Understanding of the Self Through Phenomenology in Art and Architecture

Amelia Linde
College of Design, Construction, and Planning, University of Florida

Phenomenology is the philosophy that considers and translates contextual information, including the cultural and the physical. To create a conscious experience in art and architecture, factors such as materiality, sequence, operation, occupation, and construction must be recognized. Understanding the self is the phenomenology through which to evaluate the space between art and architecture. The self is a composite of the senses and the conscience. Creating a framework to evaluate the self through phenomenology allows an exploration of contemporary projects that exist in that defined phenomenological realm. Considering all these things, this essay explores projects that illustrate this phenomenology and presents research that produces an occupiable installation project, created for the self in the phenomenological context. Methods of designing and building that heighten the awareness of the self are used to evaluate both existing and proposed installation projects. A phenomenological project arises by exaggerating a specific detail in any form that is descriptive of its context; a phenomenological project, then, has the ability to bring awareness to the senses and consciousness.

PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is a philosophy that has been interpreted and practiced through many fields of work since the 1800s. Broadly, phenomenology refers to the essence of something coming through another form of expression. Within the realm of phenomenology, applications including material, transcendental, and embodied can be used to approach mathematics, the sciences, art, and architecture. In the most primary understanding, the term “phenomenon,” from the Greek phainomenon, is contemporarily defined as “an object known through the senses rather than by thought or intuition.” Phenomenology is defined as “a philosophical movement that describes the formal structure of the objects of awareness and of awareness itself in abstraction from any claims concerning existence and how its is expressed in the physical form.”

The self is the body, with perception through the senses and the conscience. A body’s perception is its understanding of its relationship to its surroundings. Perception drives the phenomenological process of design, which is digested through sound, taste, touch, smell, and sight. Perception through the senses is the way that we relate to the world around us, and an experience is the response of the body receiving information through the senses.

The consciousness of the self is constructed from impressions made upon it. Consciousness is the understanding of the relationship to the world in which one exists. Memory plays a role in phenomenological philosophies. Over time memories can fade or be tainted; however, the overlying impression that something makes is the ultimate essence—the phenomenon—of the thing.

An understanding of the self is presented in Figure 1, “Husserl’s Theory of Essences” by Husserl, a theorist of phenomenology. Understanding how the individual relates to the universal context becomes a way to perceive consciousness and the self of the individual. Essences within a physical classification are divided between material and form. Essences within a humanitarian classification are divided between the universe and the individual. Husserl notes that individual essences are different for each person, with a true essence and a perceived essence. Husserl’s Theory dissects the self’s relationship to the universe and to the physical essences of formality and materiality. What allows these two classifications to interact is the ability of perception through the self, which is constructed from the senses and the consciousness.

The essence of the self is recognized when the conscience becomes aware of the body in its individual and
universal roles. Immanuel Kant’s “View of the Mind and Consciousness of Self” is a framework through which to understand the conscience. As Andrew Brook notes, Kant used inner sense to defend the heterogeneity of body and soul: “bodies are objects of outer sense; souls are objects of inner sense. In Kant’s thought there are two components of the self: 1. Inner self 2. Outer self.”\(^3\) In the framework of this research, the conscience is the “inner self” and the senses/body is the “outer self.”

An additional tool for evaluating ideas of the self is Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 2). The bottom of the pyramid is driven by the senses; the top of the pyramid is driven by the consciousness. The senses address physical needs, while the consciousness addresses actualized needs. The physical and psychological complete the self, allowing perception and understanding to shape genuine experiences.

The senses are how we experience, and the consciousness is how we perceive the experience; these together make up the self. The physical and conceptual realms between art and architecture need a phenomenology by which to evaluate themselves, which is through the self.

**PHENOMENOLOGY IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE**

In both art and architecture, when self and context are addressed through design, craftsmanship and memory persist. As Steven Holl et. al. point out, “The total perception of architectural spaces depends on the material and detail.”\(^4\) Thus, craftsmanship is the re-embodied physicality of the body and context. The craftsmanship of a constructed space is absorbed into the body through the senses, and “when the materiality of the details that form an architectural space become evident, the haptic realm is opened up.”\(^5\) In other words, phenomenology produces a genuine experience.

There are two classifications of context within the art and architectural realms: physical and cultural. Cultural context includes religion, clothing, cooking practices, and so on. Physical context includes climate, setting, location, etc.

A genuine architecture within the framework of phenomenology is thoughtful, contextual, relatable, and memorable. Phenomenology in architecture requires the awareness of self and context to produce a spatial experience. Installation art is experienced similarly to architecture, but at a smaller scale. Depending on intent and necessity, installations can express a phenomenon, whether cultural or physical.

Juhani Pallasmaa, an architectural phenomenology theorist, works toward understanding what constructs an experience. Pallasmaa’s work *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* offers an explanation of experience through the senses: “The authenticity of architectural experience is grounded in the tectonic language for building and the comprehensibility of the act of construction to the sense. We behold, touch, listen, and measure the world with our entire bodily existence, and the experiential world becomes organized and articulated around the centre of the body.”\(^6\) Pallasmaa makes a case for construction and craftsmanship to humanize a structure and be accessible to all through the universal ability to experience through the senses.

J.N. Mohanty notes that “phenomenology is called descriptive, because it is not deductive;”\(^7\) if deductive, it would lose the qualities of its individuality through abstracting a concept past the point of connection. To be descriptive is to speak the same language of the thing being described; it can be through location, sequence of spaces, materiality, and construction. Location points to where the structure is situated, and its cultural and physical impact; sequence of spaces speaks of the movement, the action of experience; materiality addresses scale and has the power to humanize or dehumanize the space; and construction is the craft of considering the material, location, and sequence of spaces in order to frame the spaces.

**Case Studies of Phenomenology in Art and Architecture**

Rachel Whiteread, *House*. Whiteread is an installation artist who casts molds from the negative spaces of preexisting structures, usually in concrete, resin, or rubber. Her project *House* (see Figure 3) opposes that construct with heavy, casted pieces, making it monolithic and unoccupiable. It is an extreme shift in materiality and scale, immediately directing the viewer’s perception to their relation to the massive structure. The house that was once there is no longer occupiable and the concrete presence is alien to the self when compared to typical building systems. The project provides a phenomenological experience in both the constructed and conceptual contexts. A unoccupiable structure can be viewed as a monument; a monument is a memory of a place, becoming a part of the fabric of the context, operating as presence and absence.
Do Ho Suh, *Staircase V*. Korean sculptor and installation artist Do Ho Suh manipulates spaces through materiality and form to change the audience’s view of the space. *Staircase V* (see Figure 4) is an installation of a 1:1 scale replica of a staircase that existed in the artist’s childhood home. His uses of silk and nylon evoke a dream-like palimpsest, evoking nostalgia and honoring the presence of the transparent material, which, when layered, becomes opaque. Different points of occupation in and around the installation provide different scales and relationships to the gallery. Within the phenomenological framework of the self experiencing the physical, cultural, and, in this case, the emotional context, *Staircase V* explores framing, modes of observation, nostalgia, and a connection between a memory and a physical context.

**Robert Irwin, Homage to the Square*. Irwin forbid the use of photography to document his work for most of his career. He was a pure experientialist, meaning that the only way to understand and appreciate his work was by experiencing it in person. Irwin works through painting and installation. In Figure 5, *Homage to the Square* celebrates the form of the cube and the tectonics of screen and light. The experience of this project activates the self through materiality, location, sequence of spaces, and construction. The material allows for the occupant’s perception to shape their experience. The density of the screens expresses the essence of what is behind it, not every detail. With the use of the senses, the occupant can experience each space through the true self.

**Peter Zumthor, Bruder Klaus Field Chapel*. Peter Zumthor consciously practices phenomenology by designing a genuine experience. In the Bruder Klaus Field Chapel (see Figures 6 and 7), built in Wachendorf, Germany, where the local patron saint is Bruder Klaus, there is an undeniable connection of the chapel to the physical and cultural landscape. Known for his use of local materials, powerful spaces, and consideration for detail, Zumthor uses the Chapel to go beyond the physical understanding of spaces through the senses. Indeed, Zumthor resonates with the consciousness by inviting mystic and imagination into the spaces. The Chapel’s form was made of tree trunks used to define the entirety of the interior space. Layers of concrete were poured around the tree trunks, creating a monolithic form that confronts the landscape; the tree trunks were burned away, leaving a strong scent and color to the space. A chapel is built to practice a ritual in the name of a religion; Zumthor’s work capitalizes on the landscape and uses the approach through the fields to transition into a dark, enclosed space, which then opens to natural light from the top of the Chapel. The senses and consciousness are actualized through the power of the architecture: this is a phenomenological experience.
Steven Holl, Chapel of St. Ignatius. Holl’s approach to shaping experiences is through the body, its relationship to a building, the building's relationship to site, and the relationship of these elements to time. As seen in Figure 8, The Chapel of St. Ignatius, located in Seattle, WA, uses “each of the light volumes [to correspond] to part of the program of Jesuit Catholic worship. The south-facing light corresponds to the procession, a fundamental part of the mass.” The need for experience is inherently ingrained into the program. Holl’s design formats the succession of spaces while also bringing an awareness to the program through the senses. The Chapel exists in the phenomenological realm because of its tactile experience. Through the use of material, Holl activates the psychological dimension, the consciousness, by capitalizing on the seven spaces of light he used as his framework. Each “bottle” of light is a new space for the occupants to practice/experience their religion.

Fung Collaboratives. The art organization Fung Collaboratives creates a framework for artists and architects in terms of materiality and contextual limitations. The projects are solely created of ice, and the participants form the concept and actualization of their project. The frameworks presented (materiality, location, craftsmanship, and collaboration) provide the opportunity to experiment in the realm between the two crafts (art and architecture) to reconnect where both originated. Fung Collaboratives is a place to experiment and practice phenomenological concepts. The artists and architects together decide a physical form and spatial experience within the framework of the Lapland, Finland, location and the materiality requirements. Each project, shown in Figures 10–12, produced a phenomenological expression through the constructs with exaggerated intentions.
establish a village in Csóromfölde. Project Village 2015 had an abundance of work that dealt with the necessity of immediate structures, and not many of the projects survived. Project Village 2016 was an essential year for the village to gain permanence and establish its place in Csóromfölde. The workshop conceptually deals with the balance of temporariness/permanence and art/architecture manifested with wood as the main material. The five projects addressed below are most relevant and impactful to this essay’s research, interpreted through the framework of phenomenology and the self. All of the following images were taken/made by the author.

**The Thread.** KOSMOS created a permeable wall that operated on the border between the villages; the wall acts as protection, as enclosure, and as and entrance. As seen in Figure 13, the project’s scale provided the ability to view both villages, gaining a new understanding of both. The wall acts as a permeable edge/seam, tying both sides of the wall together. The project’s five tiers, representative of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, are a ritual aiming to heal the self. An important question rose during the workshop: what if this wall enclosed the entire village? It would be received in a very different way—as something daunting and intimidating. It would seem less like a permeable wall/gate used to heal the self and more like a monolith focused on keeping people in or out.

**Case Studies of a Design Firm: Hello Wood’s Project Village**

While the previous case studies featured established installations, this section focuses on an ongoing, liveable installation in Hungary. Project Village is an educational architecture workshop hosted by a design firm, Hello Wood, in rural Csóromfölde, Hungary. Hello Wood’s Project Village 2016 is the second of a three-year plan to

**The Bath House.** The intensity of The Bath House’s vertical wood planks allows for the structure to appear as a solid surface from one perspective, and as a deconstructed screen from another. It responds to the environment around and within it, reacting to the trees that penetrate it and to the slope of the ground. There is a focus on movement of people, air, water, and nature. Just as a bath house cleanses, it also filters. The Bath House complements, utilizes, and protects the physical context and also operates as a place for the self to serve its needs. Genuine actions occur in the project through the scales of intersection.
Alt-Cathedral. Neal Hitch’s Alt-Cathedral discussed myths, rituals, human nature, and the need for spirituality. It is an essential piece to be built in the village. As shown in Figure 15, Alt-Cathedral’s architecture and construction responded to its historical context; there was a battle at the beginning of the 1700s in the village, and on the site, there are remnants of bullets and a small trench with built up dirt mounds. The project addresses rituals, specifically the rituals of religion. The project is a frame of a cathedral space. As a religious setting is about praying to a greater being, it is also about a process of bettering the self in relation to the immediate context by addressing the role the self serves to the context.

Play With Fire. Play with Fire, a project by professors at Delft University of Technology, seen in Figure 16, was designed and built as an architectural platform to practice Shou Sugi Ban, an ancient Japanese method of charring wood in means to preserve and strengthen the wood. The aging and survival of a structure ties into the role that memory has in phenomenology. Memory is experienced through the conscience, which holds the essence of the place. Play with Fire activates the senses throughout the process of Shou Sugi Ban, while building and occupying the burnt wood. The heat of the fire and the smell of the wood activate the senses, creating a relationship between construction and the self. The project features a stage where people practicing Shou Sugi Ban perform, showing the relationship between a body and its actions.

Fire Nest. Fire Nest (see Figure 17), the project of team leaders Zsófia Illés and Łukasz Pastuszka, was executed with a thoughtful place, design, and construction with consideration of its occupants. The team leaders, an architect and an artist, took the Hungarian tradition of an open-air kitchen and made it accessible to all. As an installation, the project had to be something people are attracted to; as architecture, it had to be occupiable; and conceptually, it had to operate as a community space. Fire Nest was the heart of the village and presented ways of evaluating the self and the context. The grid created a way to measure the self and the context through the use of framing to measure the time, scale, and spatial qualities of the village. Fire Nest operates in the phenomenological realm because of its interaction of site, culture, community, scale, and material qualities. It is a place to evaluate the self through the relationship of the community—the role one plays in a village. It also utilized the needs of people to bring them together around a singular point in the village for warmth, comfort, food, and community, satisfying the senses and the consciousness.
Workshop’s Outcome. Each project operated within the village’s infrastructure while also creating its own itinerary. This village needs a phenomenological process for building to preserve the culture of community, serve the needs (senses and consciousness) of the occupants, honor the tradition of material, and respect the physical context on which the village exists. The workshop presents the opportunity to experiment in occupational and monumental scales within a particular framework of location, materiality, and resources.

PROJECT PROPOSAL

The author’s own project proposal adopts the framework presented by Hello Wood, as the context and materiality are prescribed. This new proposal features a project that is designed and considered in the physical context of rural Hungary and the wood is the required material to construct with.

In this project, screens will be paramount. The use of screens is important and has been adapted all over the globe; examples include the Jali in Iran, pool screens in Florida, Shōji in Japan, and Mashrabiya in Arab cultures. Screens are created through the density, organization, and finish of a material, in this case, wood. The movement of a screen throughout the project is an unveiling process, used to slowly expose and progress through to the heart of the project—the courtyard, centered around a tree. The courtyard is a place to reflect and to worship the material from which the project was built. The explicit connection to the context is a descriptive technique used to emphasize the physical context. The ritual to the center, experienced through the self’s senses and consciousness, is a method to understand the possibilities the material holds through the manipulation from the self. The project will provide the opportunity to experiment with the material, letting the material guide the methods of building and to shape a genuine experience throughout the project. All of the following images were made by the author.

The sections (see Figure 18) provide an understanding of the self’s relationship to the project itself. The essence of a person appears through the screens in the project, introducing a scale. The project is experienced through the sequence of spaces. Each space is separated by the screens and varies by the material qualities used for a particular space. One space may be open and light, the other may be tight and dark.

The plan (see Figure 19) is used to understand the organization of the spaces around the central courtyard and in relation to the exterior skin. The densities of spaces and the densities of screens can be read to envision the layered system of walls and screens throughout the project.

The elevation drawings, as in Figure 20, introduce an understanding of the project’s scale and how it exists between the architectural and installation realms. The
Project is approached and initially confronted with a screen that needs to be pushed aside to enter; the self’s senses and consciousness are immediately activated. The concept of wood as a material is challenged here, as panels and linear members intertwine to create a tectonic language of their own. The process of Shou Sugi Ban is also utilized in order to bring in another method of activating the senses and conscience.

Considering the framework presented by Hello Wood, this proposal approaches the research on phenomenology and the self within the context of rural Hungary. The project uses experimentation to evoke the essence of the spaces through worship of the material.

REFERENCES


ENDNOTES


5 Ibid.

6 Juhani Pallasmaa, The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Academy, 2005), 64.


Figure 20. Elevations 1–2 (top to bottom) of project proposal

REFLECTION

Phenomenology is the self experiencing the essence of a place through the senses. A phenomenological process can be used to heal in order to focus and truly experience a place. The design produced a phenomenological performance in terms of drawing. Considering the Hello Wood projects and the case studies, it is understood that to accomplish a phenomenological experience, there must be consideration for all modes of viewing (photos, drawings, sculpture, architecture) and the exaggeration of gesture (considering the contexts). The proposal’s physical construction will be realized and manifested differently than the original design. Bridging architecture and art through a framework of limited resources and materiality, the design proposal progresses the philosophy. The project is not done until it is taken from drawings to be built and documented. In terms of phenomenological translation, drawing in this proposal was necessary to exaggerate the palimpsest of material through the layered structure and explicitly express the intended essence of the spaces. The action of the self in the project promotes a phenomenological understanding of materiality, construction, progression through the project, and the physical and cultural contexts.