged the importance of human experience as part of architecture; also referred as a return of lived experience." ("Post Structuralism & Phenomenology Concepts in Architecture"). Thus the space is an integration of physical, sensoric and perceived elements. After Husserl, the Cartesian duality of subject and object is collapsed by presuming that "reality" is embodied in the object's meaning in subjective consciousness. A basic principle underlying such an inquiry is the concept of "bracketing"(Wang and Groat 228). Another important philosopher on phenomenology is Martin Heidegger who has shaped one of the key approaches in phenomenology discourse("Post Structuralism & Phenomenology Concepts in Architecture"). He claims "being-in-the-world", in which he means existence connects to physical reality and thus is fundamentally spatial.

Christian Norberg-Schulz was the first architectural theorist to introduce phenomenology into architecture. He claims that our perception is the result of our previous experiences. There are several architects and scholars associated with architectural phenomenology, including: Steven Holl, Daniel Libeskind, Kenneth Frampton and Peter Zumthor.

Then comes the "Postphenomenology". It is described to take into account the "multidimensionality, multi-stability, and the multiple 'voices'" of phenomena (Wang and Groat 242). This actually relates more to overlapping's meaning.

### 3.2 Overlapping historical context

Overlapping has been practiced in wide fields since a long time ago. Marcel Duchamp, the French artist, had some overlapping practice within extended time dimension, depicting motion by successive superimposed images. *Nude person going down stair* in 1912, for example, is an overlapping of rhythm and cadence inspired by Etienne Jules Marey's locomotion 1870 that traced chronologically in the study of ergonomics,



Fig. 1 Duchamp, Marcel. *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. 1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art, PD-US.

Then in 1944, a geological investigation by Harold N. Fisk on Mississippi River, the constantly shifting ecosystem, resulted in an overlapping of river trace in different periods, compressing all its historical essence to one panel. Through overlapping, how nature and human activities influence the Mississippi River through years are clearly shown, and more “constellations” among the layers are springing out.



Fig. 2 Fisk, Harold. *The Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River*. 1944, [www.radicalcartography.net/index.html?fisk](http://www.radicalcartography.net/index.html?fisk).

Aldo Rossi's *Analogous city* in 1977 is an architectural overlapping practice under the phenomenological context. His projects are superimposed and condensed into this single image. Elements are scaled, composed and combined to express Rossi's understanding of architecture and city. The city is not the physical city, but the city in people's perception, memory and imagination. Reality and imagination are confused, Memories and present are mixed.



Fig. 3 Rossi, Aldo. *The Analogous City*. 1977, <https://arquilatria.tumblr.com/post/93050715561/the-analogous-city-collage-1977-aldo-rossi>.

Overlapping finds its practice also in landscape. James Corner, a landscape architect and theorist, superimposes elements in different scales and views in mappings, introducing concept of “measure” in mappings in *Taking measures across American landscape* in 1996. Some mappings in the book also overlap practical or poetic elements in different forms, such as images, patterns, texts and signs, and compresses into one multi-faceted image.

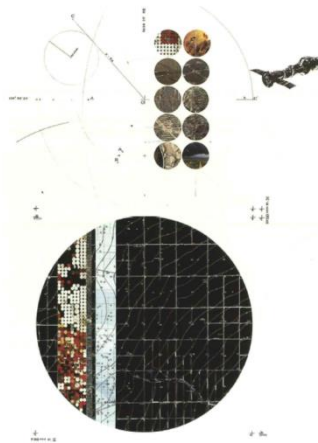


Fig. 4 Corner, James. *Pivot Irrigators I*. 1996. *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*. By James Corner and Michael van Valkenburgh. Yale University Press, 1996. 90. Print.

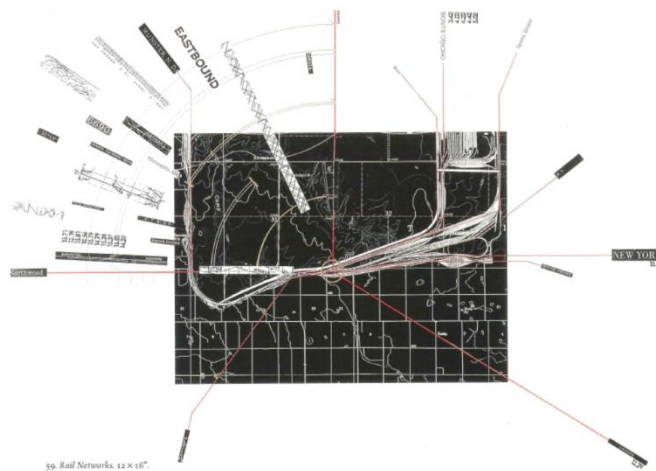


Fig. 5 Corner, James. *Rail networks*. 1996. *Taking Measures Across the American Landscape*. By James Corner and Michael van Valkenburgh. Yale University Press, 1996. 107. Print.

### 3.3 Reflection

Phenomenology is the qualitative methodology that focuses on what the space is by individual perceptual experiences. Phenomenological studies may have many subjective conclusions and thus may not yield sufficient insight for designers faced with the dynamics of a complex, multifaceted design project (Wang and Groat 229). And in certain circumstances people experience multi time spheres at the same time. In that sense, overlapping is a good supplement to depict the multi-faceted and complex essence of a spatial experience accurately. Overlapping under the phenomenology framework can depict the essence of a complex space to its extreme, because it explores potential “constellations” among layers as much as possible, and so can find many unexpected surprise; and it doesn’t limit to rigid representation ways, but depicts layers each in their best ways. This brings us closer to the essence of being.

## 4 POSITIONING

### 4.1 My position

The thesis is under the epistemic frameworks of phenomenology and method of overlapping based on my first-person experience and analysis of other people’s perceptual spatial experience through artworks and literature. I try to read the city from the “water” perspective.

In my view, phenomenology is an important ideology in architecture field. It allows re-shaping of the existing space to the new psycho-space based on individual perceptual experience. Things need to be narrated as they are in their spiritual presence. Phenomenology indicates the blurring of reality and imagination and the two can no longer be distinguished.

The method overlapping allows people to make reference to “here and there, now and then”. The spatial essence contains many aspects and the perception of experience is multifaceted. It is more “more complex and dynamic than previous formal models allowed. Ideas about spatiality are moving away from physical objects and forms towards the variety of territorial, political and psychological social processes that flow through space” (“Agency of Mapping” 227). Thus the research needs a specific method capable of handling such a complexity and multiplicity under the epistemic frameworks of phenomenology. By using the overlapping method, various narratives are mixed together and create certain perceptual experience in one space (Havik and Charley 279). It helps convey the plural and interacting nature more accurately ( “Agency of Mapping” 240). Besides, overlapping discuss many meanings of “measure”.

Apposition of phenomenological methodology and overlapping method is an endless experiment with unknown things. It breaks the conventionally quantitative and rational construction approach of mapping to a divergent thinking process. By apposition of phenomenological methodology and overlapping method, architects can take the conclusion more accurately to the next phase, design.

### 4.2 Specific research process

I had a 100km trace along the main canal going throughout Tashkent City in the “first-person phenomenological inquiry” (Wang and Groat 228), trying to read the city from the “water” perspective. I collected the interesting fragmentary information by a set of tactics: photography, interviews, field trip and library document collection.

I start depicting essence and characteristics of water in 100 ways after the first-person fieldtrip: I first explore water’s velocity, volume, height difference, pollution degree, color, cleanliness, flavor, temperature, sound, density, with artificial or natural bank, atmosphere, etc.; then try to depict each characteristics of water and its container elements in the best representation way, either by plan, elevation, section, perspective or axonometric through overlapping process. The important thing in the research is “defining the city only by water”, meaning only mapping relevant elements’ characteristics to the extreme and drawing connections among them.

Water has one very special characteristic among those listed in former paragraph: fluidity, or mobility. There is an extending of chronological overlapping when mapping fluidity, so observers will have an understanding of changing, dynamic and ephemeral characteristics. One example is the



research of shrinking lake in the city center by overlapping lake edges and the riverbed trace chronologically (seasonally, and year by year). Other examples include: Leaking from the water pipe, evaporating from the canal, disappearing in the desert, and underground water level's going down.

The collective map of our graduation studio -121 readings of Uzbekistan- also adopts the overlapping method. It seems an endless process with no preconceived outcomes. This time with the same based map, 6 students add layers within several categories: water infrastructure, historical borders, historical trips, economics, politics, transport, geography and territory. New findings of relations among layers start springing out through overlapping more and more seemingly irrelevant layers in different categories, for instance, the most dense canals are often next to economic centers; and the historical trading routes closely follow the river. Through overlapping, the map has more than 121 layers, because connections among concrete layers are forming and constructing more meanings.

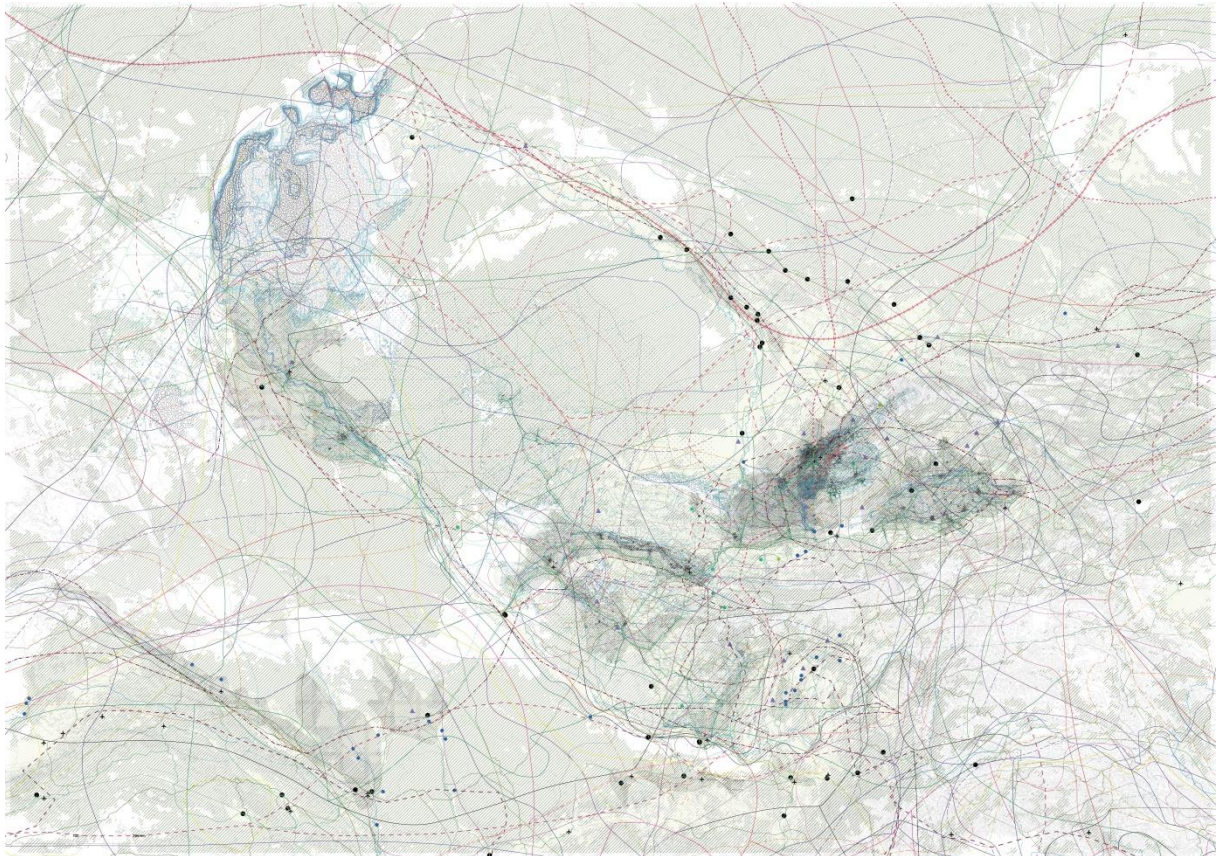


Fig. 6 Image created by the author and colleagues. *121 readings of Uzbekistan*. 2019.

The individual researching map to understand Tashkent also adopts the overlapping approach under the phenomenology framework. This is a slightly different way of overlapping: It is a montage of “subjective and objective, here and there, now and then,...parts and whole, individual and collective”(Havik and Charley 279). It is a mind map that doesn't express the physical distance (time or space) among elements, but organizes them in psycho-distance. There are multiple relations among each element, spatially, technically and metaphorically. Multiple perceptions and metaphors are condensed into one image. Technical characteristics and metaphorical meaning are mixed and confused. My mapping of Carlo Felice Theater utilizes the same approach.

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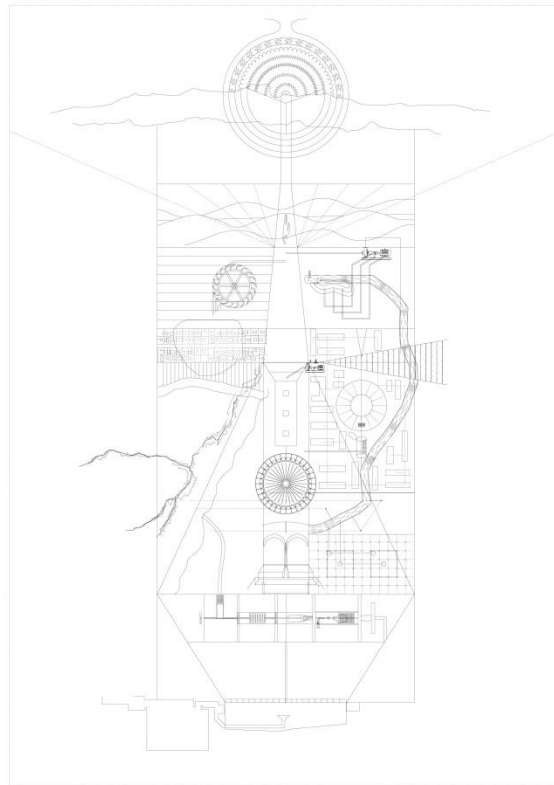


Fig. 7 Image created by the author. *Tashkent defined by water*. 2019.

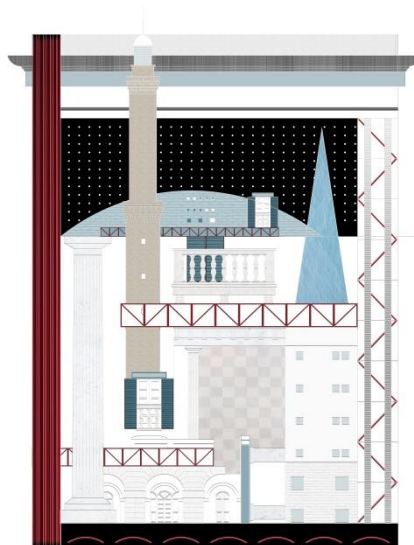


Fig 8. Image created by the author and colleague. *Re-reading of Carlo Felice Theater*. 2019.

The apposition of phenomenological frameworks and overlapping method helps respond well to contemporary space which is more complex and dynamic than ever before. Thus, it is crucial for architects to reflect on it to stimulate their research and design.



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