THE APPLICATION OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE REALM OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

ARC6989 REFLECTIONS ON ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

BY RISHA NA
110204213
[MAAD 2011-2012]
APRIL 2012
Architects like Steven Holl, Juhani Pallasmaa, Peter Zumthor and Alva Aalto concentrate on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French philosopher, they develop their own way of thinking on architecture basing on this philosophical thought. The essay is about the process of phenomenological architectural design. Firstly, basing on the experience of cultural background and sensory properties, how to start an architectural design? How to make up a determinate concept? How to combine intellectual conceptions with tectonic properties? Secondly, depending on the phenomenological philosophy, how to make idea into practice in the making process. Finally, in the light of my own experiences, re-think on architecture.

The main research questions are: What is phenomenology? How does it influence the way of seeing and thinking on architecture? How does it affect the architectural practice?
CHAPTER 2

THINKING ON ARCHITECTURE

The process of thinking on architecture can be stated as the articulation of primary idea, scheme concept and architectural thought. Architect tries to get an initial idea subjectively by acknowledging the essence of nature, then build up a kind of exuberant platform to perform the architectural practice. Architectural practice is initiated by designing, which exhibits an intellectual process. As Ayse Senturer defines the process as “an experiential, intellectual and critical decision process as a perceptual, conceptual, theoretical fact.”\(^1\), the role of architect is relatively important in it.

2.1. Idea

• How to start an architectural design?

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world\(^2\). Using “body” to obtain the information on a site with the soul and mind, it is a way of conceiving the idea of design. And the way we see is affected by what we know or what we believe. Although something is invisible when we explore the meaning of the existence of the site, we can perceive the intangible things by sensibility. This is what Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out: the sensation as a unit of experience.\(^3\)

Starting to design, anything in the world can be the inspiration that activates impulses onto architect’s nerve, not only in the physical world but also in the spiritual field, such as the revelation from poem, film, music, painting, etc. All these things that we concentrate on will lead to a kind of blur idea which forms the initial design. The architecture now is a projection of memory, and the memory is a phenomenal experience that constructs the idea.

---

1 Ayse Senturer, architect, "Architecture and Philosophy".
2.2. Pre-theoretical Ground

As Steven Holl’s description in his article ‘Pre-theoretical Ground’ of the departure point of architectural design:

“In each project we begin with information and disorder, confusion of purpose, program ambiguity, infinity of materials and forms. All of these elements, like obfuscating smoke, swirl in a nervous atmosphere. Architecture is a result of acting on this indeterminacy.”

We are in an indeterminate period with personal consciousness and phenomenological perception which is perceived from the site, and the site is a physical and metaphysical foundation in the design process.

2.3. Concept

• How to make response to site?

A concept is an idea formed from inference which is also a kind of mental design of an object in the mind. The process of the changing from idea to concept is an abstract journey which is affected by the history, culture, environment and program of the site. Unlike music, painting, sculpture, film, and literature, a construction (non-mobile) is intertwined with the experience of a place. Depending on the indeterminate sensations that we get from the site, a determinate concept becomes a particular solution for the problems that we meet during the period of response. This concept forces the whole design process to be more detailed on architectural properties like form, material, texture and structure.

2.4. Architectural thought

• What affects the process?

Architectural thought is the final stage of thinking on architecture, and the

---

4 Steven Holl, "Pre-theoretical Ground".
5 Steven Holl, "Pre-theoretical Ground", p21.
6 Wordnet 3.1 searched 2011-11-22 on: http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?q2=&o0=1&o8=1&o1=1&o7=&o5=&o9=&o6=&o3=&o4=&s=conception
7 Steven Holl, "Anchoring".
combination of all the elements that we research on during the thinking process. At outset of the study on diverse fields which are the references of the primary idea, and then the culture, history, climate, program and landscape of the site which are the limitations of the scheme concept. So far as, this is the intellectual framework that supports the creative thought of architect. Combining with the solutions on technical problems like material, texture, form and structure of the architecture, architectural thought becomes the ultimate product of the thinking process.

CHAPTER 3
MAKING OF ARCHITECTURE

Thinking and making are two interdependent and complementary phases in the process of architectural design. Like the map of design process which is made by Markus and Maver⁸, the thinking process is a continual action that drives the entire design process to be deeper and deeper. How to transform the primary sensory experience into a physical architectural practice? What is the nature of the constitution in the process of making? And what is the relation between body and world in an architectural space?

3.1. From idea to practice
Basing on the phenomenological experience, architect has the power to develop this intangible level to a tangible level which is the making of architecture. Even if the architecture is interesting for all sorts of theoretical and practical reasons, it has no soul without the sensory representation.⁹ The places that we visited before can make an effect on our cerebral cortex which can remind us a lot of phenomenal images that influence the process of intertwining of idea and

---

⁸ http://researchinarchitecture.com/Illustrations/2.3.jpg
⁹ Peter Zumthor, "Thinking Architecture", p42.
phenomena. What we make, such as the surface textures and details, should invite the senses of touch, hearing, smell, taste and seeing and build up a space to project ourselves.

3.2. Constitution

Just like the Ukiyo-e\textsuperscript{10} and the melody played by flute, are they really melancholy? “When experiencing a work of art, a curious exchange takes place; the work projects aura, and we project our own emotions and percepts on the work.”\textsuperscript{11} The depression is the sense from the viewer who is touched by the work. The emotion floating on the surface of the art work is our own feeling. The task of architectural space is to create embodied and lived existential metaphors that concretise and structure our being in the world.\textsuperscript{12} The making of architecture is about the haptic, visual and auditory technology in architectural design.

Texture. Material. Form

Texture is the perceived surface quality of a design work, it has two properties which are the physical texture and visual texture. Basing on the different surroundings, the physical texture shows different appearances to viewers, producing a visual texture at the same time. Light is an important factor that influences the visual texture of architecture. The color that projects on the retina has different representations, light or dark, more or less, but the nature of the color does not change. As a consequence of the power of eyes on the

\textsuperscript{10} Ukiyo-e is a genre of Japanese woodblock prints (or woodcuts) and paintings produced between the 17th and the 20th centuries, featuring motifs of landscapes, tales from history, the theatre, and pleasure quarters. It is the main artistic genre of woodblock printing in Japan.

\textsuperscript{11} Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Eyes of the Skin", p68.

\textsuperscript{12} Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Eyes of the Skin", p71.
representations of architectural texture, architecture gets its depth, mystery and shadow.

Like the photos above, the material of the sofa is concrete which is rough and sturdy, but the visual texture is fluid, smooth and soft. Now, the concrete is not concrete. Because the form of the matter is not its real shape, it is in a specific nature and remembered by a subjective virtual experience, the sofa becomes a phenomenal object. Material has a language of its own. “It is impossible for you to take up the most insignificant pebble at your feet, without being able to read, if you like, this curious lesson in it. You look upon it first as if it were earth only. Nay, it answers,’ I am not earth - I am earth and air in one; part of that blue heaven which you love, and long for, is ready in me; it is all my life – without it I should be nothing and able for nothing… but, because there is, according to my need and place in creation, a kind of soul in me, I have become capable of good, and helpful in the circles of vitality.” [John Ruskin, 1819-1900] All in all, it is a multi-sensory experience on a matter.

Time

If we regard architecture as a “body”, the texture is its skin, the material is its muscle and the form is its bones. As time passing away, the body is changing and growing. The nuance of the change could be illustrated as the traces of life on the skin that eroded by wind and rain, the decrease of strength of its muscle and the aging bones. The body of architecture knows and remembers the nature of existence, and the body who perceives the memory of the space is the subject of the process of architectural design. What you see depends upon where you are when. What you see is relative to your position in time and space which are two inseparable realms.
CHAPTER 4
RETHINKING ARCHITECTURE

During the summer holiday last year, I had travelled around some Japanese restaurants in UK. Some of the dining spaces of these restaurants are extremely dark with a traditional lantern hanging up to the ceiling, and some of them are bright of the modern electric lamps. At first, I did not notice the lighting system in the dining area in a traditional restaurant in Belfast, what I could really remember is the feeling when I saw the ceramic plates with sushi and the dark red bowl with turbid soup in it, however, when I was having dinner with my friends in another Japanese restaurant few days later, the cuisine was less tempting even though the taste of the food was the same as the previous one. This phenomenon reminded me of the words from Junichiro Tanizaki’s “In Praise of Shadows” about the light and shadow in traditional Japanese architecture. The beaming seasoning bottles and bento boxes which invited us to touch it was getting ordinary and rough because of the bright natural light from the immense glass windows. Light, which is so called ‘structural material’ to Steven Holl, not only can create an atmosphere of intimacy and warmth, but also can affect the spatial perception for being in a particular architectural space.

“The Chinese paper gives us a certain feeling of warmth, of calm and repose.”
-----Junichiro Tanizaki
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“Phenomenology is the study of essence…a philosophy which puts essences back into existence…” and a way of thinking. Seeing through the phenomena to perceive the essence, architectural design is a process of exploring the meaning of the existence of the space beyond the visual properties of architecture. The main point of this essay is discussing the position of phenomenological philosophy in architectural design. Phenomenology is not only the basis of architectural theory, but also the guide for architectural practice. It rediscovers the relation between consciousness and the world by the reflection on architectural design.

[Image]

Peter Zumthor
http://2.bp.blogspot.com/_XI53yAVwNuc/SeK34-mqR4I/AAAAAAAAB4U/d6KQ2dzqQFo/s1600-h/peter+zumthor+adam+crain+archipreneur+1.jpg

Light and Space: emotive and poetic.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Harry Francis Mallgrave., 2011, the Architect’s Brain, West Sussex: Blackwell.


