PHENOMENOLOGY
THE ARCHITECTURE OF SENSE

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Introduction
Phenomenology questions the most basic theories of architecture to open up the mind to new architecture. It is a major movement that juxtaposes rationalism questioning the quality of architecture and not referring to the quantity. Phenomenology of architecture refers to the experience through sensory properties in reference to building materials; a philosophy where the building does not function in the second dimension or third dimension, but the fourth dimension (time).

The following literature review will evaluate on the effect phenomenology could have on architecture and compare it to architecture of the now, it will also define what it is, depict how phenomenology would work on the site, illustrate the process to create a phenomenological building and convey the technique of how a concept can allow the building to thrive; all in which is publicized by the writings of well known architects and theorists.

Architects like, Peter Zumthor, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa and Richard LePlastrier are commonly connected with the theory of phenomenology. Whilst architects like Glenn Murcutt and Jørn Utzon share many similar traits to the movement.
Literature Review

Is it the geometry of a building that defines what a building is? Or is there more in the building than just its geometry? Masses of architecture are now designed solely on the geometry of buildings. The question is then, is this the right thing to do? Is modern architecture a positive step? In the “The Geometry of Feeling” Juhani Pallasmaa writes about the evermore popular style of modern architecture:

*Why do so very few modern buildings appeal to our feelings, the buildings of our own time may arouse our curiosity with their daring or inventiveness, but they hardly give us any sense of the meaning of our world or our own existence*¹

Juhani axiom is even though modern buildings are groundbreaking with their geometrical shape and illusionary structure they do not comfort us the way the buildings before did. This can be noted from such buildings like the NIB building in honeysuckle, where the facade is created to make the dull box seem interesting and insightful. Juhani evaluates by describing a journey where ‘stone foundations’ are found in an ‘overgrown meadow’ recounting how the mind is stimulated through basic feelings and is connected to the building creating experiences. The consciousness can relate itself to the building through these stimuli. This basis of the stimuli is governed by the theory of phenomenology.

Other examples of these can be taken from ‘Peter Zumthor’s: Thinking Architecture’. Zumthor describes images of his past that connect with his training of thought as an architect. He illustrates his aunt’s door handle as a ‘special sign of entry into a world of different moods and smells’². He then went on to portray the trip from the door handle to the kitchen:

*I remember the sound of the gravel under my feet, the soft gleam of the waxed oak staircase; I can hear the heavy front door closing behind me as I walk along the dark corridor and enter the kitchen, the only really brightly lit room in the house*³.
The main senses created were not of sight but of sound and feel, even when he describes the corridor looking dark, a chill comes down the reader’s back as the sense of a cooler scene is created. He then goes on to describe the kitchen:

*The small hexagonal tiles of the floor, dark red and fitted so tightly together that the cracks between them were almost imperceptible, were hard and unyielding under my feet, and a smell of oil paint issued from the kitchen cupboard*.

The other senses of smell and taste now create the atmosphere of the kitchen, the smell of the oil paint leaks into the taste of everything expected in the single purposed room of cooking food. This room is also increasingly warmer due to the use of the colour red; to paint the passion and warmth created from such a kitchen. This theory creates a dramatic difference of feel in a building, a positive effect where the spirit can bond with the building. In comparison to phenomenology, there is theory of rationalism where architecture is a science that can be comprehended rationally. The Selimex Building, by Werner Tscholl in Italy is a building that uses golden ratio and perfect squares to acquire its shape which does not in any way allow the body to connect with anything.

From the kitchen to the bedroom and from the bedroom to the land the building is on experiences differ dramatically, due to the change of ‘concrete things having material, substance, shape, texture and colour’. These determine the environmental temperament which is core of place. Christian Norberg-Schulz tries to define and describe space as a qualitative phenomenon due to its atmosphere. He describes particular space of having a particular identity to which every space has its own genus loci. This can be successfully shown in Glenn Murcutt’s house in Blackheath for Bunduk Marika where he learnt about the way of life of the owners of the land able to find out the right feel and style that the place should be.
How does an architect design with sensory awareness? Does the way of designing need to drastically change to allow for the emotion of a building to be retrieved? Steven Holl’s ‘Pre-Theoretical Ground’ is another reading that is important to the understanding of phenomenology. To design using the senses one has to understand that perception of perspectives is the basis of the process. Steven described the three fields; ‘the foreground, middle ground and distant view’; when architecture is absorbed all three views are experienced in unison. One cannot design in plan or section due to the lack of description, preventing the senses to unfold. This can be shown by such concept sketches of the Bagsværd Church by Jørn Utzon. The sketch creates a feel for the place that was ultimately created.

‘Pre-Theoretical Ground’ also informs the motive of a concept, where the creation of architecture lies in the intersection of the phenomenon and the idea. Establishing an order to limit and create a path of intention. This theory is also displayed in Jørn Utzon’s image above, where the deriving idea created the mood sought after.
Conclusion

Phenomenology is a term that was brought up due to the complete scientific mind of architecture; it proclaimed that the senses should be stimulated by the design and not just the visual stimulus like many buildings are doing today. By using the entire stimuli the architect is creating a journey through each threshold. May that be from outside to in or even room to room, the architect by using juxtaposing materials colours can create a feel that no geometry can create. This journey is a memorable one where the traveller through the architects design could incept a positive idea. To do such a thing though is not to design in plan or section but to design in perspectives of all three fields; the foreground, middle and distant view, to allow for the finest detail to the complete building in view a memorable one. This designing to create a memory is one in which time is a constant and to design with genus loci not to lose sight of the place. Finally what needs to be done is to have a concept that can establish an order in which to limit and create a course of intent. This theory of phenomenology wasn’t new though. Jørn Utzon designed buildings far before the movement even took place. And in an ironic way to create a place of beauty phenomenology seems rational.
Bibliography

Lecture:
- Phenomenology: Week 3 Tuesday

Video:
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Book:
- Steven Holl, “Pre-theoretical Ground” in *Steven Holl* (Basel: Birkhäuser-Verlag, 1996), [up].

Website:

Endnotes