Phenomenology methods in exploring public interior space serve the present urban life

Introduction

Research is the necessary process by which I start design anything in a consistent and logical manner. Generally, gathering information and looking for references to strengthen proposition, which is all I did in previous design research. Frankly, I didn’t think about the best way or systematic approach to conduct research. The Research Methods course is a distinct opportunity to regard architectural research as an independent discipline, to reorganize and evaluate the methods we do research.

I insist that there are many connections between research and design, which is drawn from years of my architecture studio design. Contrast to lecture, studio design is a process of heuristic self-study or group collaboration. Research is developed in the almost whole design period, from design concept, site analysis, historical urban context, program, structure, material culture, etc. Therefore, research is identified as a design method by most of us in the studio. However, I reexamine the relationship between research and design in Research Methods course. First, I think research and design are not two equivalent domains, sometimes even confrontations. Architectural educator James Snyder define research as a “systematic inquiry directed toward the creation of knowledge.”\(^1\) Comparatively, the most frequently quoted of design’s definition by scholar Herbert Simon is “courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.”\(^2\) According to these definitions, research focus on past and present, and design focus on the future; research aims to acquire knowledge and design aim to creation or changing. Hence, I would say research and design are two different disciplines at this stage. Second, I think the relationship between two domains is neither one-way nor serving and being served, instead, research and design are reciprocal and complementary. Research provides information to design, design process and final artifacts could become research objects as well, most importantly, the design process usually stimulate the significative research proposal come into being.

This thesis will discuss the phenomenology method of my recent research question: how does public interior space serve the present urban life? The research question derives from my Interior Studio graduation project: a ‘city room’ design in Antwerp. The ‘City room’, usually leaves a wide latitude for possible definitions, literally, it might be a large room design in city scale. From my interpretation, it should be a quality interior public space people enjoy visiting and spending time in, which invoke physical activities and emotional sensitivity. In order to build a more graphic impression of city room in my mind for future design, I started to research a series of historical public interior space, which still radiates vitality in modern ages. Such as church, passage, monastery, etc. However, it is worth noting that the word “serve” is not about building programs are tailored or not, I concentrated my research scope on merely spatial quality research, such as form, scale, thresholds, color, material, lighting, etc. other than building’s programs. How do these architectural components contribute to people’s activities and aesthetic demand? Second thing should be explained is why historical interior space was targeted instead of modern interiors. Due to the interval of a long time, the program design for the historical space was lost or obscure, the spaces are less build upon the modern urban program, which are more constructive on straightforward research of space. the phenomenological method was implemented in this research primarily, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

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Research-methodological discussion

Base on the characteristic of this research question, I chose qualitative research as my research strategy. Actually, research strategy is more general than methods, each research strategy contains many methods. For instance, the book Architectural Research Methods summarize three different approaches in the qualitative research section, which are ethnography, phenomenological inquiry, and ground theory. I think research strategy is the fundamental determinant to research orientation, which should be formulated first and foremost. In terms of my research question, I tried to understand the phenomenon that people use space under contemporary society and culture, which is not easy to investigate from archival or artifactual sources. That’s why I chose qualitative research instead of historical research strategy, even though my research is based on historical space.

The phenomenological inquiry is my qualitative method in this research process, undoubtedly, which is a perfect chance to understand phenomenology systematically. Modern phenomenology could be traced to the classical German philosophy at the beginning of 20th century. Edmund Husserl started to pay attention to the science of consciousness and criticize positivism, to advocate intuitive observation towards pure phenomena. What I interested is the defining quality of phenomenological inquiry, which is the interpretation of experience’s essential from the researchers’ point of view. Despite the fact that phenomenology is usually criticized because of its utopianism and egoism, I would say it is a sincere way to getting close to the material world, to return to the nature of things without any prejudgments. Depending on my intuition to discover the universal qualities of phenomena, which is the desired way to research interior space for me. In the architectural field, the distinctiveness of phenomenology could be deemed to a comparative advantage. Consciousness is understood to be aimed to an object or physical environment, the reality of which is inevitably joined to one’s consciousness. Therefore, phenomenology could be considered that more suitable than other qualitative approaches that focus on people and ignore the equally important physical context.

Methodologically, researchers wish to clear their mind before the phenomenological inquiry, because prejudgments tend to impact on their expression of a phenomenon. I have to acknowledge this paradox of “how to develop an objective interpretive science of subjective human experience.” From previous experience, I indeed had a totally different impression on one place when I went there for different purposes, even under different weather condition. This is the weakness of phenomenological research, which is not sufficient to provide precise results for the complex or multifaceted project. However, I evaluate phenomenology in architectural research more depends on my purpose of research. My intent is not the results of the rigorous examination, but inspiration and perception of interior space design from these informative first-hand studies. In this way, I chose a qualitative research method: phenomenological inquiry, for my research on historical interior space, I think it would be an insightful and heuristic study process.

Research-methodological reflection

The researcher as the leading character in the phenomenological inquiry, the first and the most important thing is to learn how to experience. Dipped my toes in architectural phenomenology, I started with learning from the most widely influential work “Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture” (1979). The author Christian Norberg-Schulz combined text and images to demonstrate symbolic and metaphysical perception of dwelling, place, and space, which concluded the complicated association of architecture and environment. “Dwelling”, in an existential sense, is the purpose of architecture. Dwelling therefore implies something more than “shelter”. It implies that spaces where life occurs are “places”. I quite like the way his pioneering observation, combining the semiotic theory and

phenomenological perspective, in which he integrated incompatible two ideas of immediate experience and reading of narratives. However, take my interior space research into consideration, I think Norberg-Schulz’s phenomenological research could not offer referential significance. Because he always emphasized the exterior accommodation of the building in regard to the existing character of the space, and ignoring the body of the observer. The experience that people’s movement in the architecture interiors is the most meaningful to my research. I kept tracing the phenomenology that applied on the interior space analysis. Philosopher Maurece Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) proposed phenomenological considerations in the architecture field, which is the absolute connection between the human body and experiential space. Our existence in the world occurs through the body, bodily gestures and its motion, and our involvement of the space takes place in the direct experience of our body. Towards Merleau-Ponty’s “body-subject”, architect Steven Holl started practice this phenomenological theory on his project. In order to realize “Intertwining of idea and phenomena”, Holl always keep the habit that hand-drawing in watercolor of spatial scenario, to study of phenomenal experiences of space. He advocated multisensory experience of space that engages the human body, to touch, smell and hearing, by which to continuously activate his sense of spatial imagination. In my opinion, Merleau-Ponty and Holl’s thoughts compensate for Norberg-Schulz’s “spirit of place” precisely, to complete the theoretical practice of architectural phenomenology, and the relationships between human body-architecture-place are more instructional for my research. After the study of these theories of phenomenology, I tried to experience architecture interior space more exquisite, beyond the observation by my eyes, as well as tactile, aural, emotional and imaginative perception, which all composed to the phenomenon of space.

How to document and express the experience is another key issue of phenomenological analysis. First, photography is the most common way I used to capture momentary sense. Lighting, color, solid and void, emotion, movement, etc. Every instantaneous detail could be persistently reserved, which contribute to the repository for my further phenomenological analysis. The second thing is easily neglected, which is text description. A series of works by Norberg-Schulz are best precedents to indicate the textual analysis of architectural phenomenology. In the first chapter, Norberg-Schulz discussed the nature of language and literature that could deliver much more information to the reader, and poetic language uses simple specific images to imply more general structures. For example, in Georg Trakl’s poem “A Winter Evening”, the word “falling” could express the sense of spacious exterior environment. On the basis of Norberg-Schulz’s methods, I started to write some paragraphs for my research on interior space on site or afterward and I found textual by memory and recall can rebuild the essential qualities of the scene in interior space. Last but not least, I put the graphic form into research practice. Usually, architecture students make up design ideas by sketch, in which phenomenological analysis can apply as well. There were a great number of classic precedents that investigate participants to response through sketches. Clare Cooper Marcus’s influential work “House as a Mirror of self” studied the inner connection between people and their homes, she asked people to use the graphic form to “talking to” his/her house, rather than “talking about”. In my practice, I think drawing is quite similar to writing some description, which is a process of filtrate the architectural elements in my mind. Sometimes my drawing is quite simple and quick, however, from which I can realize what images come to my eyes the earliest.

Positioning

After the preliminary understanding of phenomenology’s methods, I conducted the research of interior space exploring in my studio field trip to Vienna. I participated in group cooperation with several classmates, to complete a phenomenological research of Vienna city. Our final products are made up of an “Encyclopedia” and a stack of “visual index cards”, on which behalf of objective information database and

subjective ephemeral perception. Each visual index card was composed by a photograph on the front and textural narrative on the back, in which case our own phenomenological observations were documented and collected. And encyclopedia is made by traditional research method that is gathering information like floor plan, sections, structure, material, this kind of fact files. What’s more, these cards act as the visual index of the encyclopedia with chapter number, linking these subjective fragments to the specific architectural components. This exercise seemingly looks easy, however, which was my first trial to understand the phenomenology through my own study. In addition, I realized phenomenological considerations is a perfect way that makes me jump out of the traditional architectural thinking, maybe there is no ideal circulation diagram on paper, but touching moment always happened in real life world.

In the group of this exercise, each of us has our own focus and mine is historical interior space. Except for space narrative practice I did in card’s making job, I conducted another exercise, trying to explore the urban living in public interior space by phenomenological methods. I drew the scene of Ferstel-Passage in Vienna by memories, and distinguished the three types of spatial elements, Fixed-feature elements, Nonfixed-feature elements, and Semifixed-feature elements. I found different types of elements contribute to different human body experience. For instance, fixed-feature elements such as building structure, usually contribute to the visual extension or obstruction and sometimes impact interior lighting condition, while nonfixed-feature elements could contribute to the auditory sense of our spatial experience. Consequently, drawing by memories is a key to open my various sensory experience to capture the crucial qualities of space.

Besides learning from some representative works of architectural phenomenology, Klaske Havik’s talk and article inspired me as well. She emphasized literary description in architectural research, which could help to grasp more ephemeral fragments in experience of architecture. She proposed that writing spatial narrative can compensate for the deficiency of “fundamental ambiguities” of architecture, in which the traditional research methods result. In my position, this kind of “ambiguities” exist in the majority of discipline, because the same information delivering always change with diversity and complexity of human cognition and understanding. Especially in the design field, the process of design is how we transfer our subjective idea to the objective thing, and the process people read it is how do they transfer the objective thing to their subjective perception. However, during the design process, I usually was caught in the optimization of my subject idea, and phenomenology could be recognized as a perfect tool helping me think out of the box to be a customer.

Throughout architecture development in history, I believe that phenomenology was applied on architectural research theory, which played an irreplaceable role in post-modernization of architecture. Venturi argued that visual experience might be produced by the ornaments of walls and proportion of windows, and color changing of lighting techniques provide the visual guide, which can solve the design problems in a very simple approach. Contrast to previous functionalism, architects tirelessly promoted their ideas by uniformity and austerity of design standard even dogmatic slogan, I think Venturi had thought on the phenomenological perspective already at that time. What's more, cultural theorist Charles Jencks (1939-) proclaimed that postmodernism takes the place of modernism in 1977, he proposed building should have identity, the form should be linked with meaning, not just programs or conventions. These opinions respected people subjective expression, rather than make a regulation for design thinking, which conforms to the research method of phenomenology entirely.

In conclusion, I explored spatial quality through phenomenological methods, to restore the essential feature of interior space, and to understand the way which accommodates people activities and perception. In my opinion, phenomenological observation is an inverse process of subjective design, which reflect on traditional theoretical methods with human nature. No matter in the architectural study or future professional field, phenomenology is a necessary supplementary on design thought.

Reference list


Dermot Moran, Introduction to phenomenology, 391-434.


