theoretical approach to space with relation to experience

2

investigation of theoretical influences

The influence the environment that we move in has on us can completely change the way we behave (Cave 1998:1). This influence, and the subsequent change in behaviour, can be on a subconscious level or very direct and clear to the user. Experience can have a very specific function and focus within architectural space. In this chapter two approaches to experience as program generator will be discussed namely phenomenology and environmental psychology.

2.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology seeks to concentrate on the experience, rather than on what is experienced. The focus is not the objects in space, but the essential structure of the experience or the way in which these objects are manifest to us (Cerbone 2006:3,7). When an object is experienced, no one experience of that object can present or take in that object in its entirety. Only one side can be presented at once (Cerbone 2006:19). This implies that any perceptual experience will always be inadequate and the other sides of the object will only be hinted at by the experience but "is not part of the experience in the sense of being presented in that experience". This implies that there does not exist complete certainty about what is being experienced or the experience is not "apodictic". Future experiences may show the falsity of the previous experience, but because it is not the object of the experience that matters but the experience itself, the falsity or truth of that experience is not of importance (Cerbone 2006:20).

Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938), viewed as the father of phenomenology, delineated experience to the essential structure thereof. He identified the subject, which is the observer, and the object, that which is being experienced. To fully understand the object, for instance a pencil, different sides of the pencil have to be experienced. These different experiences accumulate as the "horizonal structure of experience". The "just-experienced" and the "still-to-be-experienced" are parts of the horizon of experience (Cerbone 2006:27). All these horizons are fused together through "synthesis" and form the "adumbration" of the experience, which is all the experiences, of one side of the pencil at a time, put together. This gives rise to "fixed and abiding unities" (Cerbone 2006:28,29).

Two other terms that contribute to the understanding of the essential structure of experience are 'noesis' and 'noema'. Noesis is the process of experiencing or the process of "synthesizing various moments of experience".

Noema is the “sense” or “meaning” of the process, focused on the content of experience, regardless of whether or not the object exists. Although noema is directed at the object of the experience, there exists a sharp distinction between noema and the object itself (Cerbone 2006:29).

As can be seen here, the focus of phenomenology lies not on the content or object of experience, but on the experience itself. Therefore the space becomes secondary to experience and that which lingers in the mind of the user. The phenomenological approach to theory in architecture argues that the experience of architecture and building materials and their sensory properties become important. Pallasmaa (1986:451) states “[t]he phenomenology of architecture seeks the inner language of building”. He argues that planning became a game of form. The result was that the reality of the experience in the building was ignored. It is important to interpret user behaviour, not only to represent it. He states that it is time that we reconsider whether architectural feeling can be created through forms and geometry in general and that the only effect form has on our feelings is through that which it represents (Pallasmaa 1986:450). Benton McKaye said: “The job is not to plan, but to reveal” (Hiss 1990:200).

A building creates images that are linked with emotional feelings in our subconscious. If a building does not fulfil the basic conditions of phenomenological theory in that it should be a symbol of human existence or presence in the world, it would be unable to influence these feelings. It is only when it influences these feelings that a building can become more than a sculpture (Pallasmaa 1986:452).

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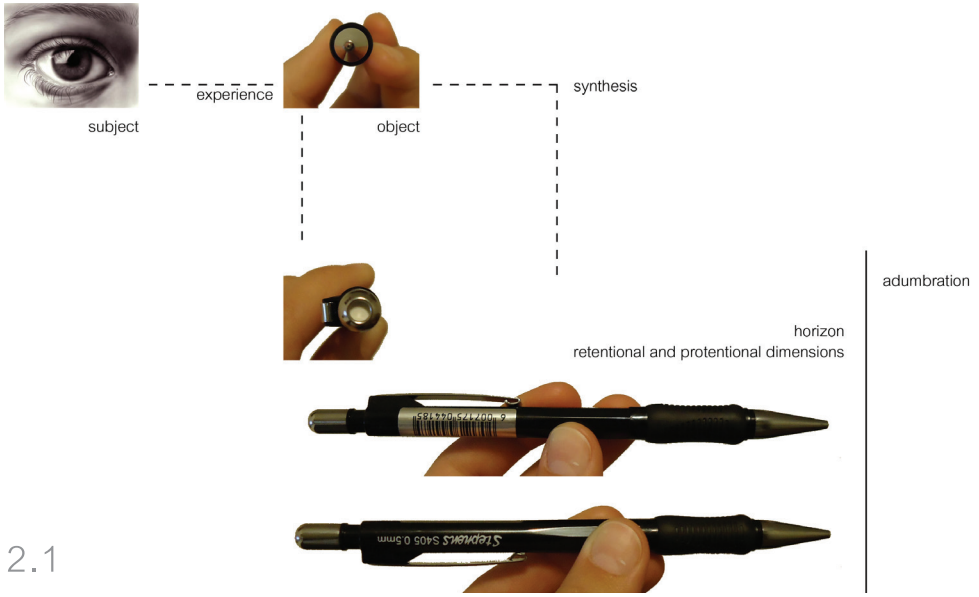
Applied in the field of interior design, phenomenology can change and enhance the manner in which we experience space. When thinking in terms of phenomenology, the designer is more aware of the effect or importance of specific experience within space, consciously and sub-consciously. The experience created should relate directly back to the programme, and therefore the space and programme, as well as the user, becomes closely connected.



2.1

Figure 2.1: Diagram explaining phenomenology

Thermal Baths Vals

Vals, Graubünden, Switzerland

Peter Zumthor 1996

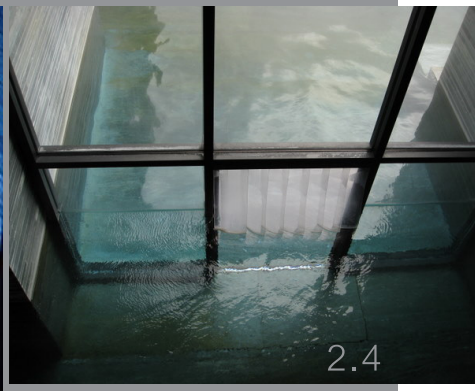


Figure 2.2 - 2.3: Thermal Bath Vals (Galinsky 2006)

Figure 2.4: The heated pool at Vals (Picassa [sa])

A contemporary architect who views himself as a phenomenologist and emphasises the sensory aspects of experience in architecture is Peter Zumthor. In his book Thinking Architecture (Zumthor 2006:9) he describes architecture that appeals to all the senses. He remembers specifically his aunt's house and describes the visual experience as well as sounds and smells. The thermal bath in Vals, Switzerland (1993-1996), designed by Zumthor, is an excellent example of a building where sense emerges through the materials used. He sees the tangibility, smell and acoustic qualities of materials as "elements of the language we are obliged to use" (Zumthor 2006:sp). This is what Pallasmaa (1986:454) refers to when talking about sound space and smell space.

2.2 Environmental psychology

Environmental psychology is the field of study relating to human behaviour and well-being in relation to the socio-physical environment. This refers to the relationship between user and environment. We influence the environment and the environment influences us (Cave 1998:2). Environmental psychology approaches people and the environment holistically, so that the reaction to the whole environment is of importance (Cave 1998:13). Aspects such as light, colour, texture, acoustic characteristics and context are taken into account (Popow 2000:1). There are several elements into which environmental psychology can be divided. Included in this are: Attention to understanding how the environment is noticed by the user; Perception or cognitive mapping or how users cognitively map their experience based on previous knowledge of the environment or how stimulation from the environment is received (Cave 1998:2); Preferred environmental psychology or motivations which illustrate that users choose places where the feelings of competence, confidence and comfort are created (Popow 2000:1).

It is important to note that behaviour is not only determined by the physical environment, but by cultural, social, personal and economic factors as well (Gifford 1997:319). Although all these factors play a big part in how the user experiences an environment, experience within the built environment itself is the focus of this study.

Ergonomics in its broadest sense is that which empirical studies tell us about the workability of environments. Environmental psychology and ergonomics feed into each other; with the difference being that environmental psychology is focused on behaviour where as ergonomics focuses on performance (Brebner 1982:1).

Images and symbols are stored in our long term memory in relation to other items. According to Brebner (1982:27) “these relationships are abstracted from our experiences and allow us to anticipate the next event.” This allows for anticipation which is a complex, complete and integrated perception because it covers all the sensory channels (Brebner 1982:28). Brebner (1982:28) also states: “missing or unexpected features of any kind can force reorganisation of a person’s perceptual and cognitive interpretation of the world at the expense of time. This is an important point since even one new element can lead to a total reorganisation of the perceived world.” A very interesting example is in the research of Ivo Kohler where the effects of wearing inverting lenses, which turns the visual world upside down, were studied. The auditory and tactual world was left as it was. Brebner (1982:28) writes: “A candle seen through the lenses was perceived as being upside down until the moment it was lit. Then, the heat from the flame and the stored information that candle flames burn upwards was sufficient to change the perceived orientation of the candle so that it then was seen the right way up.”

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In conclusion, if experience becomes the central focus of a design, the mind and perceptions of the user must be considered. Elements in space can so easily influence the user and change the experience from what was intended. The study of phenomenology and environmental psychology provides insight into the unconscious influences architecture might have on the user. These influences are difficult to anticipate without the knowledge provided by these fields of study.