

Theory of Phenomenology:
Analyzing Substance, Application, and Influence
Arch 630: Theory and Context

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Designing an experience is a unique responsibility of an architect. The theory of phenomenology acknowledges this responsibility by implementing sensory design in order to establish experiential, architectural space. Phenomenology demonstrated in architecture is the manipulation of space, material, and light and shadow to create a memorable encounter through an impact on the human senses. This theory promotes the integration of sensory perception as a function of a built form. This creates an experience that is beyond tangible, but rather abstract, observed and perceived. An analysis of this aesthetic through interpretation of its qualitative elements and the exploration of case studies by phenomenological theorists, Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Peter Zumthor and Steven Holl, as supportive evidence will highlight its fundamental characteristics as a theory, in contrast to a more rationalist design approach. An observational argument to prioritize the human experience in design will be determined by exploring the theoretical construct of phenomenology.

Architecture influences the community through incorporating human activity with adapted site context, organized programmatic and interstitial space, and exploration of material. Phenomenological concept strategies in architectural design intend to develop a unique experience of the phenomena of space, light and form. This theory contrasts rationalism by analyzing quality based on its affect on the sensitivity of human perception, rather than developing a mechanical sense of reason and tectonics. As defined by theorist Vernon Bourke, rationalism is a theory "in which the criterion of the truth is not sensory but intellectual and

deductive" (Bourke p.263). Rationalism produces a layered system of scientific reduction, whereas phenomenology delivers layers of sensory details such as emotion informed by design features of light and shadow, material and spatial perception. A new interpretation of functionality within design exists in the phenomenological construct.

The dynamics of human perception, of the individual and the community, should influence design form and function, in terms of circulation and organization of an elastic, sinuous program to produce sensory architecture. Architecture is designed to serve the needs of human activity; therefore, creates a relationship between human senses and the building to transform emotion and perception. Throughout history admiration for the human body in architecture resonates, specifically in its relationship to human perception. Christian Norberg-Schulz stresses that "the environment influences human beings, and this implies that the purpose of architecture transcends the definition given by early functionalism" (Norberg-Schulz 5). Phenomenology is the function of quality. Design should foremost consider sensory details when integrating a collaborative program. Intimate memories of place are often derived from intricate forms of detail allowing a bond, beyond physical use of a building, an experience, to become ingrained in memory.

The compositions and beliefs of Alberto Pérez-Gómez, Steven Holl, and Peter Zumthor emphasize the power of phenomenon in their theoretical constructs. Their arguments consider that the sensory experience between an architectural object and those who encounter it should be critical and complimentary. These followers are determined to revive emotion-evoking design through space, material and light and shadow through expression of these features into the both the larger context and intimate human perception. The manifestation of this philosophy will be further explored through a case study analysis of both Steven Holl's Nelson

Atkins Art Museum Bloch Addition in Kansas City and in Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals in Switzerland.

In his book, "Architecture and The Crisis of Modern Science", Alberto Pérez-Gómez challenges modern architecture to "reaffirm its role as the theatre of memory and metaphor- that there is no such thing as a meaningless structure" (Rykwert). Pérez-Gómez expresses the origination of architectural program through human perception and sensual experience when he suggests:

" [The human body] is the locus of all formulations about the world; it not only occupies space and time but consists of spatiality and temporality... its experience is therefore "geometrical". The [extension of this] constitutes the thrust of architectural design, the creation of an order resonant with the body's own" (Pérez-Gómez 3)

There is strategic elasticity between human perception and architectural rigor. In his illustrative book, "Thinking Architecture", Peter Zumthor believes that, "In [my job as an architect], I contribute to the existing physical framework, to the atmosphere of places and spaces that kindle our emotions...[Arranging] the sequences of rooms to guide us, take us places, but also let us go and seduce us" (Zumthor 85-86). Phenomenology can be exposed through arrangement of architectural elements. Steven Holl declares, " While sensations and impressions quietly engage us in the physical phenomena of architecture, the generative force lies in the intentions behind it." (Holl, Pallasmaa, and Perez-Gomez 41) There is a realization that the qualitative characteristics of phenomenology propose a necessary understanding of the sensory perception of space.

A common theme in each phenomenological approach to design is the management of space, material and light and shadow. In phenomenology, space is determined by the development of fluid, flexible program and the utilization of interstitial space. Steven Holl

elaborates on an “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’” (Holl, Pallasmaa, and Perez-Gomez 44). This establishes the necessity for place making through sensory observance. Initially, the combination of space, material and light design features creates a sensory observation for the person and then they develop an understanding of space. Material is the tactile form of phenomenology that facilitates memory. Zumthor often describes some of his most vivid memories through the expression of texture and material. He begins, “There was once a time when I experienced architecture without even thinking about it”, before he goes on to reveal a vivid illustration on childhood memories of the texture of a “particular door handle”, “gravel under his feet” and “soft asphalt warmed by the sun”. The phenomenon of materiality induces memories and emotions, reflecting on of the layers of this theory. “Memories like these contain the deepest architectural experience that I know. They are the reservoirs of the architectural atmospheres and images that I explore in my work as an architect,” Zumthor states (Thinking Architecture 9-10). It is the point where direct connection between the experience and the visitor come into contact. Not only does this involve the physical sense of touch but implied visual stimulus as well.

Light and shadow create a playful interaction of color, texture and related emotion associated to the program. The contrast between these can be sharp or blurry depending on the desired affect. This strategy can create depth and display texture and is one of the strongest design features in phenomenology. Lighting is visual, experiential, environmental, and sensual. The phenomenon lies in its affect on the human condition.

The following case studies represent the implementation of phenomenology; the specific use of light and shadow to induce experience will be primarily analyzed.

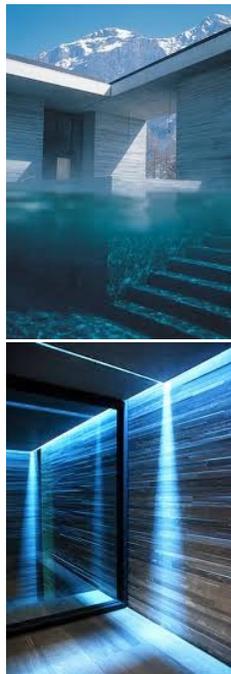
Case Study One: Steven Holl, Bloch Addition



The Bloch Addition, often described as “the Feather”, is an exploration of space through the affect of light. A unique juxtaposition to the static existing Nelson Art Gallery building, the light-gathering lenses strung down the hillside integrate a sensitive, experiential journey into the site’s fabric. Holl’s flowing program circulation and structural design allows infused day lighting opportunity throughout the galleries. The envelope of channel glass glows in the night and a permits ambient light during the day and its language is extended throughout the building. Phenomenological experience of space and material seem to be highlighted with cooperation of light and shadow. Holl suggests, “the perceptual spirit and metaphysical strength of architecture are driven by the quality of light and shadow shaped by solids and voids, by opacities, transparencies and translucencies. Natural light, with its ethereal variety of change, fundamentally orchestrates the intensities of architecture and cities” (Holl, Pallasmaa, and Perez-Gomez 63).

Case Study Two: Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals

Therme Vals creates a sensory experience utilizing bold materials and playful light. Experiential enclosures derive from manipulation of phenomenal design features. Zumthor illuminates this piece of architecture by poetically describing it as obtaining “right from the start, a feeling... for darkness and light, for the reflection of light upon water, for the diffusion of light though steam-filled air... for the ritual of bathing” (Three Concepts 11). The interplay between space, material and light is evident in their reliance on one another. The stone material in this project evokes a sense of reality, the open and closed spaces seduce circulation and the light transmits these sensations into an experience highlighting their characteristics.



Light is a necessity for the functionality of architecture. Its consideration for sensory reverence is critical in preliminary design. How light conveys the essence of a space and depth is a valued determinant of the philosophy of phenomenology.

Phenomenology establishes the need for the observance of sensory sensitivity in design. This philosophy, although it elaborates on the connection to intimate human perception, is multi-scale and also has a unique affect on health and wellness. This philosophy is an extension of natural phenomena found in the environment perhaps establishing its powerful affect. It determines sense of place through awareness of the surrounding environment in perceptual details and design features. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenologist, describes the opposition between rationalism and phenomenology by illustrating that

"All consciousness is perceptual...The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence...[the phenomenologist returns] and in relation to which every scientific characterization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography to the countryside." (Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

Phenomenology is an ambitious argument for sensory experience to be a rigor of architectural design. The integration of phenomenology into our generation of designing will ultimately acknowledge architecture's respect to the human scale. Today, technology advances architectural design strategies and it is encouraging to know that there are designers willing to harnessing this power to greater the human experience, which is what the essence of architecture seeks to accomplish.

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