

THE RECENT GRADUATE AND HIS PERCEPTION OF HOME

A phenomenological research on the perception of home and the architectural elements which influence this perception

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Thesis "Dwelling for recent graduates in a creative and dense urban environment"

“There must be something there, in the architecture itself” –

Peter Zumthor

I INTRODUCTION

The field of architecture is a complex one. A multifaceted one. This makes doing research in this field difficult from time to time. Because architecture is a broad activity¹, constantly shifting between history and culture and with its own discourse², it can be indistinct. That's why it is even more important to do research in this field. Research must be done to structure this complex field, but mostly to learn. The very essence of research.³

Architecture is not only complex because it is broad. Architecture is a combination of technique and beauty, of science and feeling. This I have experienced during my studies in Delft the past 6 years. To me, the more scientific side of architecture can be hard sometimes, but it is a relatively clear and defined one. The other side however can be much harder to grasp. The feeling in architecture is subjective and divers. It is not something which can be made clear easily. Presumably because of this obstacle, this side of architecture tends to remain undiscussed way too often. Therefore it is a positive development that nowadays there seems to be more and more attention and interest for these less tangible aspects of architecture.⁴ Especially within this intangible side of architecture it is crucial to find ways of research which can provide concrete information about the perception of beauty, feeling and atmospheres.

My graduation project lies within the chair of Dwelling. Some of the main topics which are addressed in the research and education programs of this chair are 'research into high density schemes', 'sustainability in relation to spatial configurations' and 'the interrelations between the private realm of dwelling and the public spaces of the city'.⁵ Three topics which are extremely relevant in my graduation project, regarding the design of a high-density housing block within the vivid urban area of the Merwe-Vierhavens in Rotterdam. In this studio my graduation topic is dwelling for recent graduates in a creative and dense urban environment. These recent graduates are struggling to get a new home after their time at the university. They make too much money to get into social housing, but because of study debts and the exceptional prices of houses in larger cities they can't buy a house either. Therefore they can only apply for housing in the private rental sector, where the rents are so high they can never save enough money to buy a house eventually. This is a big societal problem at the moment. My aim is to design a housing complex for these recent graduates, where they can get affordable housing in a lively and urban environment.

Within the Chair of Dwelling it is evident that the focus on the people is of importance. The chair mentions 'the relationship to the living environment', 'the individual dwelling', 'patterns of inhabitation' and 'processes of community engagement' as some of the topics which will be addressed during education.⁶ All of which are terms that touch the subject of living and experiencing in some way. To me, more specifically the focus on the experience of the people is one of the crucial aspects. Because it is so hard to grasp and because there is so little attention to it during the education, I want to research the possibilities to make this intangible feeling a bit more concrete. It is my intention to create a set of architectural elements or guidelines, based on my personal experience and that of recent-graduates. To get to this, I ask the question "Which architectural aspects or qualities contribute to a positive experience for recent-graduates in or around their home?"

1 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 7

2 Alberto Pérez-Gomez, "Phenomenology and virtual space. Alternative tactics for architectural practice", *OASE* no. 58 (2002): 38

3 Jorge Mejía, lecture on "Methods of architectural exploration, evaluation, and discovery", accessed February 13, 2020, <https://brightspace.tudelft.nl/d2l/le/content/192744/viewContent/1618566/View>

4 Klaske Havik, "Writing atmospheres", in *The Routledge companion on architecture, literature and the city*, ed. Jonathan Charley (New York: Routledge, 2019), 271.

5 "Dwelling," TU Delft, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/architecture-and-the-built-environment/about-the-faculty/departments/architecture/organisation/disciplines/dwelling/>.

6 "Architecture and Dwelling", TU Delft, accessed May 3, 2020, <https://www.tudelft.nl/en/education/programmes/masters/architecture-urbanism-and-building-sciences/msc-architecture-urbanism-and-building-sciences/master-tracks/architecture/programme/studios/architecture-and-dwelling/>.

II PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH APPROACH: TWO TYPES OF INQUIRY

This research on the perception of people fits in the field of phenomenology. This is a tradition which finds its origin in philosophy, within the likes of Heidegger⁷ and particularly Husserl.⁸ Phenomenology is about the perception of people and the “relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object”.⁹ Therefore it is in the core subjective, every person is different. This makes it challenging for architecture schools to incorporate in their education.¹⁰ In the field of phenomenology it can be quite hard to get concrete, specific answers. Just because of the subjectivity as mentioned before. But, supported by Linda Groat and David Wang¹⁰, it is my belief that there are most likely to be some aspects in architecture which contribute to a positive experience for most people. A common feeling. When listening to an interview between two of the most important people in architecture today in the field of phenomenology, I found myself strengthened in this belief. In a conversation between the theoretical Juhani Pallasmaa and the more practical Peter Zumthor, the latter stated that “there must be something there, in the architecture itself”. Pallasmaa confirmed this by stating that it is a dialogue between man and building. Certain aspects or qualities in architecture can, when present in a building, evoke a feeling or atmosphere.¹¹

To get to these common aspects or qualities, I intend to do two types of research in the field of phenomenology. One of which would be mainly focused on the ‘subject’, the other more on the ‘object’, which are the two actors in phenomenology according to Böhme¹² and are similar to the man and building Pallasmaa mentions. To do this research I need a group of people which represent my ‘future users’ of the building I am designing in my graduation studio. This group of multiple voices can help to better understand the relationship between people and places, which I tend to project onto my housing project. I have the luxury that my building intends to house recent graduates, which I am hopefully within one year from now and is a status some of my friends have already achieved. This will make it easier to find enough respondents within the target group and also makes the topic even more interesting to investigate.

The first research I propose is a qualitative research, which fits in the category emic research according to linguist Kenneth Pike.¹³ This means it is the aim to feel like an insider, with in-depth research and attentive for holistic qualities of phenomena¹⁴. It will be performed by interviewing multiple respondents. By asking in a very open way about their perception of home, I hope to understand which aspects relate to the perception of home. In this way, the outcome will most likely be diverse. But whatever the outcome will be, it will produce input for further research. Let’s say none of the respondents mention the type of door, but half of them mentions light in their answer, it can already be said that light plays a much bigger role in the perception of people. This subject-focused research can give some insight in common ground and it will reveal some themes which can be used during the design process. Nonetheless, it might be hard to find the concrete answers or elements, which is the focus of this research.

To complement the first research and to get to a more concrete consensus on elements, I propose an etic research method which is more focused on the object. This part of the questionnaire would be in the realm of the visual. I intend to make multiple drawings of a single space, with one element in the space which differs in each drawing. The respondent should pick the image he or she would feel ‘most comfortable’ in, in which one would have the most positive experience. When getting

7 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The eyes of the skin* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2005), 20.

8 Steven Holl, “Speaking through the silence of perceptual phenomena”, *OASE* 90 (2013), 24, <https://www.oasejournal.nl/en/Issues/90/SpeakingThroughTheSilenceOfPerceptualPhenomena>

9 Thibaud, J.-P. and Siret, D., *Ambiances in Action 2nd International Congress on Ambiances* (Montréal, QC: International Ambiances Network, 2012), 11, quoted in Klaske Havik, *Writing atmospheres* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 272.

10 Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 95

11 Juhani Pallasmaa, Peter Zumthor, “Architecture speaks”, cross-interview, Aalto University, January 17, 2018, video, 18:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibwvGn3PkFg>.

12 Klaske Havik, “Writing atmospheres”, in *The Routledge companion on architecture, literature and the city*, ed. Jonathan Charley (New York: Routledge, 2019), 272.

13 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 10

14 Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 296

a response on multiple series of drawings, there will most likely be a pattern visible out of which some specific aspects can be filtered that contribute to this positive experience. This is a more quantitative research method, to find trends in a larger group of people.

III PRECEDENTS IN PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRIES

A similar approach to the first chosen research method has been used by multiple researchers in the past. Cooper Marcus conducted a qualitative research of home. Therefore she asked her respondents to make drawings of their home. Characteristics, feelings and thoughts about the home and about life in it were drawn and written down.¹⁵ Klaske Havik has done a study on the experience of two buildings with a seemingly completely different style of architecture.¹⁶ She writes about these experiences from a user-perspective and in an almost poetic style. The aim of this is “bringing to the fore the interrelationship between the social and the experiential”.¹⁷ Close to this study, Kate Unsworth developed a method which she called ‘Spatial Biography’. For her graduation she studied the town of Sheffield, and her residents in particular. To be able to know who she was designing for and to build more agency for her design, she interviewed multiple residents of the city. By asking questions about how they moved through the city, how they experienced places in the city and trying to understand what people saw as the most important characteristics of the city Kate was able to establish an image of the city for herself. But even more important, she was able to imagine certain people who had to use her design.¹⁸ This closely relates to the attitude of Pallasmaa. His belief is that it is of most importance for an architect to live the spaces in the design. It is the architects job to imagine the life of the future user and to create a design which is in harmony with this life.¹⁹ It can contribute to a more layered environment, which is one of the key aspects of home.²⁰

A last example, with a slightly different approach, is the study of Maire O’Neill on the experience of ranch families in Montana, US.²¹ She interviewed multiple people who had lived on their ranches for years, trying to understand how they experienced the site and everything on it. This research gave her insight in the “modes of perception”²² of the residents of the ranches. It assisted her knowledge on which correlations between environment and thought are present. As Groat and Wang state, the outcome of this research could improve design projects and help designers in understanding what’s behind someone’s perception.²³ Nonetheless, it is not something which is directly applicable in a design process. Therefore it is not the all-fulfilling answer on the research question, which aims to find more concrete elements which can contribute directly in the design.

The second research method I propose is quantitative research, which can be defined as a preference-test. A few things can be said about this type of research in general. For one, it will be a structured questionnaire with closed questions. This means that the results from the survey will not aim at very specific or personal answers, but more on the general. Therefore a larger group of respondents is needed, to come to a general pattern. Because it is a structured questionnaire, this is possible. Retrieving a large amount of general data is one of the qualities of this research tool.²⁴

15 Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 230-231

16 Klaske Havik, “Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmons and Alvar Aalto,” *Montreal Architectural Review* no. 4 (2017): 42-60.

17 *Ibid.*, 50.

18 Kate Unsworth, “Cities as incubators for citizen’s agency” (Thesis, TU Delft, 2016).

19 Klaske Havik, Gus Tielens, “Atmosphere, compassion and embodied experience”. *OASE* no. 91 (2013), 41

20 Juhani Pallasmaa, “Identity, intimacy and domicile.” *Finnish architectural review* no. 1 (1994), accessed April 22, 2020, http://www.uiah.fi/studies/history2/e_ident.htm

21 Maire O’Neill, “Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing,” *Journal of Architectural Education* (2001): 3–12, quoted in Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 232

22 *Ibid.*, 5, quoted in Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 232

23 Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 232

24 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 83

In literature not a lot has been written on this type of preference test used in architecture, so it seems. However, one particular research was found in the process of the fabrication of houses.²⁵ In this study the respondent was asked to complete a questionnaire with twenty questions. The core questions were a series of image-comparisons. There are multiple ways to formulate the question and to let the respondent rate the preferences.²⁶ The exact distinction I will not discuss here, but the important aspect that has to be taken into account when asking for preferences is whether a rating or a degree of preference is also needed. In my coming research I will adopt this rating. Without it, preferring one setting to another does not necessarily mean that it should be incorporated within the design. The best can still be poor when the alternatives are even worse.

The combination of this object-based method together with the qualitative subject-based method described before will hopefully provide a wide range of information on experience and on the elements which influence this experience. This combination of tools also reacts to another aspect of the topic: the interrelation between the whole and the parts. Havik states: “while the experience of atmospheres thus departs from the whole, in the making of atmosphere, details are crucial”.²⁷ The architect Zumthor for instance works with these parts. He emphasizes that it is important to work on separate aspects within the design.²⁸

IV RESEARCH POSITIONING AND THE INFLUENCE OF ARCHITECTURE

After reflecting on these different kinds of research that have already been done, it is possible to position the proposed research within this field. The first research tool I propose to use is closely related to the method of Klaske Havik, which she uses to analyze the works of Rogelia Salmona and Alvaro Aalto.²⁹ Her way of writing down the experienced perception puts the emphasis on sensory-perception, as she calls it. This makes it focused on the user, which is the aim of this first research. This focus on the user, in other words subject-based, is the individual input of the research. On top of that, I comply with the idea that literary language could be a helpful addition to the more conventional and commonly used tools in architecture, such as floor plans and sections.³⁰ The approach of Marcus³¹ for example may be more concrete, but this type of research will probably exclude some feelings. Because not everyone is likely to have the skills to draw things which he or she would be able to put into words. Or it might be that certain emotions or thoughts which have to do with experience are simply impossible to visualize.

This focus on the intersubjective objectivity and on the relation between subject and object makes the research fall into the field of phenomenology. It stresses the importance of perception, a key aspect of phenomenology that has derived from the thoughts of Merleau-Ponty.³² The field itself however is broad. It involves subjectivity. What exactly is phenomenological research, and what reaches beyond this epistemological framework, is hard to tell. It is as complex as the field of architecture itself. Therefore it is hard to tell whether the second research tool proposed in this paper is completely in line with the ‘phenomenological inquiry as described by John Creswell. He states that one of the defining aspects of the phenomenological research is to “clarify the essential or underlying

25 Schoenwitz et al., “Product, process and customer preference alignment in prefabricated house building,” *Int. J. Production Economics*, no.183 (2017), 83

26 Scholz, S.W., Meissner, M., Decker, R., “Measuring consumer preferences for complex products: a compositional approach based on paired comparisons”, *Journal of Marketing Research* 47, no. 4 (2010): 685-698.

27 Klaske Havik, “Writing atmospheres”, in *The Routledge companion on architecture, literature and the city*, ed. Jonathan Charley (New York: Routledge, 2019), 277.

28 Ibid.

29 Klaske Havik, “Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto,” *Montreal Architectural Review* no. 4 (2017): 47

30 Klaske Havik, “Writing atmospheres”, in *The Routledge companion on architecture, literature and the city*, ed. Jonathan Charley (New York: Routledge, 2019), 271.

31 Linda Groat, David Wang, *Research methods* (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013), 230-231

32 Alberto Pérez-Gomez, “Introduction to architecture and the crisis of modern science,” in *Architecture theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press., 1998), 462

meaning of experience".³³ The questionnaire of the second proposed research tool will most likely give answers more focussed on what, instead of why. In that sense, this research is on the edge of phenomenological research.

As already mentioned in the introduction of this paper, this type of research is especially important in the chair of dwelling. This approach, which puts people and their experience in the center of attention, has opened my eyes. It pleads the way to design not only from the larger scale to the home, but simultaneously from the inside out. Pallasmaa³⁴ states that home is perhaps not a notion of architecture, but more one of psychology. I think that home is a combination of both, from which the psychological side is not addressed merely enough in education. It is hard to say whether this is the case during my graduation as well, there I'm not yet at that point in the process to look back at the whole process. But the importance of experience within the architecture of dwellings is indisputable. The life of people and the experience is a very important aspect of architecture. According to Pallasmaa, it is even more. "Authentic architecture is always about life" is the strong but I think striking statement he makes.³⁵ A house is a person's shelter, a place where he or she spends probably most of his time in life. More than in an office, a museum or a shopping mall, a dwelling should feel right. It should fit the resident. The architecture influences our lives. The more time we spend in a building, the more the architecture influences us. As Winston Churchill once said: "We shape our buildings, thereafter they shape us". If we want to design and construct buildings which affect us in a positive way, we have to understand which aspects can contribute to this positive perception. This research on the experience of (almost) recent graduates and the architectural elements which influence this perception of home should give this understanding, or at least a first insight. This could then be implemented in the design in the graduation studio.

33 Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 227

34 Juhani Pallasmaa, "Identity, intimacy and domicile." *Finnish architectural review* no. 1 (1994), accessed April 22, 2020, http://www.uiah.fi/studies/history2/e_ident.htm

35 Ibid.

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