

LSRM Paper

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Introduction

Methodological-research is a crucial part of the profession that is called architecture. A profession that is contained in one word, which can hold so many notions. However, the notion of research being part of architectural design might be supported by the vast majority of people involved in this profession. This might seem blindingly obvious, but for a design to react on its context, the latter has to be dissected neatly. Whether as an architect you want your design to speak the same vernacular, or born out of the will to create contrast, you have to understand this identity of place.¹ And this notion of identity should be one of the most significant outcomes of such research-based design.

The series of lectures had a big influence on my understanding of notions like phenomenology and praxeology, and the way they are interrelated with architectural design and research. Furthermore, also by addressing multiple aspects of architectural research, it became clear that a certain method isn't necessarily of a general greater importance, but forms part of a correlated whole. Herewith there is no intention to state that a specific methodological approach cannot be 'a tailor-made suit' for an evenly specific research, for example, the historical strategy having a significant relationship with a heritage-orientated investigation.

In the fast-paced world we find ourselves in today, divergent critiques and understandings cram the mind. Surely this is not a cannonade on the pedestal of the freedom of speech, more a matter of being conscious of a certain architectural core. This core is a foundation, executed in writings and illustrations by former (architectural) philosophers and practitioners. Such a fundament expands over time, showing distinguishable layers of architectural development.

When dealing with any existing context, one has to be keen on understanding a specific -sometimes vernacular- development, and therefore in understanding what it is that he or she is experiencing.² Such awareness and consciousness of past events is, therefore, crucial to comprehend the importance of a preexisting architectural piece. A guideline for such contextual awareness in relation to research can be the Evolutionary Tree by Charles Jencks, where certain movements are finely depicted in an order of already occurred events.³

This research paper shall cast around the notion of phenomenology, and how it touches upon the field of heritage-oriented research. The aim will be to investigate the correlation between a mere feeling or experience and a grounded context, consequently this resulted in the following research question: "What is the influence of a (first) gained experience, thus, in essence, a phenomenological approach when investigating the possibilities for the future use of heritage while also having to deal with a grounded context?" The matter of experiencing was an important aspect in the analysis of the Hembrug area, Zaandam the past few months. Analyzes have been made grounding on historical events and functions, providing grip on the subject. But for the aim of revitalizing this place for future use, our on-site experience was also of the essence.

¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 18,19.

² Wessel de Jonge, Reader Architectural Design, *Sleeping Beauty* (Delft: TU Delft, 2017), 323.

³ Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000 and beyond: success in the art of prediction* (Chichester: Wiley Academy, 2000).

Research-methodological discussion

“The output of history research is not verse, or essay, or some other literary form; the output is narrative.”⁴ For me, it was clear that the existing context within a Heritage-related assignment should always be reacted upon with care, whether you want to make a bold statement or just a subtle intervention.

When we as a studio group first visited the former military site, which carries the name of Hembrug, the day commenced with a communal assignment, “produce a dozen sketches of spots which you deem to have a certain value”. Without even comprehending the historical context, the sketches exposed an experience. One could define this as empirical research, where the essence of the identity of place plays a crucial role. The empirical aspect can also be identified in the qualitative approach, where one seeks discovery through a holistic way, and in that way trying to comprehend the context not only by analyzing its settings, but also the meanings that people give to such a place.⁵ By the means of these sketches, and by discussing them, I gained an insight into how this area characterizes itself.

Thus, the phenomenological inquiry was significant given the fact that it helped me to construct a sense of place. This is also addressed in the works of Heidegger, where he states that it is important to comprehend the specific environmental aspects.⁶ In phenomenology the object is inextricably linked with one’s consciousness, this object can, as in architecture, be a physical environment.⁷ It can also be seen as something more than something physical, an experience, where phenomenology is the exploration and the description of this phenomena.⁸

Later on, each individual specified their own preferred ensemble within the entire terrain based upon this phenomenological approach. The ensemble of my choice became Campus South, located in the most south-western corner of the terrain. Commencing the analysis, the first thing we (my colleague-student and myself) attempted was to describe our choice of the ensemble which was based on experience rather than scientific or historic causal explanations.⁹ This was done so that the experience that was formulated was a true one, not one modified by pre-judgmental thoughts.

Subsequently, we started dissecting the ensemble’s composition and spatial qualities by creating layered analytical plans, consisting of the ratio of open and closed spaces among other things. By defining these spatial qualities and properties, the relationship between experience and spatiality became clear, which was of great aid in comprehending the (future) possibilities. Although qualitative research may be subjective and based on personal interpretations, it played a significant role in our architectural research.¹⁰

Besides the qualitative research executed in drawings and diagrams, historical research was also done. The issue with such a historical context in the first place, when one has the intent to understand its meaning in the fullest extent of those words, is the fact that it is not empirically accessible.¹¹ In order to better comprehend what the ensemble’s qualities are, it is important to recognize the traces of past usage and function.

⁴ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural Research Methods (2nd edition)* (New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2013), 175.

⁵ Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Strategies for Qualitative Inquiry* (College Station, SAGE Publications, 2008).

⁶ Adam Bobeck, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking by Martin Heidegger, Translation and Commentary by Adam Bobeck*, 10.

⁷ Zina O’Leary, *The Essential Guide to Doing Your Research Project*, (SAGE Publications, 2017), 150.

⁸ David Seamon, *Theoretical Perspectives in Environment-Behavior Research*, (Boston, Springer, 2000), 158.

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (London, 2010), 7-35.

¹⁰ Ray Lucas, *Research Methods for Architecture*, (London, Laurence King Publishing, 2016), 36.

¹¹ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural Research Methods (2nd edition)* (New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2013), 175.

Finalizing this chapter, in my opinion, it was hard to make assumptions on how certain aspects of the terrain used to function back in the days, due to the lack of former employees able to tell their story. Also, phenomenology lacks a mere causal foundation, which could be found in quantitative research if it was accessible. Although investigating the buildings for historic traces was resulted in some satisfactory outcomes, only qualitative and empirical research just came short in formulating a thoroughgoing foundation.

Research-methodological reflection

The phenomenological movement in architecture commenced in the 1950s, reaching its pinnacle in the 1970s and 1980s. The work of Jorge Otero-Pailos has been of great help in forming my understanding of the development of phenomenology in the architectural discourse. In his book *Architecture's Historical Turn, Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (2010) he states that the search for an architecture driven by authentic, original human experiences started in the early 1960s. It contained a reaction of a new generation of architects on the "institutionalized aesthetics as the emblem of an oppressive and closed social order".¹² Stating that they saw industrialization and the modernistic approach as the deprivation of individual experience, a change of direction was needed, changing the contemporary concepts like the abstract ideas of space and form. In short, the Spaniard summarizes this period of change as follows: "They replaced the belief that architecture would become more sophisticated as technology moved toward the future teleologically, with the notion that architecture would become more advanced as human experience returned to its origins ontologically."¹³ The key figures he mentions to have been of great importance for this discourse are Jean Labatut, Charles Moore, Christian Norberg-Schulz and Kenneth Frampton.

Another important figure is Martin Heidegger. He states that building has dwelling as its goal, but yet not every building is a dwelling. Heidegger says that to be a human being on earth, is to dwell. His work can be marked as ontological, for the essence of being plays an important role in his work. Yet he has been a great influence for other important figures for the phenomenological studies like Norberg-Schulz. For Heidegger, the experience and the relation of things in space are what makes men dwell, and therefore be.¹⁴

Another key figure in the course of phenomenological research is next to Heidegger is Edmund Husserl.¹⁵ In his work *Ideas I* (1913) he stated that phenomenology was about the essence of and study one's consciousness, and therefore has to be approached only "in the first person".¹⁶ Heidegger opposed to some of Husserl's works, especially because of Husserl linked notions like consciousness and subjectivity to phenomenology. For Husserl, perception was of prime importance in how humans experienced their environment. While for Heidegger the actual context would reveal the situation as it was -and has always been- itself, without needing the subjective personal perception of humans.

Otero-Pailos mentions a common misconception about the nature of architectural phenomenology, namely the fact that its name makes it seem "primarily philosophical".¹⁷ He explains that there are also aesthetic works part of this intellectual source like camouflage, graphic design and photography. Camouflage patterns or a graphical scheme were looked upon as visualizations of a theoretical approach of thought and experience and were according to him considered "legitimate intellectual work in architecture, not something secondary to mental acts but as their primary source and governing standard".¹⁸

The practitioners of architectural phenomenology worked in various ways, be it a graphical or literary approach.

¹² Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

¹³ Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 4.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking* (1993), 359.

¹⁵ David Wang, Linda Groat, *Architectural Research Methods (2nd edition)* (New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2013), 227.

¹⁶ Paul Ricœur, *Key to Husserl's Ideas I* (Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1996), 113.

¹⁷ Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁸ Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 6,7.

In the 1980s, architectural phenomenology was becoming an equivalent notion of a non-intellectual interpretation of the primacy practice over theory.¹⁹ Given that architectural phenomenology emerged out of the awareness that history and theory were inextricably connected, Otero-Pailos states that it is ambiguous in this sense that it became a mark of “superficiality and subjectivism”.

Although it now seems that there is one kind of architectural phenomenologist around, Herbert Spiegelberg states that there are as many styles of phenomenology as there are practitioners.²⁰ This makes the search for a unifying notion more of a troublesome quest.

Relating the latter historical development of architectural phenomenology to my own project, there are some comparisons that can be made. For example, the fact that both literary and graphic methods were used to analyze the historical and spatial issues is something that can be seen in the works of former architectural phenomenologists. In the context of the research for the Campus South ensemble, it was sometimes a matter of experiencing the past activities. There were pieces of information available on how the ensemble’s buildings and spatial tissue functioned during its heydays, resulting in a fragmented documentation. By analyzing the lived experience of such a place, formerly used routes and workflows could be dissected. Whether the critics call phenomenology subjective or sensitive to assumptions, it is my belief that an architect must always be able to incorporate his or her ability of sensing and experiencing the context as it is today, without being deluged by the specifics of the past altogether.

¹⁹ Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 9.

²⁰ Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement* (Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, 1982), 2.

Positioning

The lecture of Marieke Berkers was one that really supported me in the understanding of the notion of praxeology and has therewith fueled my interest in phenomenology as well. Albeit I am aware that these two notions are not the same, I do believe they complement each other.

In her lecture, Berkers mentioned that everybody has his or her own perception of space and that everybody conducts or acts differently in a specific environment. One of the examples used in the lecture was the one of Bruno Taut and his book *Die Neue Wohnung*. Taut had an interest in social ideas, on how the living conditions were changing and how dwelling could develop. This is what we aimed to do while creating our vision for the future development of Campus South; what kind of dwellings are needed nowadays, and in 20 years? An architect has to be able to make these interpretations, he or she therefore has to rely on his or her own experiences and insights, by examining and understanding the praxis of architecture.

Albeit both phenomenology and praxeology ask the researcher or architect to fish in their pool of experiences in a certain way, I believe they both must rest on a historical grounded core. In *Architecture's Historical Turn*, Otero-Pailos states that architectural phenomenologists saw the physical experience as the most important factor in researching the historic significance of a building.²¹ I adopt the notion that researching the present and resulting experience of a design is an important part of the process and can therefore be of great influence on the design outcome. However, I oppose the statement that this is of the most prime importance to a historical research, I believe that understanding the lessons of history holds the key to designing a sustainable future.²²

A big challenge for contemporary architecture is to fill in the gap of understanding between the designer, environment and user. By observing the historical context, the notion of environmental experience and the (future) target group. In the last couple of decades, numerous amounts of non-expressive, yet non-coherent building blocks are erected. Where erecting this kind of dwellings is a logical consequence of our ever-growing population and the irreversible flows of migration, we as architects should be more aware of whom we are building for. And not only the latter is of prime importance, but also the way one experiences an environment.

According to Wessel de Jonge, architecture's history provides us lessons which are to be learned from, then why is it so that we still create senseless autonomous spaces? During the housing crisis, The Netherlands faced a huge shortage in dwellings. In countless area's gallery flats were erected, area's which nowadays fail to engage with the human senses. These functionalist type of buildings were, of course, a reaction to earlier occurred events in architecture, and would later cause reactions itself.

In my own research, such historical events played an important role in determining some of the ensemble's qualities. An elevated pipeline network appeared to be of great influence on the industrial area in the past, supplying the factories on the terrain with steam energy. The Campus South ensemble turned out to be a distributor for the Hembrug terrain, giving us as designers the ground to build your narrative.

In my opinion, phenomenology can be of great aid in finding ways to (re)use these qualitative elements for future development. One aspect about the approach in the Heritage & Architecture studio that struck me was the emphasis on experience in the commencing period of the analysis.

²¹ Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 8.

²² Wessel de Jonge, *Reader Architectural Design, Sleeping Beauty* (Delft: TU Delft, 2017), 323.

A phenomenological approach in historically-oriented architectural research for me is not a mere philosophical way of working but can help architects to find (new) ways to integrate historical significant qualities into their design. It is a way of touching upon subject-matter that is not skimmed over in a mere historical-oriented approach, to find a right balance between historical significance and future experience.