# THE QUALITY OF PHENOMENOLOGY AS RESEARCH METHOD
# The way phenomenological research results can be interpreted to use it for the design process.

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## I INTRODUCTION

Different research methods were discussed every week of the "AR3A160 Lecture Series Research Methods" course, which was interesting, because it became clear what the different approaches can be and how they can have a contribution in the further design process. While linking the lecture series with my design studio, I found out that my research contained some of the research methods of the lecture series already, which was a good sign because that means that I use different research methods in order to gain as much knowledge as possible. This is according to Lucas logical, because no single approach can tell you everything. A collaboration between the different research method is needed to gain a broader spectrum of research results that can help solving problems. At the same time Lucas mentions that focusing on one specific method will give more depth to the research which is more beneficial for the project than focusing on multiple methods at the same time (2015). Therefore, it makes sense to conclude that using different methods is good but don't use it simultaneously.

With the conclusion of previous part taking into account, I want to focus on one specific method that I used for my graduation studio, in order to get a specific research. I would like to focus on phenomenology[1] as research method, which is useful in relation to my target group of my graduation studio. Based on literature and financial research I'm focusing on young (18-25 years old) starters. Because the design site is located close to the centre of Amsterdam, the housing prices are high, which results that I want and need to create compact dwellings (20-40m$^2$). However, by creating compact dwellings, a different experience will be created for the residents compared to normal size dwellings. This means that I need to do research how we as humans, and especially the starters, experience these spaces. But the main problem of phenomenology is, as Havik mentions, the subjective side of it. Everybody experiences the same space or object differently (2019). In some way phenomenology lacks trustworthiness, because opinions, and therefore the research results, can be different from researcher to researcher. So, my research question is: "How can the results of phenomenological research be interpreted in a way that it becomes useable as argumentation in the design process?". In the upcoming three sections research will be done in order to answer the research question.

After reading the sections, it can be concluded that, besides your individual experience, it is important to bring other's experiences into account as well. A connection with another research method can be useful to make the results more objective and reliable. Furthermore, friction-free technology can be distracting, especially for a research method like phenomenology where you need your human senses. Finally, using phenomenology as research method depends on the design assignment as well. The variety in design assignments asks for a different research process in which sometimes other research methods rather than phenomenology is used to get the research results you as researcher have been looking for.

## II MY APPROACH AND USED TOOLS

In relation to my design studio, I used phenomenology for the first time during the field trip. By that time, I was using it in an unconscious way, because I hadn't heard of it. How busy was it? Did I feel comfortable? What do I see? What are qualitative places and what can be neglected? How is the sun and wind orientation? These kinds of questions helped me experiencing the site and at the same time these questions had a contribution in my phenomenological research. As Lucas mentions it in his research, this is a part of the research process that is context led[2] (2015).

The field trip was finished for me by having an overview of how I experienced the site. Therefore, I made a list of my observations (image 1) and a collage in which images have been used to reveal the characteristics of the site (image 2). This combination of writing together with drawing is, as said by Pallasmaa, a normal medium in architecture to transfer information to each other (2014).

[1] The interpretive study of human experience (Seamon, 2000); Investigates the embodied experience of the world around us (Charley, 2019); The way things appear to us and the role of the body in experiencing space (Havik, 2019); The study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Woodruff Smith, 2013).

[2] Helps establishing the "primary importance of the physical, social and historical setting" (Lucas, 2015, p.11).

Even though I tried to maintain a neutral position in the researches, in order to add an objective side to the research, it stayed subjective, because other people maybe would have had a different list with observations and a different collage. This type[3] of research is according to Lucas called qualitative research, which is more subjective than objective from origin and is used to understand the qualities of the subject you are researching (2015). Because it is an individual research, this way of researching is part of, as Seamon describes it, the "first-person" phenomenology, which is a method where the researcher uses his or her own experience of the phenomenon as a starting point for researching the characteristics of the object (2000). So, this is the most subjective research as possible, which is not contributing in making phenomenological research useable for the design process.

Niet ingedeeld

Geen titel

Clean
Windy
Coast used for new office buidling
Some bus stations, car is still dominant but not annoying
Height in new buildings almost the same, expression totally different
Shift in function already in progress
Not much infrastructure (good way to keep it as it is?)
Industrial view (nearby)

Topics:
Ultra flexible (change in function after 2040?)

Target groups:

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Gemaakt: 9 sep. 2019

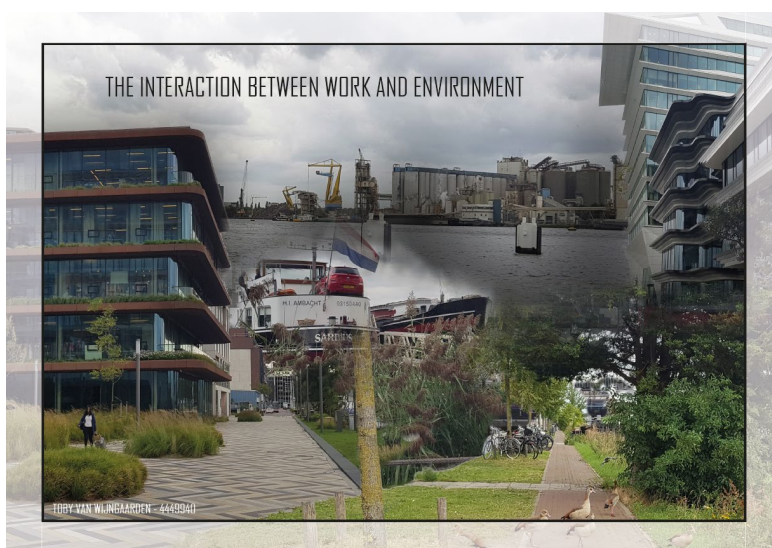**Image 1.** *My observations from the field trip.* (Author, 2019).



**Image 2.** *Collage of the characteristics of the design site.* (Author, 2019).

Later in the process I started analysing case studies (image 3, next page) based on how quality is maintained in the compact dwellings. But what is the meaning of "quality" in the analysis? Therefore, I read literature to come up with a checklist that helped me analysing and at the same time comparing the different case studies to each other. By having the checklist, a more objective research is realised, while it is still a phenomenological research method. Because it becomes more objective, you set aside preconceptions, which is according to Charley, the challenging side of phenomenology. He adds to that that we must perceive the object before we start reflecting on it (2019).

As it turns out by looking at the two types of research (images 1 and 2 and image 3), a shift from a subjective to a more objective research is visible that which makes phenomenology as research method more useable for the design process.

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[3] Definition: Replacement of old categories of classification such as character and genre (Jacoby, 2015); "A category of people or things having common characteristics." (Gorny, 2019).
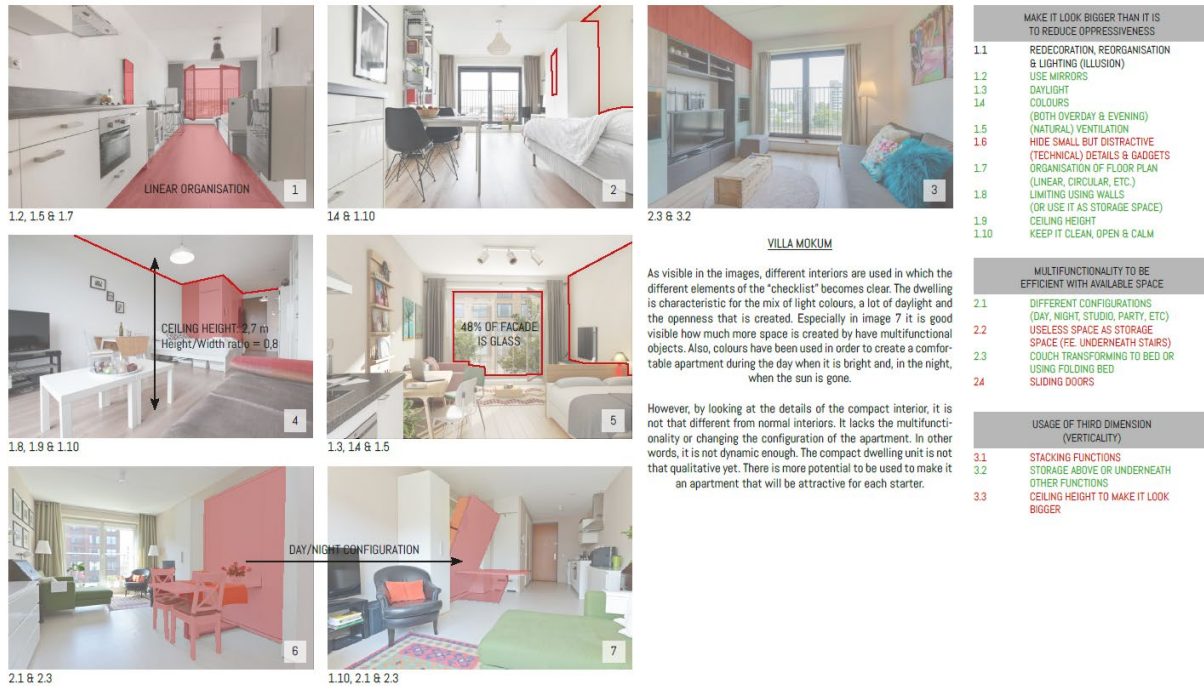
**Image 3.** *Analysis (left) in relation to checklist based on literature (right).* (Author, 2019).

## III PHENOMENOLOGY THROUGH THE YEARS

According to Seamon and Woodruff Smith, phenomenology started to get its name in the early 20th Century, due to philosopher Edmund Husserl. He was convinced that the phenomenological research method could identify certain unchangeable structures of consciousness. Other philosophers saw phenomenology differently. Heidegger didn't think that consciousness is separated from the world and human existence, while Merleau-Ponty extended Heidegger's critique on Husserl by mentioning the importance of including the role of the body in human experience (2000 & 2013). By looking at the different point of views of the three philosophers it becomes clear how the research method has changed from a transcendental[4] structure from Husserl to a research method by Merleau-Ponty where experiencing things in reality is central. Even though phenomenology has been popular through the entire 20th Century in Europe[5], there were, according to Woodruff Smith always debates about the characteristics of the research method and the research method itself (2013).

Through the years, many different approaches have been used by different philosophers. Woodruff Smith mentions the first approach in which a type of experience has been described that directly comes out of our own first experiences (2013). Seamon calls this "first-person" phenomenology. Francis Violich is a good example of this approach, who examined contrasts in the qualities of several places. Seamon mentions another person in relation to this approach, which is Toombs. She had difficulties using her senses due to an illness. Because of using "first-person" research, clarity and insight can be derived in her individual lifeworld. The second approach mentioned by Von Eckartsberg in Seamon's literature focuses not on the world of one individual but on how to involve the worlds of others as well. This approach is called "existential" phenomenological research. The focus with this research is on collectivity where people will share their experiences. Shertock's research is a good example of this. She lived with a couple of families she didn't know at the beginning and asked them to accompany her when she was doing fieldwork. The last approach in Seamon's literature is called "hermeneutic" phenomenology research, which means that the researcher must find ways of doing research on his or her own while the aim is to understand the materialization of the environment (2000). In Woodruff Smith's literature this approach is described as "interpreting a type of experience by relating it to relevant

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[4] Definition: something extremely special or unusual and can't be understood in ordinary ways (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019).
[5] In other continents such as North and South America, analytic philosophy was the traditional method in the 20th Century (Woodruff Smith, 2013).

features of context" (2013). The architect Thiis-Evensen proposed a universal language of architecture where the focus was on experiencing qualities of architectural elements such as floors, walls and roofs. (Seamon, 2000). It turns out that "existential" phenomenological research is the method which tends to be more objective than the first and third method, which makes phenomenological research more reliable.

By looking at the present, I find it important to mention the influence of technology on phenomenological research. We are living in a period where we are becoming more and more dependent on technology. To make the connection with the "AR3AD011 Research Seminar" course, Sennett describes the way we use technology nowadays as friction-free. This sounds positive, but Sennett believes that using friction-free technology, such as smartphones, will avoid complexities, which is according to him a shame. He is convinced that complexities are needed to create or enhance quality by facing problems and start solving them (2018). This can relate to phenomenology in a way that technology can have a negative impact on the research. Take for example the collage I have made after the field trip (image 2). The pictures in the collage are taken by me with



**Image 4.** *Friction-free technology that is distracting the human experience during a field trip.* (Author, 2019).

my smartphone, but I haven't taken the pictures with the purpose of implementing them in the collage. Using the smartphone as a tool distracts me from experiencing the site with my senses[6] (image 4). The focus on having the object as good as possible on the picture is distracting me from the field trip. It blocks me interacting with tangible architecture. That's why I think it is important not to let technology being part of phenomenological research, or at least not having a bad influence on the research results. An overview of this section is visible in image 5.



**Image 5.** *Chronological order of theories related to phenomenology.* (Author, 2019).

IV        POSITIONING THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL RESEARCH METHOD

Seamon questions the trustworthiness of phenomenology by stating how the individual experience can accurately be placed in a theoretical framework (2000). It is a process wherein the research results can't be measured in defined units. It is not a quantitative, but qualitative research as mentioned by Lucas (2015). However, Seamon describes a way how the research results can become reliable. He calls it "intersubjective corroboration" which means that when another person or group of people can find themselves in the research results (2000).

For me, it stays difficult to make it a more objective research to let it be useable for the design process. Phenomenological research lacks some sort of grip. It needs to be connected to another research method to get that objectivity. The difference between the examples I have described in "My approach and used tools" makes it understandable what the influence is when another research method comes into play. By combining the two research methods, the results become more specific and useable

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[6] Human senses such as perception, smell, imagination, thought, emotion, visuality.

at the same time. Phenomenology alone can, in my opinion, be used to let people, such as the client, look differently to a certain object or environment. It can convince them that something can be experienced different from how they experience it. Pull people out of their comfort zone and make them realise that another interpretation is possible as well, which doesn't necessarily mean that their interpretation is right or wrong.

Because every design assignment is different, it means that phenomenology as research method is maybe less useful for another design assignment compared to the dwelling design assignment I have now. That means that different research methods come into play, which are needed to get results that can't be derived from doing phenomenological research. An example is a heritage design assignment I have done in my first semester. Because you have to deal with a historical and monumental object, a research method is needed where the history should be researched and not specifically the experience.

A way how phenomenology can be useful, is if it supports a different research method, which was the conclusion at the end of the second section. Take for example, ethnography, which is according to Lucas, a research method where the focus lays on a very long and extensive research. The results are often written up and supported by theoretical considerations, which is most of the time done after the period of fieldwork (2015). Here, phenomenology can be helpful. You can use your human senses to research how you have experienced the environment over a long period. This collaboration between research methods is in contrast with what is said in the introduction, where I used Lucas to argue that focussing on one specific method will give more depth to the research compared to using different methods at the same time (2015). Now it becomes clear that I don't fully agree with Lucas has mentioned.

To continue making a relation with my dwelling graduation studio, it is important to take the experiences of my target group into account. According to Avermaete, there are three dimensions of the public form in relation to the architect. One of them is the architect as facilitator where the public is part of the design process (2010). As architect, especially with the dwelling graduation studio, I have to facilitate the target group in fulfilling the demands they have. To make another relation with the "AR3AD011 Research Seminar" course, Sennett calls this a bottom-up approach, which lets the public be part of the design process instead of not doing that, which is the top-down approach (2018). So, the challenge will be to get to know how the target group experience a certain object or environment. I have to understand their behaviour and try to act like them to get to an idea of how they would experience it.

So, in relation to the research question "How can the results of phenomenological research be interpreted in a way that it becomes useable as argumentation in the design process?" it is important to bring, besides your individual experiences, other's experiences into account as well. A connection with another research method can be useful to make the results more objective and reliable. Furthermore, friction-free technology can be distracting, especially for a research method like phenomenology where you need your human senses. Finally, using phenomenology as research method depends on the design assignment as well. The variety in design assignments asks for a different research process in which sometimes other research methods rather than phenomenology is used to get the research results you as researcher have been looking for.

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