

# TRACING THE STREET LIFE THROUGH SPATIAL NARRATIVE

## A Reflection on the Phenomenological Research Method for Reading Places

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### I INTRODUCTION

The lecture series of research method introduces methodological awareness. It is about how to observe and deal with problems. In the past, my research of architecture or urban space usually followed a fixed process: on-site observation, photo collection, photo classification according to a certain theme after returning, and getting a problem or conclusion. In this way there was no pertinence, and it was too one-sided to further develop into a rigorous academic research.

Methodology addresses specific research questions and the perspectives to understand things. Thus the heuristic techniques used to conduct each method are different. The appropriate selection of methods in studying a specific issue promotes me to deal with the information in a more systematic and clear way. It helps me establish my own standpoint on observation, and represent the information with imagination, so as to draw a more convincing conclusion. It is quite instructive for me to understand the nature of space and develop the design based on research. With the research method of spatial phenomenology, I will integrate these realizations into my thesis by describing my research question, selecting a corresponding research method, and comparing and contrasting relevant literature and cases.

The thesis is a reflection on the investigation of using spatial narrative in exploring a specific neighborhood. It is based on my studio's research project. "Spolia", the theme of my graduation studio, is a term from archeology. It means the left-overs or 'spoils' of a building, which find themselves back in a new structure. The idea of spolia exceeds material remnants. More resources than just material fragments or built structures are supposed to be discovered. Social networks, practices of inhabitants, cultural expressions, or whatever is found worth keeping can be similarly mined in our field research.<sup>1</sup>

The site in Anderlecht is the starting point of the assignment. Anderlecht is a bricolage of different identities, a vibrant and diverse community. It blends in industrial and residential architectural typologies of different scales, combines urban tissue of different ages, weaves in multiple foreign nationalities and interlaces different religions.

Five themes in different scales serve as guidelines for our research in Anderlecht: Unstable city, Zenne river, Bricolage, Living/working, and Whose neighborhood, among which our group research is under the theme of "Whose neighborhood". With the context of "Spolia" to figure out what is worth keeping, I put forward the research question: How do the people of Anderlecht engage in the street life of the neighborhood?

In order to trace the street life and the tales happening, urban public space and grey space are the target locations to be investigated. Streets, squares and parks are the outside public space, while public buildings such as churches, schools and libraries belong to the inside public space. The grey space means the buffer zone located between public space and private area. It can best reflect the quality of street life in a neighborhood. Therefore, a series of sub-questions come as follows: Where are you allowed to enter? Are the users happy to be seen or not? Where do people meet? How do they interact with each other? How do they interact with the sets, or appropriate them? What can they share from each other? From this perspective, what is the role of architectural details?

### II SPATIAL NARRATIVE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH IN READING PLACE

To investigate the questions mentioned above, spatial narrative as a phenomenological research method is adopted as the main approach to explore the street life in the given context. Phenomenology is the study of how things appear to us, while spatial narrative is a form of observation to describe and represent the situation where the things happened, and thereby enables us to think deeply about the way to experience the environment.

The specificity of spatial narrative lies in the use of phenomenology to read places and conduct spatial experience. As discussed in the lecture "phenomenology, architectural perception, and reading places", it requires the researcher to perceive the atmosphere with multiple senses instead of only sight observation, which means during the field investigation, sound recordings, videos, interviews and texture rubbings are as important as photographs.

The related heuristic technique of spatial narrative is not limited to literary writing, but also includes graphic novel, film, scripting, and documentary. In my case, a film with the storyboard and the script is the main analytic tool to explore street lives and their surroundings.

The street life in Anderlecht neighborhood is a dynamic and complex process. It is inappropriate to investigate with the research methods such as material culture or typology, since they address static, local fragments, relevant changes and classification. Phenomenology-based spatial narrative can comprehensively recognize the process from multi-faceted observation and dynamic experience, which is my main reason for choosing it as my research method.

The challenge or difficulty of space narrative lies in the emphasis of the core information. The film, as a relevant analysis tool for this method, may bring better perception than the actual experience because sometimes the latter is disturbed by too much irrelevant stuffs, making the understanding complicated. The continuous, subtle and orderly expression of the shots, supplemented by the simple graphic interpretation of the storyboard and the script, can filter out the irrelevant factors and emphasize the key points related to the research question. Thus the spatial plot created by it is quite influential to the perception of the viewer.<sup>2</sup>

In my research, the narrative of Anderlecht neighborhood are represented by 3 parts:

The composed film, which is a group work, compares and contrasts the different realities of the inside and outside street life, revealing a collective perception of the neighborhood. Along with telling a tale, the movie depicts the experience of the street life from a sensory point of view, allowing the viewer to hear, see and feel the neighborhood.

The scenes we filmed became our sets, the people we interviewed became our characters. Each "room", along with each person, has a story to tell. Each scene or character can be read individually or knitted into the fabric of the adjoining spaces. To order in which they are read defines who, where, and in what way they engage in the street life of the neighborhood at that given moment, highlighting the multitude of answers to the research question.

The script holds a description on the setting in which all these stories take place. It forms a glossary to all these stories which can be used to cut and edit into a plot line for a film, representing a depiction of "how people engage in the street life of the neighborhood" as we experienced it through the research.

### III REFLECTIONS ON PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH-METHODOLOGY

Spatial narrative, as a phenomenological research method, has been widely used by many researchers and architects, while the heuristic techniques in practicing it can be various. As I have mentioned in section II, the ways of reading a place is not limited to literary writings like poetry and novel, it also includes films and related screenplay or storyboard. They are similar and comparable in the contribution to understand given surroundings with multiple senses. In this section, I will indicate how other architects use spatial narrative with the techniques of literary writing or screenplay to conduct their research.

"The traditional tools of architectural research, often foregrounding rational and formal modes of thinking, fail to address the fundamental ambiguities of architecture, such as the intricate relationship between subject and object, crucial to understand and address architectural experience." According to Klaske Havik, "A poetic way of writing as a mode of architectural investigation could help investigations into architectural themes such as sensory experience, atmosphere, and memory."<sup>3</sup>

Havik used poetic writing in her research of a particular architectural place in Finland called Hvittrask. Her first encounter with the house took place in a winter. Within the house, not only the structure but also all pieces of the furniture were in one tone. Everything was warm, dark and heavy. However, when she went out and saw the landscape environment, all elements including the lake and the hill melted in endless, limitless cold and white. The intriguing contrast and the powerful relation between house and surrounding aroused the poet's impression on the multi-layered perception of the site and the imagination of the architect's initial design idea. She wrote it in the poem:<sup>4</sup>

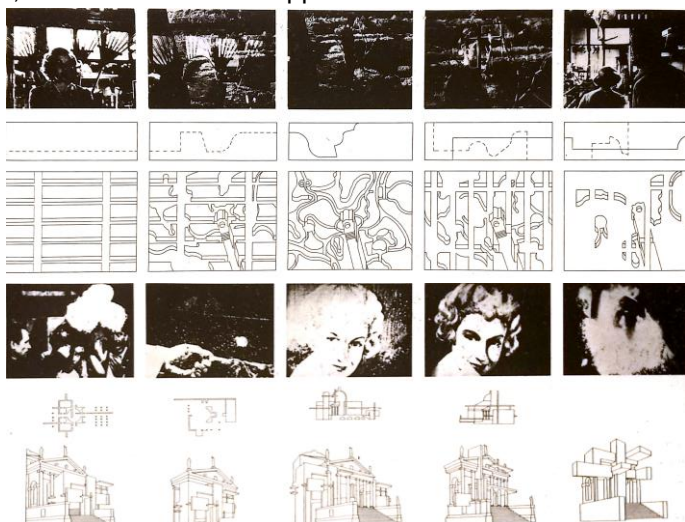
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*by running feet and touching hands  
these trodden floors and creaking doors  
these corners and uneven stairs and  
rooms nestling between full-grown trees  
between years and seasons  
bathing in sunlight  
floating on the lake-  
the children's voices  
the rose, the rain, the wood, it all  
still smells the same*

These simple words narrated a sense of intimate and the vivid trace of using and living. As concluded by Havik herself, spatial narrative with literary writing usually starts from the simplest daily observations, in which architectural features such as materials, shapes, colors, smells, light and shadow, trigger associations and memories.<sup>5</sup>

Bernard Tschumi is another example of using spatial narratives for urban research. Different with Havik, Tschumi chose the film with screenplay as the technique instead of literary writing. He regarded architecture as a kind of narrative and explained that when you enter a building, it is like entering a whole new story. You walk through the various parts of the building in an orderly way, like a continuous plot in a movie, which together make up the story.

The understanding of space is reflected in *The Manhattan Manuscript* and *Screenplays*. Tschumi interpreted architecture as the superposition of three systems: space (the fabrication of physical or material spaces), movement (the movement of bodies in space), and the event or use. Once the split between them occurs, the fragments can be combined in any way to form a montage effect, thus stimulating the connection between the fragments and forming a new narrative that helps viewers to read the urban space and trace the activities from a new perspective. According to Tschumi, it is the events that happen in it that define the architectural space.<sup>6</sup>



The inspiration from Tschumi's research is that when describing a space, the perception of spatial phenomena is not only related to multiple senses like seeing, smelling, touching and hearing, but also can be further extended to other two levels: the emotional status on the psychological level and the imagination, which are caused by the constant change and reorganization of events and movements.

As a phenomenological research method, spatial narrative focuses on both physical and psychological perception of the places as well as the events and characters in it, but the targets of perception vary among researchers.

Havik's narrative with literary writing can be regarded as a research process to perceive the space by meticulously observing the details and atmosphere of architecture and its surroundings, thereby creating sudden connections between such details and human emotion. Tschumi's research

pays more attention to the perception from the view of the event and movement in a given context. Also worth mentioning is Koolhaas, who explores Manhattan's metropolitan wonders through metaphorical descriptions of events. In his research, architecture is regarded as a container of the creation and occurrence of contexts. It connects and traverses different atmosphere, giving the roamer multiple uncertain experiences in space.<sup>8</sup>

However, the same thing in using this phenomenology-based research method is that all the former researchers and architects used rich imagination to help with the representation of the place, especially in the creation of atmosphere and events. Back to my own research, these reflections force me to develop deeper in defining the target and emphasis of the perceptual experience, as well as in mining the details that stimulate the viewer's resonance psychologically and emotionally with multi-level senses.

#### IV SENSORY EXPERIENCE, MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

Phenomenology focuses on direct feelings. Since the spatial narrative belongs to qualitative research, researchers need to fully participate in the target situation as part of the research object. Therefore, most of the time subjective wills of the researcher or architect may be included in the outcome. The problem is that the phenomenological approach is relevant to the subjective perception, which cannot be measured by a certain quantitative standard. It is contrary to the traditional approaches pursuing rationality and objectivity.

However, as I mentioned in section III, Havik believes that the poetic spatial narrative not only breaks the solidified thinking of foregrounding rational and formal modes in traditional research methods, but also addresses the fundamental ambiguities of architecture, such as the intricate relationship between subject and object.<sup>9</sup> Absolute objectivity is impossible, but the advantage of spatial phenomenology is that with the subjective narration it can present the sensory experience, atmosphere and memory which cannot be expressed through the traditional objective approaches.

I agree with Havik's point of view. In my opinion, the phenomenologically-led research method is not a simple and arbitrary subjective conjecture, but an important way of elevating the multi-sensory perception to a higher level. Space is objective, while human perception is subjective. As the user of the building, human emotions and memories can give a special meaning to the space. In turn, the colors, details, materials, and light of a building can also guide human behavior.

A similar view is also involved in *The Poetics of Space*. The author's understanding of space, especially the paragraphs describing the house, are completely perceptual and subjective, and extends endless fantasies and memories in the perceptual atmosphere. The space here depends on the person who perceives the space. It is completely different from the objectively existing space with geometric scales. It must be experienced by humans and its characteristic is given by the imagination, thoughts and memories when people gallop in. This is a two-way interactive composition of "human and space". Thus, the objective space is like the situation without "me" in the "white description", while the poetic space is more like the situation with "me" in the "blending of feelings and scenes".<sup>10</sup>

The general strategy of our studio is to judge what is worth keeping through site research of different scales, which is inherently subjective in nature, because different research scales will bring completely different architectural experience. For example, the material-scale-oriented research focuses on the effects of color and texture on the senses and emotions, the neighborhood-scale-oriented research addresses the relationship between people and events in spatial sequences, while the urban-scale-oriented research pays attention to the unstable changes of each block under the time lapse.

Different research scales correspond to different research methods. I think spatial narrative based on phenomenology is not a simple and arbitrary subjective conjecture, even though sometimes it contains fictional elements. This kind of subjective description related to perception is quite infectious in the investigation of tracking street life of a neighborhood and reading the place spirit. The methodological movement towards research practices such as film, script and writing are capable not only of recording the qualities of the field, but also of recreating them.

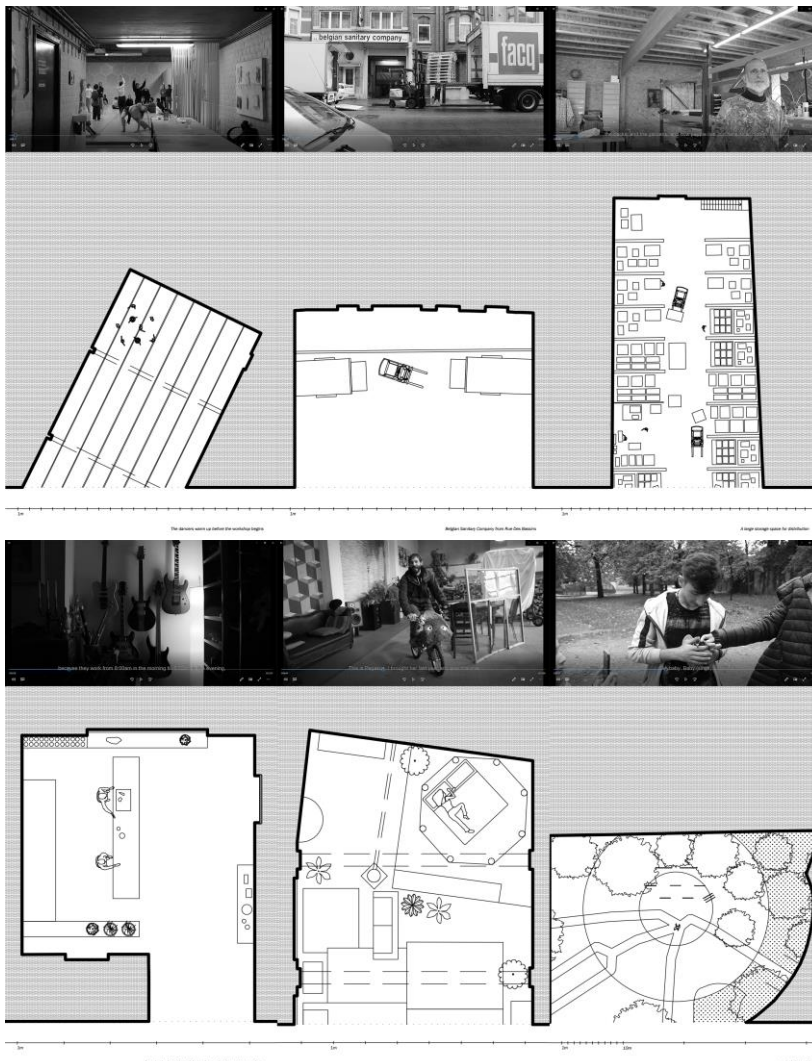
Back to my initial research question: "How do the people of Anderlecht engage in the street life of the neighborhood?" The approach to conduct the investigation with the tool of film and

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storyboard is inspired from Tschumi's screenplay. In this way, I considered both outside and inside public/semi-public space as various "rooms", thus form a continuous narrative with characters and events in it.

In our films, the street life of Anderlecht neighborhood is described from the perspective of a participant:

*He enters from a graffiti-filled doorway facing the street, crosses a narrow corridor, and enters Tic Tac Studio.  
At this moment, the dancers are practicing intently with the beat.  
The Belgian sanitary company is on another street next to the Tic Tac Studio.  
The truck in front of the door is unloading today's goods.  
The white-bearded administrator took the time from work to chat with him.  
A melodious music came from not far away.  
Following the guidance of the music, he passed through one door after another.  
Every time he opened the door, he entered a new building.  
In an instant, he came to the park at the end of the street.  
A naughty boy was proudly demonstrating with his friends how to catch a pigeon with his coat...*



Through a series of clips of videos, our films and storyboards describe different scenes in a spatial sequence consisting of "rooms" one after another. The memory and imagination of street life aroused by the characters and events constitute the climax of the "room sequence". Meanwhile, the special perspective brought by spatial narrative represents us some interesting phenomena: Rich stories of the street life were always hidden inside the blocks. When the sets are put together following

the plot line, it is obvious that the open public space like parks are only small “rooms”, while the “rooms” inside the blocks form a big world with various tales. In Anderlecht neighborhood, the distributions of inside and outside, public and private, and front and back are confused.

Phenomenological oriented spatial narrative offers valuable insights for researchers and architects to engage lived experience in their investigation. It is a research approach tailor-made for reading a place, “a reading in which different layers of perception are present: the immediate encounter with the building’s materiality and atmosphere, it’s situation in the landscape, a sense of history both of its conception and former use, and the traces of life itself”.<sup>12</sup>

**END NOTES:**

- 1 The description is based on the information provided by the syllabus of Urban Architecture, Graduation Lab, 2019-2020.
- 2 Andong Lu. “Film architecture and spatial projection.” In *China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House*, 1994-2019.
- 3 Klaske Havik. “A Plea for Poetic Receptivity in Architectural Research.” In *Reading Architecture*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung, p.61. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.
- 4 Klaske Havik. “A Plea for Poetic Receptivity in Architectural Research.” In *Reading Architecture*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung, p.71. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.
- 5 Klaske Havik. “A Plea for Poetic Receptivity in Architectural Research.” In *Reading Architecture*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung, p.62. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.
- 6 This paragraph is based on the description in *Tschumi : le Fresnoy : architecture in/between*. pp.36-37. New York : The Monacelli Press, 1999.
- 7 Excerpt from Tschumi’s *Screenplays*, “Alfred Hitchcock’s Psycho” and “Palladio-Rietveld”.
- 8 The description is based on the view of Rem Koolhaas. *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*, New York : The Monacelli Press, 1994.
- 9 Klaske Havik. “A Plea for Poetic Receptivity in Architectural Research.” In *Reading Architecture*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung, p.61. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.
- 10 The description is based on the view of Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Boston : Beacon Press, 1994.
- 11 This is part of the sequence in the film. The description texts worked as a script, and the drawings of the plan worked as the storyboard related to each screenshot of the film.
- 12 Klaske Havik. “A Plea for Poetic Receptivity in Architectural Research.” In *Reading Architecture*, edited by Angeliki Sioli and Yoonchun Jung, p.62. New York, NY : Routledge, 2018.

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