

LSRM FINAL ASSIGNMENT

Self-Assessment on Research Methods

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH AS A RESEARCH TOOL

I INTRODUCTION

Through the years the need of the implementation of the research method and the design method has been increased significantly. Architecture students through their studies have been called to relate these two processes, but they find it very difficult to connect them although their similarities.

In the course of the lectures series on Research Methods, I was given the opportunity to gain not merely a more explicit definition regarding certain terms, but also an understanding of the differences between the notion of 'methodology', 'approaches', 'methods' and design with research methodological approach. Finally, these series of lectures gave me the capability to be able to analyse and compare each methodology's particularities and empowering the understanding of the build environment, and at the same time to specify the characteristics between a design approach and a particular episteme.

The following paper is a reflection on my graduation project, a multidisciplinary research based on the methodology approach obtained in the course of Research Methods Lectures Series. The scope of this paper is to define the reasons I chose this methodology for my Graduation year, the literature which are related to the project, and how I applied it to my research.

The predominant aim in my graduation thesis is not only to analyze and design for a site, specifically in this case, the city of Bogota in Colombia, but at the same time to reinforce my tools for the architectural research and design. Therefore, I believe that for each project there is an analogous approach and the analogous research tools which they should be carefully use based on the particularities of the topic and the context, while each case takes a different position on the research methodology.

Simultaneously, this ideology fits with the general philosophy of my chair, Methods and Analysis. The ideology of the chair Methods and Analysis supporting the idea of the use of research and design while both methods can benefit from each other when processing at the same time. Moreover, the chair of Methods and Analysis researching multidisciplinary combinations of knowledge encouraging the cooperation of architecture and other disciplines. Finally, the chair gives you the ground and is challenging you to invent and discover your own methods, position and tools for your research.

Tom Avermaete in his lecture about Architecture and its *epistemes* presented concepts and practices in Architecture by approaching them through the notion of typology, phenomenology, semiotics and praxeology. All these set of values Michel Foucault the French philosopher called them *epistemes*. Tom Avermaete during his lecture gave an insight based on the methods and the tools where they have been implemented in several design projects and researches by mentioning that each architect's ideas and statements most of the time is a result of a personal set of values that each of us follows.

II RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

In the case of my graduation project my chosen methods lies upon the episteme of phenomenology which has been used in the history by many philosophers and architects. According to Merleau-Ponty phenomenology is "*the world is always 'already there' before reflection begins – as an inalienable presence; and all its efforts are concentrated upon re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world*".¹

This phenomenological approach derived during the excursion with the studio while I was exploring the streets of Bogota. Having as a main research theme the concept of disruption, a keyword that came out intuitively through my exploration, I chose to focus on an area of the city that this phenomenon is quite fluctuating. This fluctuation of disruption can be noticed in different scales. Reading the area from above one can notice that there is a clear disruption between 3 zones of the city starting from zone 1 the residential part (small scale houses), zone 2 the high rise area (skyscraper buildings) that are sparsely planned within the zone enhancing the heterogeneity. And finally there is the green zone which gradually making over the city to an 'infinite' forest. I saw this scenery as the architect Steven Holl explains "*architectural synthesis*" in the book, "*Questions of Perception*", suggesting, "*foreground, middle ground, and distant view, together with all the subjective qualities of material and light, form the basis of 'complete perception'*".²

Observing this area from a bottom up perspective but also in elevation it became interesting how these different zones were visually interweaving with each other, while they are changing depending on the view point from the street. The climax of disruption is reached to the outskirts of the mountain in the interstitial space between the city and the mountains where the landscape starts to become steep wild and the whole scenery starts to become detached from the city but still engaged through the alluring view towards it.

My phenomenological approach relies on how one experience space in a relation with his body and his movement but also by using one of the strongest senses- the vision; how people are experiencing the phenomenon -so called *fluctuating disruptions in their consciousness*. According to the architect and theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa "*in classical Greek thought, was based on the vision and visibility, and according to Heraclitus, the eyes are more exact witnesses than the ears. Plato considered vision as the greatest gift for the humanity, and Aristotle believed that vision is the most noble of the senses. Thus, since the Greeks, knowledge became analogous to the clear vision, and light became the metaphor for truth*".³

During my visit, the set of tools I used were : visual recordings, photographs and sketches. My research consisted of a mix of multiple factors such as form, color, material and light. In nowadays it plays a major role the image and its perception in order to deliver ideas and projects. My main method to perceive the city as an observer is very much aligned with the given term '*Parallax*' by Steven Holl. '*Parallax*'⁴ is the way you perceiving space through the motion of the body while a series of perspectives are overlapping.

III RESEARCH-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Phe•nom•e•nol•o•gy
(fī-nă'-mə-năl'ə-gē)

(noun) *A philosophy or method of inquiry based on the premise that reality consists of objects and events as they are perceived or understood in human consciousness and not of anything independent of human consciousness.*⁵

The term phenomenology appeared for the first time in 1900 by its founder German philosopher Edmund Husserl. According to Husserl phenomenology is *"as a bold, radically new way of doing philosophy, an attempt to bring philosophy back from abstract metaphysical speculation wrapped up in pseudo-problems, in order to come into contact with the matters themselves, with concrete living experience"*.⁶ Husserl intention was to *"address the given, the phenomena, the things themselves, in the sense of whatever immediately appears to consciousness in the manner that it so appear"*.⁷

Martin Heidegger another German philosopher and an original phenomenologist of the 20th century, started with the notion of the *'things themselves'*⁸ by Husserl but he went further and developed his own approach and focus on *'Being'*.⁹ Heidegger in his book *'Being and Time'*¹⁰ uses phenomenology as a *'method of investigation and concept'*. According to Moran *"Heidegger wants to employ phenomenology as the proper mode of access to the phenomena of concrete human life, factual life, as he had initially called it in his early lecture courses, a way of thinking about human nature that remained faithful to the historical, lived, practical nature of human existence"*.¹¹

Maurice Merleau-Ponty a French phenomenological philosopher and very influenced by Heidegger and Husserl perceives phenomenology as the essence of perception and consciousness. Merleau-Ponty states that the biggest achievement of phenomenology *"is to have united extreme subjectivism and extreme objectivism in its notion of the world or of rationality"*.¹² At the same time, there were many architects who got inspired by Merleau-Ponty such as the architect and theoretician Juhani Pallasmaa and the architect Steven Holl. Regarding to Juhani Pallasmaa the concept of phenomenology is linked to the images and the feelings of the community while he argues with the philosophers Heidegger and Husserl that phenomenology is not related with psychology or any science but it is only addressed to the phenomena that have to do with consciousness. Furthermore, he explains that the original sense of phenomenology derives from the Greek word *theoria* (θεωρία) which means *"looking at"*.¹³ In his words phenomenology is *"a pure looking at the essence of things unburdened by convention or intellectualized explanation"* and expresses that *all the artists are phenomenologist and try to present the things as if they were objects of human observation for the first time"*.¹⁴ Finally, the second architect Steven Holl stated that before he read Merleau-Ponty's writings he was working with the method of typology. Since then he completely changed his method while he realized that he could come up with ideas for projects outside of the discipline of architecture. From his point of view, the phenomenological method is that *"Architecture can shape a lived and sensed intertwining of space and time; it can change the way we live. Phenomenology concerns the study of essences; architecture has the potential to put essences back into existence. By weaving form, space, and light, architecture can elevate the experience of daily life through the various phenomena that emerges from specific sites, programs, and architectures. On one level, an*

idea-force drives architecture; on another, structure, material space, color, light, and shadow intertwine in the fabrication of architecture. When we move through space with a twist and turn of the head, mysteries of gradually unfolding fields of overlapping perspectives are charged with a range of light – from the steep shadows of bright sun to the translucence of dusk. A range of smell, sound, and material – from hard stone and steel to the free billowing of silk – returns us to primordial experiences framing and penetrating our everyday lives".¹⁵

IV POSITIONING

In my opinion, for each design project or research with all their particularities requires a different set of tools and methods. Additionally, I strongly believe that the researchers should be more open to the theme of experience and work with a wider spectrum of sources and methods under their projects interest from inside and outside their disciplines. The possibility of combining other disciplines could offer you new and different perspectives but also solutions, by giving you a wider perception of things and possibly ending up to a more succeed result. As Ray Lucas states that "*architecture is, by its nature, a complex, multifaceted field of study, meaning that no single approach can tell you everything you need to know*".¹⁶

I believe that the methodology of phenomenology in design it has a really strong position by studying the power of human's perception and the communities it can influence all the designs aspects and create an architecture directly related to human's senses and needs. In parallel, when one approaches architecture through a phenomenological methodology needs to take into account that the design process of a building is not that simple to be carried out only through rationalism-the left side of the brain. But according to Pallasmaa it is necessary both of the sides to participate through the process by using particular research and design methods to succeed.

But Pallasmaa on the same text states something equally if not more important, and that is the relationship of phenomenology to time. He argues that: "*Instead of participating in the process of further speeding up the experience of the world, architecture has to slow down experience, halt time, and defend the natural slowness and diversity of experience. Architecture must defend us against excessive exposure, noise and communication.*"¹⁷ As I've mentioned before, we live in the zeitgeist of the fast image, experiencing high speed tempos of information, all trying to be metabolized by the Architects and by Architecture as a discipline strongly related to the aesthetics and the appearance. Especially when entering the working industry the Architect has to speed up his working process tremendously in relation to the academic environment, just to keep up with the production of the office. But as Pallasmaa says we as Architects at certain moments have to slow down a bit and observe the project more into depth, behind its appearance.

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Endnotes

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