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Education
in a Nordic
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Editors: Elise Lorentsen and Kristine Annabell Torp

Copy-editing: Peter Woodruff

Proofreading: David Possen

Layout: Gilbert Hansen

Publisher: Architectural Publisher **B**

Copenhagen, www.b-arki.dk

Print: Narayana Press, Denmark

ISBN: 978-87-92700-23-0

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All essays in this publication, part I: Teaching Architecture, have been through a double-blind peer review. Each essay has been reviewed by a different peer reviewer.

With generous support from:

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD

- Towards an Approach to Architectural Investigation, Description and Design

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Abstract

Architectural design always deals with a unique object; it takes place in a wide range of scientific and artistic disciplines in a non-linear process. It is characteristic that the process is not repeatable and that the result cannot be verified. The knowledge of architects is often described as tacit, and the methods of creating architecture are rarely described. This article aims at describing a “methodological outline” for architectural phenomenological investigation, description, and design. The article proposes an architectural phenomenological method in five levels able to re-present an architectural phenomenon to contemporary attention, whether working with an existing building or creating a new work of architecture.

Introduction

Architectural design takes place in a wide range of scientific and artistic disciplines in a non-linear process, and always deals with a unique object. It is characteristic that the process not be repeatable, and the result remain unverifiable. The knowledge of architects is often described as tacit,¹ and the methods used to create architecture are rarely described. The Finnish architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa even expresses a fundamental scepticism regarding the attempt to explain an architectural design in a single comprehensive architectural theory – let alone that ‘theory’ would be able to generate architectural solutions.²

Correspondingly, Gadamer underlines how in phenomenology and hermeneutics “there is no methodical way to arrive at the solution.”³ What characterises phenomenology is that there is no method in a scientific sense. Nevertheless, the experience among practitioners is that you can articulate architectural knowledge.⁴ Teachers of architecture describe architectural design approaches to their students on a daily basis. The finest task of a school of architecture is to articulate the seemingly nonverbal.

Practitioners of architecture do recognise that theories have a necessary place in architectural culture,⁵ just as the phenomenologist emphasises that phenomenology and hermeneutics, even if these are not about method in the scientific sense, is “concerned with knowledge and with truth.”⁶ A variety of approaches can help to structure the work and suggest different strategies.⁷ However, they do so in a general way, unable to point towards the quality of the specific intervention.

This article aims at describing a method for architectural phenomenological investigation, description and design. Method is defined as a systematic and targeted approach that can help structure the architectural design process. The method is intended to be used when practicing architecture at a professional level as well as in an educational setting. The aim is to give a description of a useful approach that can help investigate existing architectural phenomena and to assist in designing new interventions in the world.

1. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1967).

2. Juhani Pallasmaa, “Begrebslig viden, indlevelse og tavs visdom i arkitekturen,” in *At fortælle arkitektur*, Kim Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., eds. (København: Arkitektens Forlag, 2000), 84-99.

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 359.

4. As described by Donald Schön in Donald Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner – How Professionals Think in Action* (Århus: Klim, 2001) and Donald Schön, *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986).

5. As argued in Juhani Pallasmaa, “Begrebslig viden, indlevelse og tavs visdom i arkitekturen,” in *At fortælle arkitektur*, Kim Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., eds. (København: Arkitektens Forlag, 2000), 84-99.

6. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), xx.

7. As described in Nicolai Bo Andersen, “Arkitektens transformation – fem metoder,” in *Om Bygningskulturens Transformation*, Christoffer Harlang et al., eds. (København: Gekko Publishing, 2015), 72-87.

The article is based on an experience-oriented approach to architecture, as was popularly and most clearly articulated in Steen Eiler Rasmussen's internationally recognised *Experiencing Architecture*.⁸ The architectural design process is seen through the lens of phenomenology and hermeneutics. The approach is inspired by writing exercises developed by Finn Thorbjørn Hansen⁹; the article uses the phenomenology of practice which Max van Manen¹⁰ has characterised as a framework to describe a 'methodological outline' for architectural investigation and design.¹¹ The architectural phenomenological method is defined through five sections that correspond to five levels of practising architecture: A. Experiencing an architectural phenomenon, B. Investigating the architectural phenomenon, C. Hermeneutical reflection, D. Describing the architectural phenomenon and E. Architectural phenomenological re-presentation.

The approach is based on the assumption that phenomenological research cannot be separated from the actual (writing) practice.¹² The starting point is the so-called 'everyday lived experience' that is used in a systematic manner as the basis for a (textual) reflection. Parallel to this, a personal experience and a reflective drawing practice together exemplify an architectural research method and a path to knowledge.

Selected works by students at the Master's Program in Architectural Heritage, Transformation and Conservation at KADK are used as 'findings' exemplifying phenomenological descriptions aimed at identifying and describing a specific character, an atmosphere and emotional qualities as the basis for an architectural intervention.¹³ Finally, the architectural phenomenological description is discussed as a starting point for architectural design. As Gadamer points out, the content of a work of art "is ontologically defined as an emanation of the original"¹⁴ – as a re-presentation of the intrinsic subject matter that may be pointed out through a phenomenological description. This leads to the proposal of an architectural phenomenological method in five levels, that is capable of re-presenting an architectural phenomenon to a contemporary attention, whether working with an existing building or designing a new work of architecture.

A. Experiencing an Architectural Phenomenon

The first level in the architectural phenomenological method is to identify an architectural phenomenon – that is, to ask a phenomenological question. A successful phenomenological description is based on a personal architectural experience. The phenomenologist would call it "Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience."¹⁵ The aim is to get a deeper understanding of a specific existing building or architectural phenomenon in general.

Steen Eiler Rasmussen emphasises how, throughout our upbringing, we achieve a very sensitive, bodily understanding of the world that we use unconsciously when experiencing a work of architecture.¹⁶ We experience architecture physically, through the senses, even before we are aware of it. Similarly, the phenomenologist describes how things appear in the constitution of phenomena through sensation, imagination, memory, etc.¹⁷ The phenomenon is what appears to our consciousness as we immediately experience it – prior to attempts to reflect, analyse and categorise them. For the phenomenologist, it is not the house but rather the phenomenon of the house, the cogitatio, which is given.¹⁸ However, the work of art is not just an aesthetic question but an "event of being—in it being appears, meaningfully and visibly."¹⁹ The work of architecture is never just an isolated phenomenon but instead belongs to the world; it is part of time. Similarly, the experience is not just an isolated experience, but "always contains the experience of an infinite whole."²⁰ The experience of a work of architecture is knowledge that goes beyond any subjectivity.

The aim is not to explain, analyse or categorise the phenomenon, but rather to disclose it (alētheia) in a nuanced and rich manner. The description is aimed at a direct sensory experience that is based in a personal experience, rather than in concepts or logic explanations. It is about giving a personal, sensuous description of an architectural experience through a reflective drawing practice.²¹ The essential aspects of the phenomenon must be disclosed and made physical in such a way that others can recognise the description as a possible (new) interpretation of an architectural phenomenon.

But how do I choose? When I stand in front of an architectural work and want to make a phenomenological

8. Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Om at opleve arkitektur* (København: Gad, 1957).

9. See Finn Thorbjørn Hansen, "Det personlige essay som en filosofisk praksis," *BLUS Nord Norge*, Skriftserie 3/2007 (2007); Finn Thorbjørn Hansen, *Kan man undre sig uden ord?* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2014) and Finn Thorbjørn Hansen et al., *Arkitektur- og designpædagogik – i praksisnært og fænomenologisk perspektiv* (København: Arkitektskolen Aarhus, Kunstakademiet Arkitektskole København og Designskolen Kolding, 2016).

10. Max van Manen, "Practicing Phenomenological Writing," *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, Volume 2 Number 1 (1984), 36-69.

11. Max van Manen (van Manen, 1984) describes four levels in the methodological outline for doing phenomenology: A. Turning to the Nature of Lived Experience, B. Existential Investigation, C. Phenomenological Reflection, D. Phenomenological Writing. I use this description as a framework, but from the perspective of an architect, and with the addition of a new fifth level to describe architectural design.

12. As argued by Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience* (New York: The State University of New York, 1990).

13. The phenomenological survey is described in Nicolai Bo Andersen, "Fænomenbunden registrering," in *Om Bygningskulturens Transformation*, ed. Christoffer Harlang et al. (København: Gekko Publishing, 2015), 144-149.

14. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

15. See van Manen, "Practicing Phenomenological Writing," 36-69.

16. Rasmussen, *Om at opleve arkitektur* (København: Gad, 1957).

17. See Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999).

18. *Ibid.*, 147

19. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 138.

20. *Ibid.*, 61.

21. Three formats are taught in KADK's Master's Program in Architectural Heritage, Transformation and Conservation: Album, Sketch and Note. In their own way, each are tools to identify an architectural phenomenon. See Nicolai Bo Andersen, "Fænomenbunden registrering," in *Om Bygningskulturens Transformation*, Christoffer Harlang et al., eds. (København: Gekko Publishing, 2015), 144-149.

22. Gadamer describes the question of tact in Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004).

23. See Hansen, *Kan man undre sig uden ord?* (Aalborg: Aalborg Universitetsforlag, 2014).

description, which phenomenon should I work with? How do I know what is of importance in this particular work of architecture? The starting point is that there is something going on, that there is something in the architectural experience that touches me. It may be a sensory impression, a certain feeling or a spatial atmosphere. It may be the textural character of the wall, a rhythmic effect in the façade, or the way the light falls into a room in a way that moves me.

Making the right choice is not an act caused by reason but a question of tact, not liable to be proven.²² Tact signifies a certain sensitiveness and responsiveness to a situation, and the way in which we react to it. It is about being guided by a "touched non-knowledge."²³ I experience architecture and I am caught by an architectural phenomenon that I immediately want to understand better. I am seized by a lived experience that causes me to wonder.

One must ask what characterises the phenomenon. What is the nature of this phenomenon as I experience it, 'what is it like?' For example, the phenomenologist does not ask for the scientific properties of the light falling through a window. The architect's name or the stylistic characteristics of the building also are not part of a phenomenological description. Instead, the phenomenologist asks for the experiential quality of the light. Just what is the quality of the light that is falling through this window as I experience it?

However, the phenomenological approach raises questions without the expectation of a definitive answer. It aims at understanding rather than explaining. The style is more exploratory than analytical; the form investigative and inconclusive. As van Manen points out, in a phenomenological study "as in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary."²⁴ Rather than an objective statement attempting at correctness and completeness, the description should instead be a beautiful drawing that in itself articulates the phenomenon. The successful phenomenological question asks how we can get a new understanding of an architectural phenomenon through an architectural drawing.

Figure 1.
Julie Wendt,
Vilhelm Lauritzens Concert Hall for the Danish
Broadcasting Corporation.

One problem with the phenomenological approach is not that we do not know enough, but that we often know too much. We think we know the question, but our advance knowledge leads us to jump to conclusions. We begin to reflect on, analyse and categorise the phenomena before we even get started. Generally, at the beginning of the design process the architect will start a project by analysing the technical, historical and architectural properties of the building.²⁵ However, such prior knowledge, previous experiences and expectations as to the project will get in the way of the immediate sensuous and personal experience of the phenomenon.

Before making a phenomenological description, we must therefore try to forget our biases and assumptions in order to understand the phenomenon on its own terms. A phenomenologist would make a systematic 'phenomenological reduction' or 'epoché'²⁶ – also known as 'bracketing' – in order to examine phenomena clearly. However, this reduction must not be understood as a purification but rather as a way of making us aware of our assumptions and beliefs about a phenomenon. In order to see the nature of the phenomenon we must make our prior knowledge explicit. We want to see what we actually see, not what we think we see.

B. Investigating the Architectural Phenomenon

The second level in the architectural phenomenological method is about investigating the phenomenon, collecting material. After experiencing the phenomenon, asking a phenomenological question and making a phenomenological reduction, we are interested in conducting a thorough investigation through a presentation form that is physical (visual). The starting point is the personal architectural experience, the lived experience. My own experience is generally the most accessible, the easiest to get in touch with. I want to give a direct, sensuous description of the architectural experience as I lived it – without giving explanations – making analyses and generalisations and I want to present that experience in an architectural drawing.

But how can I be certain that my experience is valid? How do I know if my description is usable? The phenomenologist knows that a personal experience is also a possible experience for others. An experience is



24. van Manen, "Practicing Phenomenological Writing," 13.

25. The Danish Agency for Culture and Palaces requests a systematic description when working with listed buildings; cf. *Vejledning – vurdering af fredningsværdier* (København, 2012), accessed September 15, 2016, http://silks.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/kulturarv/bygninger/dokumenter/Vejledning_fredningsgennemgangen_2012.pdf. In the KADK Master's Program in Architectural Heritage, Transformation and Conservation, students are taught a carefully described method for survey, analysis and valuation, as described in Søren Vadstrup, "Analyse og værdisætning," in *Om Bygningskulturens Transformation*, Christoffer Harlang et al., eds., (København: Gekko Publishing, 2015), 150-157.

26. See Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*.

Figure 2.
Pia Dyrendahl Staven,
Arne Jacobsen's Rødovre Town Hall.



not only a private matter; others may have had a similar experience. When I experience the light falling through a window, it is constituted through my perception of the phenomenon, and by making the phenomenon physical through a drawing, I can examine this phenomenon as a possible experience that other people may have in the future, or could have had in the past. The phenomenologist would say that personal experience must point towards the universal.

An architect will usually make a survey of the existing conditions through sketches, photographs or perhaps models. One must try out different tools. Perhaps the phenomenological question is not explicit at the beginning of the investigation, but needs to be developed in the process of drawing. Maybe the presentation tool needs to be adjusted, developed or even invented in order to clarify the question.

I need to discover through which tool I can disclose the architectural phenomenon as it is experienced. Merleau-Ponty argues that “what I understand begins to insert itself in the intervals between my saying things; my speech is intersected laterally by the other’s speech.”²⁷ Knowing what to say is discovered through the act of speaking. Similarly, the selection and development of the investigation tool is in a constant interaction with the phenomenon. The presentation tool helps clarify the question, and vice versa: the question sharpens the tool. However, the architectural phenomenological description is not intended as a simplification of the phenomenon. The description must reveal a new understanding of the phenomenon through a density in presentation and a clarity of expression. The description cannot simply be a diagram or a reference to an external object but must be as rich and as nuanced as the phenomenon itself.

C. Hermeneutical Reflection

Hermeneutical reflection is the third level in the method of an architectural phenomenology. As van Manen explains, “phenomenology describes how one orients to lived experience, [whereas] hermeneutics describes how one interprets the ‘texts’ of life.”²⁸ The reflection aims at taking a new look at the architectural experience. How should we understand the architectural experience? What architectural motifs can be derived from the investigated

27. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 142.

28. van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, 4.

Figure 3.
Hanna Talje and Kristoffer Bilet,
Arne Jacobsen's Rødovre Town Hall.

phenomenon and how can these help me towards a more precise phenomenological description?

Motif derives from the French word *motif* that comes from the Latin *motivus*, which means 'giving rise to movement.' The word comes from *movere*, 'to move,' and represents a "dominant or recurring idea in an artistic work."²⁹ An architectural motif is a subject matter or a characteristic unity, a group of phenomena that have something in common. An architectural motif can be about the building's relationship to its surroundings, or it can be the internal order of the house itself. It can be related to the building as a whole or to a part of the building. The phenomenon may have to do with the exterior gestalt of the building or it may be about an internal space. It can be an assembly of parts; for example, numerous windows of the same size that together constitute a rhythmical arrangement in a façade. Or it may be the way in which windows of different sizes form a composition, as variations of a form. The motif may be the properties of an object: the shape, colour, proportion or textural quality – for instance of a window.³⁰ Or, it may be the specific way in which the light falls through a particular window.³¹ The relation between objects, such as shift, interstice or contour may be a motif. Architectural effects describing an experience of direction or a sensation of movement³² may also help us to understand and describe the architectural experience in a new way.

Motifs are identified, some rejected, new ones added and others adjusted and clarified through the continuous development of the presentation tool. The reflection takes place in a close dialogue with the material. As a hermeneutical conversation with the material, the reflection constitutes an attempt to come to a better understanding of the phenomenon through the drawing.

In general, all architectural phenomenological descriptions can be used as the valid personal expressions of an architectural experience. The descriptions may address different motifs, they may have different expressions and may make use of different presentation techniques. However, some descriptions are more precise than others. Therefore, it may be useful to ask others for advice. I am not the only one who has experienced light falling through a window in a certain way; others may

29. Oxford Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/motif>. Accessed September 15, 2016.

30. Carl Petersen points out that shape, colour, proportion and textural quality are the four most important elements in the 'forming' arts. See: Carl Petersen, "Stofflige virkninger," in *Arkitektursyn*, Christoffer Harlang et al., eds., (København: Kunstakademiets Arkitektskole, 2009), 118-136.

31. Probably inspired by Vilhelm Wanscher (1917) and Aage Rafn (1918), Steen Eiler Rasmussen adds rhythm, as well as light and shade, in "Experiencing Architecture" (Rasmussen, 1957). See Vilhelm Wanscher "Rytmer og Funktioner i Arkitektur," *Arkitekten* vol. 15, nr. 19, feb. 8, (1913) and Aage Rafn, "Rytme," in *Arkitektursyn*, 22-31.

32. For example, Vilhelm Wanscher characterizes the baroque style as a simultaneous ascending and descending movement. See Vilhelm Wanscher "Rytmer og Funktioner i Arkitektur," *Arkitekten* vol. 15, nr. 19, feb. 8, (1913).



Figure 4.
Rikke Wennevold,
Arne Jacobsen's Rødovre Library.

have had a similar experience. I can therefore consult the experiences of others as a way to broaden my own. For example, Vilhelm Hammershøi's famous picture *Dust Motes Dancing in the Sunbeams* (Hammershøi, 1900) may help me reflect upon my own experience. The picture is not an objective description of how the light falls through a window – but it says much about the quality of the light that comes through a specific window, in the way that the artist experienced it. In this way, related artworks within the visual arts, music, literature and architecture can be a source of insight into lived experience. The artistic statement is a rich, sensuous description of the world as it expresses a depth and complexity that is not inferior to the original experience. The artist is able to re-present a phenomenon with a density and clarity that makes the viewer recognise the work of art as a possible (true) description of a phenomenon in the world.

Finally, as a part of the hermeneutical reflection, I can consult experts in order to broaden my own experience of a phenomenon. In a school of architecture, it may be the teacher; fellow students may be an indispensable source of dialogic reflection; colleagues at the office; or in some instances a client, or those who use a building, could be appropriated as partners in a hermeneutic conversation.

D. Describing the Architectural Phenomenon

Description is the fourth level in the architectural phenomenological method. Five examples of work done by students in the Master's Program in Architectural Heritage, Transformation and Conservation at KADK exemplifies the architectural phenomenological description.

The model of Vilhelm Lauritzen's Concert Hall for the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (Fig. 1) is about the geometry of space. The exterior geometry of the building forms a box protecting the characteristic interior spaces. Corridor, rehearsal halls and auxiliary rooms each have their unique geometry built as positive figures. Each figure has its own place in the shrine, marked by a relief. Stemming from functional and acoustic considerations, each room gives the impression of interior components organised side by side independently and at the same time closely interrelated.

The collage of façade elements in Arne Jacobsen's Rødovre Town Hall (Fig. 2) articulates a vibrant play of colours. Photographs of window frames, mullions and curtains recorded at various locations in the building have been cut up and reassembled in a new image, providing the impression of a spectral analysis. The colours shimmer, ranging from a cool grey to dusty blue, and a pale green to brown, beige and warm grey. The horizontal format of the drawing and the vertical shadows give a dynamic effect, almost as if the façade were in motion.

The drawing of the façade in Arne Jacobsen's Rødovre Town Hall (Fig. 3) is focused on the building's proportions. Rather than using the well-known elevation, the façade is presented here in a perspective foreshortening. An open window breaks the rhythmic configuration of the curtain wall: hidden between the mullions in part of the drawing but exposed in others, the blinds give an impression of a deformation in the façade. The distinctive proportions of the façade and the modular order of the curtain wall are dissolved in a new configuration.

The photograph of the floor in Arne Jacobsen's Rødovre Library (Fig. 4) articulates the textural quality of the material. The floor surface of the central aula, never visible in a single view, has been photographed piece by piece and put together into a new whole. The exact geometry of each tile, along with the quality of the cool marble, describes a surface with rich textural play. The lines in the marble give a rich impression, almost as a water surface broken up by waves. A single step and the shadow of the roof marks a subtle difference in the otherwise smooth surface.

The rendering of Michael Gottlieb Bindsbøll's Museum for Bertel Thorvaldsen (Fig. 5) concerns the effect of light and shadow. The drawing of an internal space is composed of a section through a window and a corresponding interior elevation. The modulated shadows articulate the filtering of light through the window. The physical elements – the façade relief, the bevelled window panels, the geometry of the mullions and the colour and texture of the wall – are described through the effect of the shadow.

Each of the five examples of an architectural phenomenological description are based upon a personal

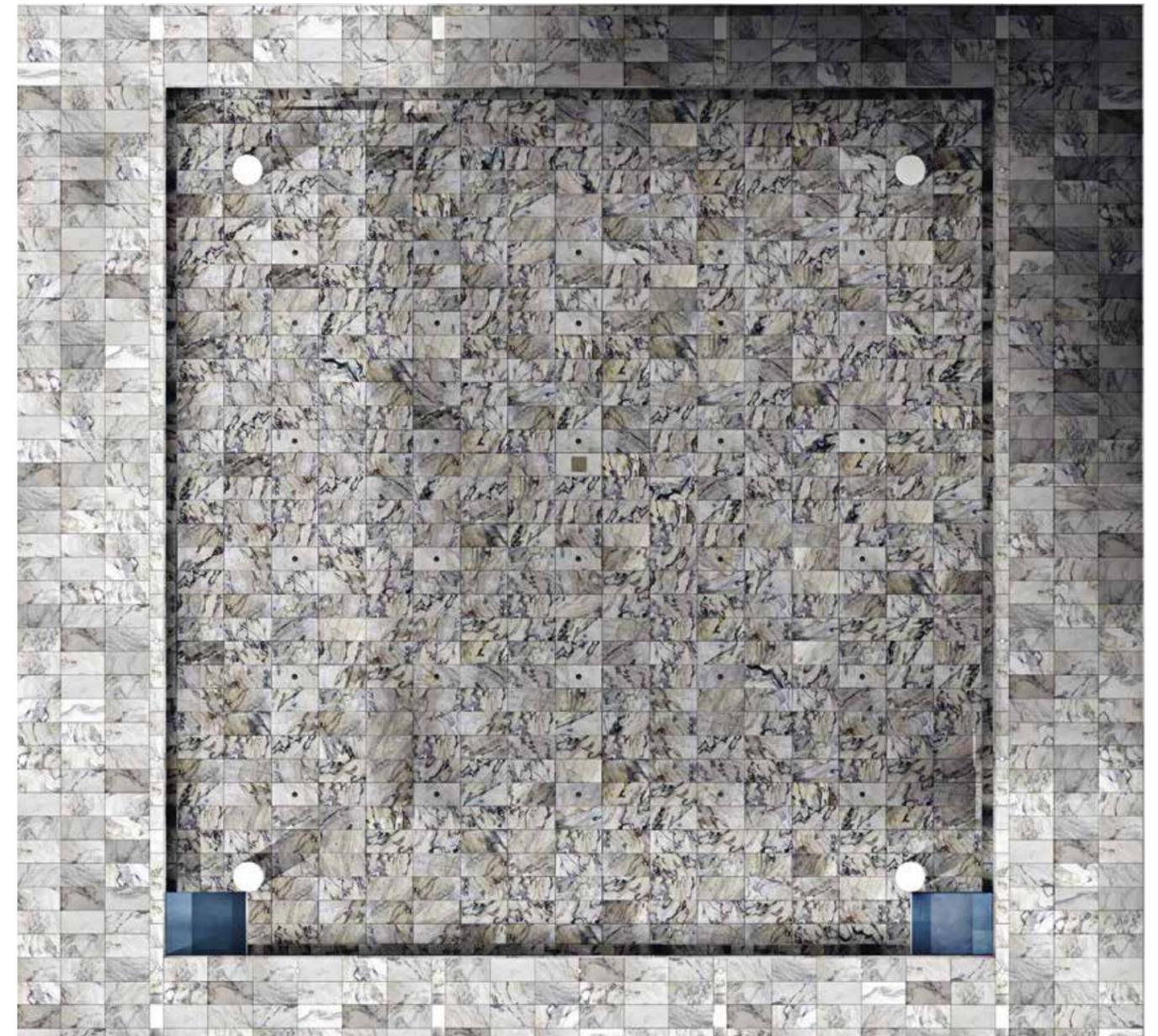


Figure 5.
Anders Suhr Lausten, Michael Gottlieb,
Bindesbøll's Museum for Bertel Thorvaldsen.

architectural experience. They are made in different media: model, collage, line drawing, photography and computer rendering. The choice of tool seems to be closely connected to the phenomenon experienced. It is likely that the description would have been different had the presentation tool been of another kind. Similarly, one can imagine that another person may have reached a different result. The five visual descriptions constitute five independent works in themselves. Rather than simplified diagrams aiming at an objective explanation, analysing and categorising a phenomenon, each description has a richness, nuance and sensuous quality in itself.

The architectural phenomenological descriptions are not definite. Each drawing is not just about the shape, colour, proportion or textural quality of the building, but describes several aspects simultaneously. At the same time, the drawings cannot be said to be the only possible, fully complete descriptions of the rich qualities of the original works of architecture. Furthermore, the buildings are not necessarily recognisable. You need to know the building before you can actually recognise it. Yet there is something that makes you understand what it is. The descriptions are at the same time new and recognisable images of the investigated buildings.

A phenomenological description is not merely a symbol, or a reference to an external phenomenon; in Gadamer's words, "[w]ord and image are not mere imitative illustrations, but allow what they present to be for the first time fully what it is."³³ The phenomenological description is more like a nuanced "portrait,"³⁴ as rich and sensuous as the phenomenon in itself, a reflection made through a physical presentation form. It is only one example among many possible. The description is a good one if we, as viewers, can recognise in it a likely experience of an architectural phenomenon. The phenomenological description does not speak of the world, but, like in the poem, "the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of 'singing' the world."³⁵

Of importance for the precision of the phenomenological description are: the properties of the pencil, the line thickness, the quality of the line, the paper size, format, surface texture, colour and tonality, the composition, the print, and ultimately how and where the drawing



33. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 137.

34. *Ibid.*, 143.

35. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 217.

is presented, as well as the light conditions. However, the architectural phenomenological method should not be considered a simple presentation technique or a mechanical process that will guarantee a successful result at all times. Rather, the phenomenological method is more like a “cultivated thoughtfulness”³⁶ that is conducted through a physical material.

The phenomenological question and the presentation tool are calibrated in a constant oscillation between production and reflection. The working process is a continuous negotiation between an experience, an investigation, a reflection and a test leading to a choice of action: acceptance, rejection or adjustment of the (preliminary) drawing. The process is repeated in a spiral-like movement that arrives closer and closer to the essence of the phenomenon. The interim answer gives rise to an adjustment of the original question, resulting in a new, interim answer, and so on. It is all about drawing and redrawing.

But how do I know when the drawing is good enough – how do I know when the phenomenological description is finished? In a way, a phenomenological description is never finished. The successful description is never the only ‘right answer,’ just as it is never exhaustive. The Dutch phenomenologist Frederik Buytendijk has used the term ‘the phenomenological nod’ as an indication that a phenomenological description represents an experience that we have had or could have had.³⁷ The phenomenological description aims at precisely this: the viewer must recognise the architectural description as an expression of an experience that one could have had. ‘Yes, that’s exactly how the light falls through this window’ is a response to a successful phenomenological description.

E. Architectural Phenomenological Re-Presentation

The final level in the architectural phenomenological method is architectural design. As we have seen, we can experience a work of architecture, we can investigate phenomena in an existing building that touches us by using our senses, and we can develop presentation tools that are able to disclose the phenomenon in a new way as it is presented through the description. But can we use this phenomenological description to design architecture, to make new interventions in the world?

The question is what does ‘new’ signify? What does it mean that a work of architecture is ‘new’? The Danish architect Erik Christian Sørensen points out that the new is a “new interpretation of old questions.”³⁸ For P.V. Jensen-Klint, it is crucial that the architect “will not imitate the old, but reproduce it reborn as he invests himself.”³⁹ Similarly, Peter Zumthor emphasises how the new work of architecture must “make us see what already exists in a new light” by embracing “qualities that can enter into a meaningful dialogue with the existing situation.”⁴⁰ This suggests that designing architecture is not a question of making something new, but rather a matter of transformation.

Three examples of work done by students at the Master’s Program in Architectural Heritage, Transformation and Conservation at KADK typify how an experienced architectural phenomenon can be the starting point of a new architectural intervention.

The project for transformation of an urban area in Berlin (Fig. 6) is founded literally as well as figuratively on a series of existing walls. The starting point is an experience of the complex character of the area visible through the different building expressions and many temporal layers. A rhythmic configuration of courtyards and passageways gives a labyrinthine experience of the site, at the same time under construction and demolition. The urban transformation continues the ‘writing’ on top of the existing layers by restoring, transforming and adding new parts. The project re-presents an experience of the city as a continuous transformation process.

The project for an addition to Hanssted School in Copenhagen (Fig. 7) is based on the collected works of the Danish architect Hans Christian Hansen (1901-1978), and more specifically on the existing school building. The experience of the dynamic section, the tectonic articulation and the textural qualities of the simple and inexpensive materials, form the basis for an addition that simultaneously complements and re-interprets the existing structure. The project re-presents an experience of the building as a body made up of structural elements, dynamic interior spaces and an outer protective skin. The project for an addition to a technical school in Copenhagen (Fig. 8) departs from an investigation of the

building elements and the construction process. The quality of the materials, the tectonic and experiential properties are instead developed into a new architectural alphabet. The individual parts are connected in joints articulating the tectonic hierarchy of the building. The different lifetime of the elements, and the patina of the materials, are used to develop a new architectural vocabulary. The project re-presents an experience of building elements, joints and patina that suggest temporality.

The three examples of architectural design are all based on existing phenomena. It may be an existing physical structure, the collected work of an architect or the building process. The architectural designs re-present architectural phenomena to a contemporary attention. Seen in this perspective, architects deal with the same elemental issues, the same questions, as always. For Gadamer the experience of art is about “to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself.”⁴¹ However, it is not about just knowing what we already know, since the “joy of recognition is rather the joy of knowing more than is already familiar.”⁴² In this sense, the new may be understood as making new interpretations of phenomena in the world, adding something more to what already exists.

Like the work of art, a building is characterised by a continuous ability to make itself relevant. An existing building has been selected for conservation for a reason. If it loses its functional, technical or aesthetic properties it will decay, be transformed or demolished. Similarly, a listed building must have qualities that speak to us across a temporal distance. John Dewey points at the Parthenon as an example of a building that constantly renews itself for our attention, and for this reason it can be said to be classic. The perceiver continuously creates a new experience of the work. This building, more than two thousand years old, is “universal because it can continuously inspire new personal realizations in experience.”⁴³ In this sense, aesthetic experience is a continuous re-creation of the intrinsic subject matter of the artwork.

Correspondingly, Gadamer points out that “it remains irrefutable that art is never simply past but is able to overcome temporal distance by virtue of its own

36. van Manen, “Practicing Phenomenological Writing,” *Phenomenology + Pedagogy*, Volume 2 Number 1 (1984), 67.

37. See van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*.

38. Erik Christian Sørensen, *POETIK til bygningskunst* (København, Arkitektens Forlag, 2003). My translation.

39. P.V. Jensen-Klint, “Om den gamle og den nye Tids Bygmestre,” *Architecten* (1901). My translation.

40. Peter Zumthor, *Thinking Architecture* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1998), 18.

41. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 113.

42. *Ibid.*, 113.

43. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York, N.Y.: Perigee Books, 1980), 113.



Figure 6.
Mette Hübschmann, Thesis Project.

meaningful presence.”⁴⁴ Following this, one may argue that working with existing buildings concerns the “re-actualising” of aesthetic values. It is about making experiential qualities available for a contemporary attention. The task of the architect who works with existing buildings, listed or not, is to restore the building’s own “meaningful presence.”⁴⁵

Heidegger points out that, for the Greeks, the word for ‘technique,’ the art of building and constructing, means “to bring forth or to produce.”⁴⁶ Producing in general, and making architecture more specifically, is a question of letting appear. To Gadamer, the content of a work of art is ontologically defined as an “emanation of the original.”⁴⁷ The work of art is characterised by being “essentially tied to the original represented in it.”⁴⁸ The picture (Bild) comes to “presentation in the representation” and by doing so, the picture experiences an “increase in being.”⁴⁹ Artistic representation is thus signified by “the fact that ‘reproduction’ is the original mode of being of the original artwork itself.”⁵⁰ This should not be understood in the trivial meaning of a simple imitation. The work of art is not a copy (Abbild). Rather, the picture (Bild) is a new interpretation of the original (Ur-bild). It is about the “coming-to-presentation of being.”⁵¹ The artwork adds something new into the world as an “event of being” which is “repeated each time in the mind of the viewer.”⁵²

An intervention in an existing building, or the design of a new work of architecture, may thus be understood as a new interpretation of an already known phenomena in a new form. The work of architecture is a re-presentation of an existing phenomenon in a new way. If it is true that architectural design is not a question of simply getting ‘a good idea,’ but rather about re-presenting existing phenomena for a contemporary attention, then the phenomenological description may be the first step in a design process. The phenomenological description of an existing building, or of an architectural phenomenon in a broader sense, may be able to disclose phenomena that point towards a new architectural intervention. The phenomenon, as personally experienced through the senses and as disclosed through the phenomenological description, may be re-presented in a new work of architecture.

44. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 158.

45. Ibid.

46. Martin Heidegger, *Sproget og Ordet* (København: Hans Reitzels Forlag A/S, 2000), 51. Translation from Danish by the author.

47. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 135.

48. Idem.

49. Idem.

50. Ibid., 152.

51. Idem.

52. Idem.

Figure 7.
Even Brænne Olstad, Thesis Project.

Conclusion

The architectural phenomenological method can be described as a systematic (hermeneutic) understanding of an architectural phenomenon based on a personal lived experience. Since it does not meet the methodological ideal of science, this understanding is not certain in any scientific sense: the subject matter of the investigation is always unique; the experiment cannot be exactly repeated or lead to the same outcome; just as the result cannot be verified. One cannot speak about a work of architecture in terms of true or false. On the other hand, the method suggests an approach to understanding phenomena that would otherwise remain undisclosed. Just like the experience of art, the phenomenological method is “concerned with truths that go essentially beyond the range of methodical knowledge,”⁵³ by offering a new understanding of a phenomenon in the world.

The architectural phenomenological method is not precise in the sense of being ‘correct.’ It does not ensure a factual and verifiable result, identical at all times. This unfinished nature of phenomenology is not a deficiency, but rather its very nature. It is not a static system, but is characterized by a constant “attentiveness and wonder.”⁵⁴

The architectural phenomenological method might not even be called a method, but rather an approach that aims to understand the experience of an architectural phenomenon through a physical re-presentation that points towards a new intervention.

This has implications for how we make architectural investigations. The so-called objective criteria in a traditional building analysis are, in the phenomenological study, not enough. On the contrary, they seem to get in the way of a personal and nuanced phenomenological description. On the other hand, the method may disclose important qualities in buildings that, when seen from an objective architectural consideration, are not worth preserving. The phenomenological reduction may assist in making us aware of our assumptions and beliefs, and help us to experience the phenomenon without prejudice. The phenomenological description should complement, not replace, existing building analysis and valuation methods. Secondly, it may also have an impact on how we work with existing buildings. The conservation architect should not simply bring a building back to a supposed former

state. Similarly, the transformation architect should not do just anything to a building that has an experienced architectural quality. Rather, the architect must ‘re-actualise’ the intrinsic aesthetic values of the existing building. Using experiential qualities as the basis for a new intervention, the architect may get an understanding of the existing building through personal, lived experience.

Thirdly, the phenomenological method may point towards new works of architecture. If the work of art is a re-presentation of an existing material in a new form, then the task of the architect is to make new interpretations of old questions. The new work of architecture may be seen as a re-presentation of an experienced, existing phenomenon in a new form.

Finally, the architectural phenomenological method may restore the human subject as pivotal for architectural quality. Placing at the core of architecture a personal experience that points towards the universal, specific, nuanced and rich sensuous qualities may become central in the architectural design process, and in new works of architecture.

The architectural phenomenological method, working with conservation and transformation and with new works of architecture, may constitute an approach that does not focus just on visual appearance or stylistic elements. It is not just a question of how it looks but of how it is. Architecture may be understood as a language that thinks the world, since the experience of a work of architecture is not just an aesthetic question but a question of knowledge.

In this perspective, architectural education may be understood as a question of culture (*Bildung*). To Gadamer, “*Bildung* is intimately associated with the idea of culture and designates primarily the properly human way of developing one’s natural talents and capacities.”⁵⁵ He notes that the German word *Bildung* contains the root *Bild* – comprehending both *Nachbild* (image, copy) and *Vorbild* (model) – and argues that “*Bildung* is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction, but grows out of an inner process of formation and cultivation, and therefore constantly remains in a state of continual *Bildung*.”⁵⁶



53. Ibid., xxii.

54. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 2002), xxiv.

55. Ibid., 9.

56. Ibid., 10.

Figure 8.
Søren Pihlmann and Kim Lenschow Andersen,
Thesis Project.

It follows that teaching architecture as well as architectural design may be understood as an event of being. The aim of the teacher is to assist in a process that may disclose and re-present the intrinsic subject matter of the work of architecture through experience, investigation, reflection and description. The role of the teacher is to assist the student in cultivating a relation to the world. Discussing the term 'tact,' Gadamer describes a "special sensitivity and sensitiveness to situations and how to behave in them, for which knowledge from general principles does not suffice."⁵⁷ Following this, the teacher must have the same approach of constant "attentiveness and wonder"⁵⁸ to the student of architecture, as the architect and the student of architecture have to the investigated architectural phenomenon.

The architectural phenomenological method may thus be understood as a way of thinking the world through personal experience. It is an attentive and wondering attitude towards teaching and practising architecture that aims to get a better understanding of a given architectural phenomenon. Whether the aim is conservation, transformation, or new works of architecture, the architectural phenomenological method is a cultivated approach that points towards architectural interventions.

57. Ibid., 14.

58. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xxiv.

