

## *Phenomenology*

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### the philosophy of phenomenology

The philosophical construct of phenomenology, born in the early twentieth century, is most notably linked to philosophers Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. Though they used the term in slightly different ways, their philosophical understanding of phenomenology was very similar. Husserl's phenomenology was the 'reflective study of the essence [nature] of consciousness as experienced from the first person point-of-view.' He posited that phenomenology 'takes the intuitive experience of phenomena [observable events] and tries to extract the essential [absolutely necessary] features of experiences.' Heidegger had a more existential viewpoint. He felt that, while western philosophy had neglected the 'Being' and treated it as an entity rather than a state, phenomenology had the ability to focus on the experience of being in itself. He identified modern man's dilemma as his inability to reflect on existence. These theories went on to later influence Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher of the mid-twentieth century. Merleau-Ponty felt that perception was 'not a causal outcome but rather an active dimension' and that one's body was not an 'object of scientific study in space but rather a permanent condition of experience.' Each philosopher had a slightly unique view of phenomenology but ultimately they each were interested in achieving a greater level of self-awareness through experience.

### the search for an elevated architecture

In the latter part of the twentieth century, architectural historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz said 'during the last decades it has become increasingly clear that this pragmatic approach [formalism] to design leads to a schematic and characterless environment with insufficient possibilities for human dwelling. The problem of meaning in architecture has therefore come to the fore.' According to Kate Nesbitt, phenomenology as a postmodern theoretical design paradigm emerged as a 'favored approach to design that was highly personal and inward-looking.' This new postmodern paradigm offered an alternative design strategy to modern architecture, often characterized by the international style which seemed to lack personal meaning because of its universality. The phenomenological viewpoint was critical of modern scientific logic and rational planning because these were thought to have 'devalued being' and individual experience. Norberg-Schulz said that 'the architect's purpose was [instead] to make a world visible' through what he called 'concretization of existential space.' He was describing a physical and tangible manifestation (through architecture) of structures capable of generating meaningful and memorable experiences. Alberto Perez-Gomez, author of *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, helps us to understand Norberg-Schulz's theory. He stated that, 'a metaphysical dimension makes architecture meaningful.' This phenomenological architecture, or concretization of the metaphysical dimension, allows each user to experience the same building in an entirely unique and personal way. This is very different than the concept of modern rationalism which conceived of spaces that were pragmatic and universal, thus limiting the opportunity for subjective, individualized transcendence. Norberg-Schulz felt that 'every situation should be local as well as general.' His suggestion implies that while a building design may be highly contextualized and site specific, each

unique user's architectural experience will differ based on the way they actively occupy the space and dwell within it. Perez-Gomez shares this view that a place must permit duality, but he is somewhat prescriptive, calling for a symbolic architecture which is easy to identify, rather than Norberg-Schulz's more universally meaningful and subjective abstract duality. Both theories encourage tangible, sensory architecture and intangible, metaphysical experience, but achieve these ends by different means.

The dilemma of meaning in architecture persists in our contemporary culture, even though myriad postmodern paradigms continue to generate new architectural theories and experiments. Perez-Gomez believes that today culturally significant architecture is 'a rare treat in a privatized world where perception of reality is increasingly identified with a telematic picture.' His comment is critical of our modern age and challenges architecture to go deeper than façade imagery. He goes on to say, 'the fact that we may now believe that meanings are simply mental associations, that space is 'out there' and merely qualitative (describable through three-dimensional coordinates), or that decontextualized images (in cyberspace) are reality, has precipitated the world of architectural practice into a crisis that makes Merleau-Ponty's challenge crucial and timely.' He hopes to cure our modern dilemma through a 'critical practice that endeavors to recover the mystery of the ordinary.' Simply stated, Perez-Gomez hopes to infuse the everyday existence with the potential for individual meaning and exploration. From Heidegger to Perez-Gomez, we see that for most of the twentieth century there has been a struggle to create user-conscious architecture capable of individual transcendence. However, most philosophers would agree that phenomenology in architecture addresses a lack of meaning and promotes individual reflection and heightened user awareness through sensory experience. Today, contemporary architects like Peter Zumthor and Steven Holl claim to be phenomenologists in search of this richer meaning and more interactive and contemplative user interface for their buildings.

#### creating a phenomenological architecture

Though many architects and theorists subscribe to slightly different theoretical agendas, most phenomenologists agree that the sensitivity to detail is critical in order to penetrate individual consciousness. Architectural design elements (planes, slopes, thresholds, skylights), sensory elements (perspective, air flow, reflection, audible features), and material joinery (material meets earth, material meets material, material meets sky) all impact the way users perceive and experience space. These elements have the potential to create phenomenological awareness; therefore, the present moment of being becomes an active and personal dimension rather than simply one's recognition of being a static object inside of a singular space. In addition to sensitive detailing, Norberg-Schulz believes that tuning in to a place's genius loci, or spirit, is essential. In his essay, *The Phenomenon of Place*, he says that 'place is evidently an integral part of existence' which is made of more than an abstract location. He believes characteristics like the material substance, shape, texture, and color of an existing place 'determine its environmental character, or essence.' He argues that environmental details of a particular site are meaningful and should inform the architecture of a place. Norberg-Schulz supports his theory by saying, 'in modern society, attention has almost exclusively been concentrated on the 'practical' function of orientation, whereas identification has been left to chance. As a result true dwelling, in a psychological sense, has been substituted by alienation. It is therefore urgently needed to arrive at a fuller understanding of the concepts of identification and character.' By identifying notable or illusory features within a site, he claims that an architect would know the sight more completely and

therefore be able to translate that intimate knowledge into the internal form language, rather than allowing all formal qualities to be based simply on programmatic necessity.

#### balancing phenomenology and pragmatism

The resurgence of phenomenology in the field of architecture has been an important development in postmodern architectural theory. Most contemporary architects, whether they claim to be phenomenologists or not, are at least somewhat interested in the user experience and its potential for enlightenment. Critics of phenomenological architecture are justified in arguing that design which is purely infatuated with phenomena (for the sake of consciousness) often lacks the sufficient pragmatism necessary for the creation of coherent, efficient, and economical architecture. However, when phenomenological design is carefully balanced with these rational concepts, it has the potential to significantly enhance society's perception of built space through a heightened consciousness and attention to detail, thus transforming mere buildings into meaningful architecture.