Researching Non-Conscious¹ Dimensions of Architectural Experience

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Editorial Summary: Entitled »Researching Non-Conscious Dimensions of Architectural Experience«, Marcus Weisen's contribution explores the investigation of pre-reflexive ways of knowing, sensory thought, and the embodied mind. He introduces the micro-phenomenological interview as a successful methodology to exploit immanent, non-conscious aspects of architectural experience. He emphasizes the relevance of investigating the individual, subjective perspective in architectural research, proposing the first-person description of experience as a starting point from which to derive insights into overarching, essential principles of lived experiences of, and encounters with, architectural spaces. Tracing the elusive, embodied dimensions of architectural experience, he aims for an »embodied rationalism« in architectural research. [Uta Graff]

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The Realm of Perception

The academic study of perception still focuses predominantly on the sense of sight and reflects the resilience of »ocularcentrism« in Western culture (Levin 1993). When, in 1961, Marshall McLuhan pointed to the need for »re-balancing the senses« (Howes 2004), immersive and installation art had already begun to shift the paradigm of what constitutes perception from sight toward bodily experience, a shift borne out in reflective artist practices and in art

1 In this article we use the term »non-conscious« to cover references in theoretical writings on architectural experience to pre-reflective and pre-reflexive experience (phenomenology) and unconscious experience (depth psychology, cognitive psychology). We are interested in particular in the possibilities of passage between e.g. pre-reflective experience and reflective thought.

*»Unconscious and Conscious Interplays Between Experiencers and Architecture«
Steven Holl: Kiasma Museum, Helsinki, 1998.
Photographer: Marcus Weisen, 2016.*

criticism. Architectural thinking, on the other hand, has been remarkably slow in engaging with multisensory lived bodily experience. Not until the 1990s did a noted momentum of reclaiming sensory experience in architectural discourse arise (Pérez-Gómez/Holl/Pallasmaa 1994). During the same decade, sensing and feeling (*spüren*) began to take center stage in emerging studies on urban and architectural atmospheres in Brazil, Germany, and France. »Everything suggests that we are witnessing an in-depth movement which reconfigures our ways of thinking today's ambient world [...] in every case it's about engaging with the question of experience and paying special attention to sensory perception« (Thibaud 2010).

Bodily experience, movement, peripheral vision, feeling and sensing are at the core of architectural experience and of feelings of rootedness and participation in the world (Pallasmaa 1996). A lived understanding of whole-body perception is therefore central to the design of nurturing and life-supporting environments. While architecture is undoubtedly enriched by academic disciplines that focus on the body, such as phenomenology, neurosciences and evolutionary biology, there is no better way to understand it than deliberate bodily engagement with the lived experience of architecture itself.

In architectural experience, sensory perception, memory, imagination, social imprint, emotion, cognitive processes, and incidental factors are intertwined. This highly complex experience resists investigation by the methods of the hard sciences – a view already expressed by Merleau-Ponty (Hahn 2017). Architectural experience is to a large extent unconscious, a point Pallasmaa has been making since 1980 (MacKeith 2005). This makes lived architectural experience very difficult to study. An implicit, widely held and largely unquestioned view discerns the boundaries rather than the possibilities of perception. There is ground for perceptual optimism, however. It is a common experience of artists, meditators, dancers, practitioners of yoga, Qigong, body therapies, and indeed, of any other form of practice, that the threshold of conscious perceiving and experiencing is lowered through a listening attitude.

The Research Project – The Quest for Architectural Encounter

This doctoral research project, to be completed in 2022, seeks to deepen the understanding of elusive and non-conscious dimensions of architectural encounter. In this research, perception is both a gateway and an inseparable part of architectural encounter. The term is sometimes used spontaneously

by lovers of art and architecture to denote salient experiences of positive valence. It resists being defined. It refers to singular situated, sensory, emotional, and existential experiences of singular buildings and environments which are very difficult to convey. A description of architectural encounter is being evolved bottom-up from the interview materials. What happens, for example, when I enter a hospitable building? When I am inspired to joyfully run up the ramp at Steven Holl's Kiasma Museum? When a feeling of connection with the city and its people washes over me as I look out of a window at Peter Zumthor's Kolumba Museum? What happens to me, to the building, to the space in between?

This research project applies the micro-phenomenology interview developed by Claire Petitmengin in the late 1990s to architecture for the first time. It allows fleeting architectural experiences to become conscious to an extent that the hitherto little studied cultural, bodily, existential, and professional practice of sensing architecture would not on its own. Interviewees often make the startling observation that they can recall experiences of which they might not otherwise have become aware (Vermersch 2002).

The Significance of Researching Fleeting and Non-Conscious Architectural Encounter

In 1930, Alvar Aalto praised »the value of the fleeting moment« in domestic architecture (Schildt 1997). More recently, Pérez Gómez ascribed »essential architectural meaning« to elusive and largely pre-reflective architectural experiences (Pérez-Gómez 2016). Pallasmaa views the loss of fleeting and »unconscious architectural communication« as a root cause of the much critiqued inhumanity of modern architecture (Pallasmaa 1980, in: MacKeith 2005). In the absence of the affordance of such nurturing interrelationships, human beings »cannot thrive in [the architect's] house, its apparent beauty will be of no avail – without life it becomes a monstrosity« (Rasmussen 1959). A subtle and respectful conscious and unconscious understanding of the invisible textures and dynamics of architectural experience is then a prerequisite for the design of life-supporting environments.

Research Aims

The specific research objectives were to identify:

- How the findings of the empirical micro-phenomenological research supports, extends or varies from the architectural phenomenology of writers such as Juhani Pallasmaa;
- The design intentions and strategies of Peter Zumthor and material qualities of Kolumba Museum, the case-study building, which favours the emergence of encounter;
- The potential of the micro-phenomenology interview as a tool for knowledge creation in architecture.

Methodologies

In this research project, micro-phenomenology interviews are brought into dialogue with key texts from the phenomenology of architecture written by architects with a gift for evoking lived experiences. The materiality, presence, and agency of Kolumba Museum (2007) co-shapes the research.

Twenty-three interviewees gave a total of thirty interviews in three interview phases. Most interviewees were from the cultural professions (artists, arts managers, art historian, opera singer, composer, architect). Prior to the interview, they explored Kolumba at their own pace (40–75 minutes). They were briefed that the researcher was interested in what they sensed, felt, experienced or thought during the visit. In the interview, they first briefly described their experiences (5–10 minutes). A short salient experience was then selected for an in-depth interview (40–50 minutes). At the end of the micro-phenomenology interview, a semi-formal exchange took place, in which interviewees expressed their emerging thoughts and impressions regarding the experience and the building (10 minutes).

The Micro-Phenomenology Interview

»Becoming conscious of the pre-reflective part of our experience requires a break with our habitual attitude« (Petitmengin 2006). The micro-phenomenology interview leads the interviewee away from the natural habit of analyzing and evaluating. Instead, it prompts the verbalization of concrete lived experiences. The interviewee is guided to evoke a past experience, recalling

it in its bodily and sensory dimensions. Empirical micro-phenomenology studies a wide range of lived experiences academically, such as meditation, the visual arts, depression, children's play, and the patient-doctor relationship.²

Methodological Alignments and Divergences

Micro-phenomenology is a second- and first-person research method. It has affinity with research methods in environmental and architectural phenomenology (Seamon 2000) and with experiential research methods applied to multisensory urban and architectural ambiances (Thibaud 2015).

Inherent to research on encounter is the quest for research methods suitable for epistemologies that bridge the subject-object divide and seek to evolve knowledges of being with, rather than the distant knowledge of. These have existed for millennia in meditative, somatic, craft and design practices, and are being developed within academic fields, not least in the domain of urban and architectural ambiances. Feminist theorist Karen Barad proposes touch as a paradigm for knowledge (Barad 2015).

Rather than treating interviewees as purveyors of »information«, this research project approaches the deep well of their embodied experiences with the same respect with which it seeks to approach the building. And Kolumba Museum, a work of great complexity, is being approached in a way similar to a literary work. At the edge of extreme rigour, the hermeneutics of empathy of literary critic Jean Starobinski acknowledge the knowledge-benefit of surrendering to the work (Starobinski 1961).

In contrast to neurosciences, which develop knowledge by extreme reduction of parameters in laboratory experiments, this project embraces the multifactorial complexity of situated architectural experience as the life-ground of enquiry.

Emerging Lessons for Architectural Research and Practice Provisional Findings and the Space Opened by Surprise

To provide an insight into the interpretive work building up from reflection on concrete architectural experiences, we briefly summarize and discuss a few interviewee experiences here:

2 Cf. www.microphenomenology.com

a.) a European immigrant to Cologne (Köln) makes the joyful realization that she belongs to Cologne's deep history as she walks past a lone-standing case with Colonia-style Roman glassware toward the large window bay nearby. She is then overcome by a feeling of happiness. She speaks to herself: »I am of Köln. I am here, simply here«.

b.) a stressed opera singer anticipates that nothing much will come of her visit. Then, on the second floor, she feels that the building is there for her personally. As she looks out of a window bay down to the street where people are walking in the rain with and without umbrellas, she feels a strong connection to all people in the world.

c.) an architect enters the museum with a sense of sadness and thoughts of his departed mother. The feeling is amplified in the foyer at the sight of a big flower vase. The sadness starts to dissolve in the vast space of Roman excavations at the sight of the warm glow of a red brick in the medieval wall – rounded by erosion and lit up by the sun through a small fissure in the wall.

d.) an arts manager sometimes visits Kolumba to restore herself. In interview, she describes the healing presence of the *Reading Room*. She evokes the bodily feeling of her back »straightening up« on her previous visit as she mounts her bike outside the museum.

Several interviewees experienced joy, happiness, and gratitude, which are bodily-mental states (e.g. example a.). This surprised the researcher, as these themes are only vaguely treated in critical literature. Descriptions of concrete experiences of improved wellbeing (c. and d.) are a rarity in architectural thinking. The experience of the straightened back invites comparisons with Pallasmaa's 1999 descriptions of the sense of verticality and dignity afforded to humans beings by living architectures (MacKeith 2005). Experiences a. and b. constitute lived evidence of the capacity of resonant architecture to enhance the sense of self and participation in the world (Pallasmaa 1996).

A few of the interviewees described discreet, yet powerful symbolic experiences. Standing on the top of the lofty staircase on her way down, an interviewee saw herself fly. Another one felt the sensation of being in a whale's body. One interviewee felt walking through narrow *Room 20* to high *Room 21* as a journey through a birth canal. Such experiences are rarely documented.

They are flickery events that become more visible in micro-phenomenological interviews. We should assume them to be meaningful.

Experiences a. and b. helped identify Kolumba windows as »attractors of experience«. This prompted the researcher to re-read Pallasmaa's various writings on the power of »primary architectural images« (e.g. Pallasmaa 2002), such as the door, stairs, and window to engage unconscious experiences. This, in turn, re-directed the focus to Zumthor's unusual skill in designing such primary architectural images. This again, turns attention to their rootedness in the pre-reflective embodied memories of the architect's childhood experiences (Zumthor 1998). The meaningful existential experiences made at Kolumba's windows evidence the successful communication of Zumthor's design intention to enhance the visitors' relationship to the city.

Relevance of Micro-Phenomenology for Perception- and Experience-Based Research in Architecture

Micro-phenomenology helps fine-tune descriptions of the complex reality of the interplays between the experiencer and architectural form, materiality, presence, and atmosphere.

The evocation of lived experience renders material texture to existential person-place encounter. It makes it more visible and eliminates the abstraction of philosophical and scientific discourse without denying its value.

Micro-phenomenology in architecture is, of course, still very much at a pioneering stage. As a transversal method, however, it has been applied in academic research and educational practice for more than three decades. As it develops, it can in principle, be applied to widen concrete understanding of every aspect of architectural experience and embodied knowledge, e.g. of:

- The experiential dynamics of healing architectures and of inhospitable architectures;
- The barely communicable felt experiences of »ordinary« architecture for the everyday;
- The numerous tacit knowledges which underpin the effectiveness of the architect's professions;
- the unconscious and intuitive dimensions of the design process. Alvar Aalto, Juhani Pallasmaa, Alvaro Siza, Peter Zumthor, and Francesca Torzo (Torzo 2018) provide singular fragmentary, yet arresting insights into creative design processes, which deserve respectful study;

- Sensing competences in architectural education and in innovative professional training. Even the simple experience of being interviewed in the micro-phenomenology method heightens awareness of perception and helps expand perceptual skills.

For an Embodied Rationalism in Architectural Research

The present research project is one of a growing number of projects that analyze elusive embodied and infra-verbal architectural experiences. This field is currently experiencing an evolution of methodologies, such as urban walking, urban choreographies, and dance, as well as sensory and bodily experimentation. Such projects rank first-person experience as a central component and seek to overcome the methodological confines inherited by Cartesian subject-object dualism, which has long been philosophically and scientifically defeated.

Thibaud is among the few scholars to develop a meta-discourse on methodologies for researching elusive and largely unconsciously experienced architectural atmospheres. »If ambiances are currently developing into a research domain, they in turn question the scientific paradigms on which we lean to study them« (Thibaud 2015). From this, he draws a logical conclusion: »Setting off on the quest for ambiances means finally accepting to explore new tools of investigation, new forms of knowledge and categories of analysis«. He even recognizes the need for »risking new forms of writing«.

At a time when the lid on tacit knowledge, and on unconscious and intuitive experience, is being lifted in architectural discourse dominated for decades by a narrow »techno-rationalism« (Williams Goldhagen 2008), we may look back for roots of this thinking and practice in the traditions of architectural thought. Aalto's 1935 vision of an »extended rationalism« furtively sketched out in his short article »Rationalism and Man« (Schildt 1997) deserves a reappraisal. Aalto held intuition in high respect. »An analytical, rational approach to the multiplicity of human needs [...] can be adopted also in architecture«. Nevertheless, »there will always be more of instinct and art« in this process – intuition, he asserted elsewhere, »can be astonishingly rational« (Williams Goldhagen 2008, quoting Aalto).

An extended rationalism irrigated by intuition in architectural research, which seeks a more fluid passage between pre-reflective experience and conscious thought, seeks to make the tacit more explicit and values first-person experience as integral to research, is a rationalism transformed. It

is an embodied rationalism (Williams Goldhagen 2008) which sensitively tunes into the subtle life-textures of hospitable and health-supporting architectures and the project processes that generate these. It is dedicated to research as a way of getting in touch.

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