

ARCHITECTURE OF PUBLIC SPACES IN A GLOBAL METROPOLIS

A phenomenological approach on defining public space in the context of New York

Student

Anastasia Eleni Voutsas (4745701)

Chair of Complex Projects, "NEW YORK MIDTOWN"

Thesis "Re-defining public space in a global metropolis"

Architecture is an undoubtedly complex discipline and this complexity resides in the interconnection with its environment. It is not only about architecture; is about people, culture, history, politics. It goes beyond buildings, comprising *a way of seeing, thinking and questioning our world and our place in it* (T. Mayne 2005). This inherited nature of architecture makes research vital for its practice since it allows professionals to gain information about their environment and be able to critically respond, moving the architectural thinking forward. The research methodology is, therefore, of great importance, as it is setting the framework of the whole approach, defining the final design product.

It is crucial for architects to be informed about the various *modus operandi*. Architecture is a profession in which most of the times quick responses are required. That being so, the ability to ask the right questions in order to get faster to more accurate solutions, is for the architect a fundamental ability. In this direction, the Lecture Series of the Research Methods undeniably broadened my cognitive horizons by introducing a variety of methodological tools for conducting research. Moreover, through the architectural design examples presented in the talks, I witnessed how the collected data was implemented in the architectural design.

On top of everything, I understood that architecture is not only a cultural practice build on knowledge but additionally acts as the medium of knowledge production. Epistemology in architecture stresses the importance of the discipline in the formation of thought and moves it from the strict architectural under a more multi-disciplinary scope. The nature of architectural practice is not only spatial and material, but it is also intellectual, providing the ability to experience sides of the world that are often disconnected; intellectual and sensory reason.

As an architectural student with working experience, I got to do architectural research many times up to today. It is the first time though that I am truly aware of what I am doing and why. Even if the choice of only one method is proven often a more precise way to conduct research, in the current thesis I found it necessary to multiply my investigation means, in order to tackle with the research challenges more holistically, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, within the framework of phenomenology. I am going also to indicate the need for the phenomenology to be assisted by praxeology, in order for the architect to be informed about the needs of the users. To a great extend my approach to the research had to be shaped within the studio's general timeline and plan.

The studio thesis topic is about the near future of the urban environment of Midtown Manhattan after its decentralization by moving the activity in the recent development of Hudson Yards. The personal research is mainly focused on Manhattan's public spaces trying to redefine their role in the organization of the city's new social life. Public space form ancient years was the center of social interaction, leisure, and gathering. Conventionally, it was regarded as the space that is owned by the public and everyone has free access. However, within the metropolitan environment and under the great impact of technology and digitalization, public space needs to redefine its role in order to remain a fundamental part of the urban fabric.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Because of the organization of the studio's program, before I initiate my personal research, I had to conduct a fundamental one on every aspect of New York, following the demands of the given framework in the form of a log-book. Later in the process, knowing already a lot about the city, I was allowed to focus on my personal fascination; the social dynamics and the poles of social activity within the city. Because of the studio's structure and its division to the pre-excursion research-period, the excursion to New York and the after-excursion research evaluation, I had to follow a deductive approach to my research. In other words, first I had to collect empirical data and study relevant literature in order to

interpret them into a new definition of public space in the global metropolis and then to test them in the real site.

In order to get to a definition of public space in New York, I used, apart from data collection, mapping, and statistics, case study methodology of different types of public spaces in New York. In the end, I attempted a qualitative comparative analysis on the spatial and functional characteristics of each space to qualify their impact on the users (locals or tourists) but also on the social dynamics of the wider area. This user-centered approach to research about public spaces was afterward elaborated even more on-site. During the trip, I had the opportunity to personally experience the space of intervention and to investigate the social interactions and transactions from a closer look. I conducted qualitative research through sketches, mental – maps, as well as photo and video documentation. It was particularly interesting to examine the life of those spaces from day to day and also to compare my personal observation of the social dynamics taking place to what people saying.

The involvement of actual users in my research was a really important part of the process. I have conducted countless interviews with different kinds of users and also form people of the surrounding area. The advantage was the fact that the interview was being taken in their own language so it was easier for them to express accurately their thoughts. The challenge was the interpretation of those thoughts by me since I am coming from a different cultural environment. New York and The Netherlands are both parts of the western world, so there are many similarities in the way urban life is being organized. Even though, I tried to assess critically every time the findings of this work in order to achieve intersubjectivity (E. Husserl). After all, communicating with as many people as possible, was my way to achieve more objective conclusions by approaching the problem from common understanding.

Generally, because of the studio structure, in the beginning, I got lost in a huge amount of information and in a short period of time, I had to perform a big jump from the general studio research to my own personal fascination. In other words, there was a need for limiting the huge amount of data in the ones that are directly related to the individual research question. In this way, the research would be more to the point, allowing for a better translation of its findings into an architectural language. On that account, I ended up in a strategy of mixed methodological approaches because as supported by Creswell and Piano Clark (2006), using quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination will provide a better understanding of research problems than either approach used alone.

As a matter of fact, many researchers choose this path of mixed methods when dealing with the complex multi-dimensional problems of urbanization (Rittel & Webber 1973) especially considering public space, to make the findings more solid. In addition, it is common for the mixed research methods to be linked with the conduct of case studies, arguing that it can be particularly enlightening to explore settings or circumstances holistically by utilizing a variety of data collection and analysis tactics (Groat and Wang 2002). This mixed-method was further framed within the episteme of phenomenology in order to understand *the meaning events have for persons being studied* (Patton, 1991).

Architecture is really connected with the experience, *is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses* (J. Palasmaa 1996). The senses are the medium through which people perceive the world and focusing on them in the public realm can result in *alternative geography of place by offering an insight into narratives, feelings, practices and experiences often hidden from common view* (S. Pink 2009). Following this approach, I focused on an empirical approach to Midtown's practices, activities and actions taking into account the implied dimensions, too. By accepting the phenomenological perception of subject and space as a whole, where the two parts *mutually include and define each other* (J. Palasmaa 1996), I tried to identify those dynamics in the public spaces of Midtown Manhattan.

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement that was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and was about the study of the levels of consciousness as experienced from the individual point of view. Even if E. Husserl was the father of phenomenology it was Heidegger that changed its nature into a way of questioning the philosophical traditions, a way to disassemble things and then rebuilt them, intending to discover a new idea of how the human existence determines *being*. However, it was not until the beginning of the 1940's that phenomenology associated with architecture when philosophers working phenomenologically started exploring subjects directly related to it.

One of the greatest thinkers who serves as an example of this notion is Gaston Bachelard. In his work "Poetics of Space" (1958) he believes that space and not time is the generator of memories. Therefore, through *topoanalysis*, he invites architects to use phenomenology to focus on the experience and not the process, on the essence and not the fortuitous. Another key figure, according to Otero-Pailos, was the French American architect Jean Labatut. Labatut supported that the best way to understand architecture is through experience. In this sense, he created many architectural and environmental works, like the "Lagoon of Nations" in 1939 New York World's Fair, requesting the spectator's involvement through vision, sound, and touch.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, phenomenology opens to a more interdisciplinary scope through a movement of thinkers whose studies were more related to architectural or environmental psychology, behavioral geography or human factors in design. One of the representatives of this movement was Kevin Lynch. He was a pioneer in studying the impact of spaces in life through empirical research. In his work "The Image of the City" (1960) introduces the idea of *mental maps* like the way that people navigate through space, dividing it in five elements: Paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. Furthermore, in the "View from the Road" he is using visual documentation such as images and videos, to extract spatial perceptions of urban space like highways. His intended to use this cinematically expressed data to eventually improve the quality of the freeway journey.

Following the thinking of Lynch, Gordon Cullen also theorized about the impact of space in life. In his book "The concise Townscape"(1961), he presented a series of sketches he produced as case-studies. This method of *serial vision* aspires to portray the relevance of people with their surroundings through the observation of contrasts; *You cannot have a here without a there, a this without a that. Some of the greatest townscape effects are created by skillful relationship between the two* (Cullen, 1971). He proposed three ways, *gateways*, in order to do so: Motion (Serial Vision), Position (Here and There), and Content (This and That).

Furthermore, extremely relative to my research is the work of the urbanists, Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl. Jane Jacobs was one of the first to criticize the post-war modernistic mass-production developments in the urban environment of New York. Her approach was qualitative, interpretive and hence tacitly phenomenological with citizen-oriented incentives. Her book "The Death and Life of Great American cities"(1961) was an ethnographic portrayal that was achieved through observations of everyday socio-spatial relationships that were taken place in the public realm. According to her, those dynamics were the base of urban life, therefore the focus should be on them when researching urban life.

Gehl's research of public spaces also focuses on the experience of the user, through an empirical understanding of human behavior in public space. His research is mainly done with the method of observation in combination with systematic measurement. He suggests that reason is that life is under constant change so *anyone who decides to observe life in the city will quickly realize that you have to be systematic in order to get useful knowledge from the complex fusion of life in public spaces* (Gehl and Svarre, 2013). His work is widely considered as one of the greatest contributions in the study of the urban environment under a user-centered perspective.

The architectural interest in phenomenology was continued through the 90's to 20's mainly because of the contribution of Norberg-Schulz's work. Schulz used phenomenology as a way to access the daily world of existence. In his first work "Existence, Space and Architecture" (1971) and in the following "Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture" (1980) he suggests that architecture is the means to provide to the individual an existential place, a meaningful place. He analyses this place into schemata, centers, directions, paths, and domains by interpreting case-studies / examples of the work of Gaston Bachelard, Kevin Lynch and others. Phenomenology in architecture is still a relevant approach today supported by many architects also in practice – such as Steven Holl or Peter Zumthor-

All of the previous examples were about studying the people and their interaction with the space from distance, through a variety of methods. At this point, I would like also to refer to the first time that the user started being involved in the architectural research by expressing his own opinion about his experiences. In 1950 the Group d' Architectes Modernes Marocains (GAMMA) were going around the slums of Bidonville in Morocco, asking the people living there about their opinion on the space, what were their problems, what was needed. Initiatives like this started changing the role of the architect from being a representative of his own opinion into being a social agent, defending the opinion of the people. This eventually led to a democratization of architecture. As Jane Jacobs said *Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because and only when they are created by everybody* (J. Jacobs 1961).

IV POSITIONING

All of the talks added something in my cognitive toolbox but I found particularly interesting the one of Marieke Berkers on "*Investigating Spatial and Social Practices*". Berkers in this lecture highlighted the importance of the study of praxeology in architecture because it informs the architect about the characteristics of the actual users of the building. She is suggesting to see what the inhabitants are thinking about a place based on their own experience. With the use of interviews and personal observation through pictures and drawings, the architect can identify what is actually needed.

In the same direction, Tom Avermaete in "*The architect and the Public: Empowering People in Post-war Architecture Culture*"(2010) highlights the change in the profession of the architect from a craftsman to an activist architect. His new role includes constant questioning of the existing situation, challenging the conventions of the profession and trying to create spaces that the people enjoy, involving them in the process. According to Avermaete, working across a wide spectrum of epistemes is really important for the democratization of architecture. As a matter of fact, the involvement of people in the research phase is being facilitated even more as the technology evolves.

Similarly, according to Pike, in order for the researcher to truly understand users behaviour he needs to engage in a dialogue with them, to get into their culture. That is translated in the enforcement of a phenomenological approach with a layer of praxeology. A great example of this notion was, of course, the "*View from the Road*"(1965). In this project, Lynch created a simulation of the experience of driving along highways by the use of notation systems, perspective sequences and films produced through a model scope. Those techniques were later further developed and used as tools to simulate the urban experience, through multisensory experience.

Gehl on the other side attempts to objectify his empirical findings through systematic measurements. The vast amount of qualitative details can prove the success of space in practice when noticing who is actually using the space, how he is interacting with it, when, etc. This initial analysis of space between buildings through different methods -maps, sketches, pictures, etc.- is the one that is going to lead him to the needed improvements for the space-subject of the research. According to Meurman (2012) this research method of Gehl is *a good method for creating a clear picture of the situation today, necessary for making the right implementations for the future*.

While approaches like those of M. Berkers and Jan Gehl, position the human as the operator of the analysis, digitalization created different trends. An example of those trends is the Space Syntax, a tool developed in the '80s in order to help urban planners simulate the likely social effects on their designs. As stated by Meurman, (2012) that space syntax is rewarding *if you want to analyse new suggestions with a good prognosis*. It is a qualitative method that is comparing spaces through selected variables and it measures the impact it has on life. The more variables they are the more holistic the approach is. There are also examples of researchers that are using this kind of program as complementary material to their research method in order to have more tangible results.

After all, phenomenology is still today a significant conceptual and practical force in modern architectural theory and practice. Concerning the different methods of researching within the phenomenological framework, it is evident from the previous examples that all the different tools, from mental maps to videos, personal observation, etc. were perceptions and interpretations of the human interaction with the physical space through his senses. All of those tools I also used in my research and they were proven really helpful in order for me to understand how people perceive public space in a global metropolis, which spaces they prefer and why and what is missing from the metropolitan urban fabric. This was the only way for me to redefine public space and predict its future in the urban environment of New York.

In the end, I believe that the use of different methods carefully selected and successfully combined can lead to astonishing results. In my opinion, phenomenology is always a good way to approach architectural research since the discipline is interconnected with the experience by nature. However, in order for the researcher to avoid subjectivity, the combination of praxeology can be proven so much more than just effective. The involvement of the actual users in the research process can only add to this methodological approach, by positioning it in the sphere of reality. Particularly, in urban planning, this approach is often selected. Finally, I am positive about the change in the profession of the architect towards a more social practice, bring it closer to the emic as opposed to the etic (Lucas 2016), an architecture by the people for the people.

IIV BIBLIOGRAPHY

Research Methods for Architecture, Raymond Lucas, Laurence King Publishing, 2016

The eyes of the skin : architecture and the senses, Juhani Pallasmaa, Wiley-Academy, 2015

The poetics of space, Gaston Bachelard, Penguin, 2014

The Architect and the Public: Empowering the people in Postwar Architecture Culture, Tom Avermaete, The Berlage Report on Architecture, Urbanism and Landscape, no.14, 2010

Public and Private: Rereading Jane Jacobs, Elissa Rosenberg, Landscape Journal, 1994

Life and death in Great American cities, Jane Jacobs, Vintage Books, 1961

Life between buildings, Jan Gehl, ISLAND PRESS, 1971

The concise Townscape, Gordon Cullen, Architectural Press, 1961

The view from the road, Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, and John R. Myer, M.I.T. Press, 1964

The Image of the City, Kevin Lynch, , M.I.T. Press, 1960

Existence Space and Architecture, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Littlehampton Book Services Ltd, 1971

Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Rizzoli, 1991
Space Syntax: Permeability, Spatial Network, Spatial Network Analysis Software, Urban Planning, Visibility Graph Analysis, Isovist, Lambert M. Surhone, Miriam T. Timpledon, Susan F. Marseken, Betascript Publishing, 2010

Husserl on Ethics and Intersubjectivity: From Static and Genetic Phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, (Contemporary Studies in Philosophy and the Human Science), Janet Donohoe, University of Toronto Press, 2004

Architecture and Phenomenology, David Seamon, Routledge, Department of Architecture, Kansas State University, London 2019

On Phenomenological Discourse in Architecture, M. Reza Shirazi, Department of Urban and Regional Planning at the Berlin University of Technology, 2012

Design Principles for Co-Creating Inclusive and Digitally Mediated Public Spaces, Francesco Bagni, Iva Bojic, Tiago Duarte, Joatan Preis Dutra, Scott Gaule, Adam van Heerden, Isidora Karan, Maria Kikidou, Athanasia Panagiotidi, Artemis Psaltoglou, CyberParks Training School: Inclusive design, 2017

Open Spaces, Public Spaces, Publics, Open-minded Places, Project: Past Present and Future of Public Space - Research Group, Luisa Bravo, 2013

Methods For Studying Public Spaces' Impact on their Life, Kristin Westlund, Luleå University of Technology department, 2018

Talk 2 on Investigating Spatial and Social Practices, M. Berkers, TU Delft Research Method Lecture Series, 2019