An Investigation Study on Phenomenological Concepts in Modern Architecture

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ABSTRACT

This research approaches the question of the role of the user in architecture from a phenomenological perspective. In the most common understanding, the formulation “user-oriented” has a strong methodological emphasis, directing attention to ways of getting feedback from the users and integrating it directly in the design process. This project, instead, concentrates foremost on the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the users’ role. It asks primarily why it is important to include individuals in a design process and how architects should approach a user’s experience in a non-reductive way. The initial question of user involvement leads here to more general issues, such as the cultural context of architecture; architectural ethics; the role of tradition; the views of creativity and art; the challenges of globalization; and the professional ethos. The initial part of the research explicates how different paradigms within contemporary architectural discourse ground different approaches to users. It reveals certain limitations of the dominating conceptual positions (post positivism, critical theory, constructivism), and argues in turn for a need of adopting a paradigm that could support a more user- and context-sensitive architectural practice. The subsequent part of the study points at the relevance of phenomenology of conceptualizing user involvement in architecture. First, the research discusses ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of phenomenology focusing on the ideas of Life world, lived experience, and interpretation. These concepts are reexamined in terms of their implications for the role of user in architecture. This discussion is supplemented with a consideration of the phenomenological account of space as given in lived experience, and the Views of art and ethics grounded in the life world. Second, the study addresses the relevance of phenomenology in contemporary, globalized conditions, which to some extent unsettle previous ways of thinking about architecture and its users.

Key words: Investigation Study, Phenomenological, Concepts, post positivism, critical theory, constructivism

Introduction

Contemporary architectural theory may be generally divided into two groups of perspectives. These positions represent a contradiction between architecture as a contingent practice that has to deal with the given reality and architecture as an autonomous realm that acknowledges this reality in a very limited way. The present study addresses this gap, focusing on the position of user-related concerns in contemporary architectural discourse. It represents the search for a conceptual framework that could legitimize and encourage a more careful consideration of the perspectives of individuals affected by architectural choices. Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for deeper reflection on the cultural context of architecture, arguing that to respect the perspectives of people means also to respect the cultural background of a place that situates architectural interventions. The question of how to approach a user’s perspective in a given cultural context is particularly relevant today. As many scholars argue, a contemporary built environment, specifically the city, can no longer be considered a homogenous cultural entity. Rather, it should be seen as a collection of intersections where various social, cultural, or economic events disentangle. The present-day globalized conditions unsettle older ways of thinking about architecture and its users.

Research Problem

As Clare Cooper Marcus asserts, architecture can be a powerful, positive social force—people’s environments exert considerable influence on their behaviors and lifestyles. Inhabitants’ needs, as well as social and cultural activities should therefore inform and shape the designed environment, balanced and merged with ecological requirements, contextual issues, and aesthetic goals (Cooper Marcus, 1986). To actually accomplish “user involvement” means to create
architecture that is truly meaningful for individuals and responsive to contemporary cultural questions. Yet, while a review of contemporary architectural theory indicates that user-related concerns have not been absent, this discussion remains rather fragmented and incidental. Many influential architectural theorists promote a vision of architecture as an intellectualized, abstract form exploration, claiming that it should be as free from any traditional “constraints” as possible (Wiseman, 1984; Schumner, 1994). Others declare that architecture should follow the globalization processes and market forces rather than pay attention to the specificity of a given place and the needs of a local community (Kolas, 1995; Lavin, 2005). The voices calling for a more engaged, user- and context-sensitive architectural practice have been present within architectural discourse for over 50 years. These perspectives were primarily influenced by structuralism ideas and the shift from positivist to post positivist framework in the social sciences; some of them were also grounded in the radical social movements of 1960s. As early as in 1953 (at CIAM IX), a group of young architects led by Alison and Peter Smithson along with Aldo van Eyck, in reaction to the dominance of functionalist reductionism of the “old guard,” stated: Man may readily identify himself with his own hearth, but not easily with the town within which it is placed. “Belonging” is a basic emotional need—its associations are of the simplest order. From “belonging”—identity—comes the enriched sense of neighborliness. The short narrow street of the slum succeeds where spacious redevelopment frequently fails. (Quoted in: Frampton, 1994:271) With this statement, the group (known later on as Team X) established a position based on the affirmation of the importance of both the social and symbolic aspects of the built environment.8 Kevin Lynch in The Image of the City (1960) continues this line of thinking, stressing the importance of human perception of a built environment. He defines urban environment as a complex system of interactions between people (users) and various surrounding objects. The visual quality of the urban environment, in Lynch’s theory, relates both to the physical and the mental image of its users. Of a city’s public places and inhabitants’ social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. It also has a political dimension, being enlisted as a strategy for increasing user empowerment and democratization (Jenkins and Brat teening, 1995). The role of user in a design process may be understood in many different ways. In this context, it is worthwhile to refer to Carole Pate man. In her Participation and Democratic Theory (1970), Pate man discusses the contemporary theorists of democracy (e.g., Berenson, Dahl, Sartor) and the theorists of “classical,” participatory democracy (e.g., Rousseau, Mill) examining how they conceptualize the widespread participation in the political processes. According to Pate man, the participation of the individual in political decision-making is a central issue of classical political theory, while the contemporary theorists regard democracy in terms of the institutional arrangements where participation is restricted, through elections, to a protective function. In other words, the majority can only participate in choosing the decision-makers. Mass participation beyond this function is regarded as dangerous, since the masses are considered to lack the rationality necessary to make proper decisions; consequently, participation should not raise much above some indispensable minimum.

Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the objectives set out below: 1. To give a critical overview of the paradigms underlying contemporary architectural discourse and to discuss how the basic assumptions of specific paradigms result in different approaches to user. Consequently, To point out the limitations of the dominating positions and delineate a niche for further research. 2. To discuss how certain aspects of phenomenology could provide conceptual foundations for a more user- and context-sensitive architectural practice in present-day conditions. 3. To situate the theoretical findings of this research in the context of an architectural practice. An attempt will be made to accomplish this objective by means of a case study.

Methodological Remarks

This research may be most generally characterized as qualitative research. Some scholars argue that the term “qualitative research” refers to one of two main research paradigms (qualitative and quantitative), but this view is often considered an oversimplification. Here, following the view of Gobi and Lincoln (1994), the term “qualitative research” will primarily refer to a methodology, not to foundational ontological and epistemological beliefs that constitute a paradigm. Cores pending research methods, and bridges philosophical concepts and practical and applicable research techniques. John W. Creswell (2003) defined methodology as a “strategy of inquiry.” This strategy (which is typically suggested by the adapted research paradigm) governs choice and use of specific methods, i.e., techniques and procedures of data collection/analysis (Creswell, 2003).

The concept of analysis is sometimes criticized as having definite positivist connotations. Etymologically the word comes from Greek analyzing or “unloose,” meaning “resolution of anything complex into simple elements.” Analysis is most typically understood as dividing up, breaking up a phenomenon into elements. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (2005) associates analysis with […] the philosophical method, or a set of methods, characteristic of much twentieth-century Anglophonic philosophy, of the type which describes itself as ‘analytic’ to express allegiance to rigor and precision, science, logical techniques, and […] careful investigation of language as the best means of investigating concepts.

Numerous scholars indicate that qualitative research findings have too little impact on practice. Among them, there are voices suggesting that the qualitative researchers have failed to communicate the nature of their studies to the
wider scientific community. Undeniably, “there exists a widespread conviction that only quantitative data are ultimately valid, or of high quality” (Securest, 1992, in: Gobi and Lincoln, 1994). Ernesto Grassy, in the introduction to his Rhetoric as Philosophy (1980), remarks: “I believe it is always important to return to the personal situation out of which one’s own thought arises, in order to clarify the theoretical problems that concern one’s self” (Grassy, 1980). This statement is particularly relevant for qualitative research, which is fundamentally interpretive research. The researcher analyzes and interprets data, develops description of the studied phenomenon, and eventually draws conclusions regarding its meaning. Data are unavoidably filtered through personal values, biases, and interests of the inquirer, while situated in a specific historical, social, and cultural context. Even though it is not possible to make all the personal influences explicit, it is worthwhile to indicate some of these factors.

Mapping The Research
Gary B. Madison (2001) asks “when in our philosophizing we attempt to articulate a particular position, how do we proceed?” and answers that “we do so dialectically, that is, we proceed by attempting to ascertain how, out of ideational necessity, the position we want to elaborate differs, has to differ, in key ways from other possible posit (Madison,2001). Following this methodological insight, this chapter provides an overview over the main types of discourse, paradigms, and tendencies within contemporary architecture. Eventually, deficiencies of the dominating frameworks and a niche for the research are pointed out the objective of this overview is to situate architectural theory in the Tradition of the human sciences, and to prepare a background for further presentation of phenomenology. An additional aim behind the theory survey is to point out the importance of a type of research which Donald Scoin (1983) called “frame analysis” (the study of the ways in which practitioners frame problems and roles) for professional practice. According to Scion, when professionals are unaware of their way of framing problems, they do not experience the need to choose among different possibilities. They do not reflect on the way in which they conceptualize the reality in which they function, because for them it simply the “given reality.” The survey of different paradigms underlying architectural theory is essentially an analysis of the basic ways of framing user-related problems.

Introductory Remarks
Not all architectural writings can be characterized as “theory.” Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of discourse within the discipline of architecture: history, theory, and criticism. The borders between them are not sharp. We could say however, that architectural history is descriptive of past works, architectural criticism is relatively narrow “activity of judgment and interpretation of specific existing works relative to critic’s or architect’s stated standards” (Nesbitt, 1996), and theory, overlapping to some extent with history and criticism, differs from these activities in that […] it poses alternative solutions based on observations of the current state of the discipline, or offers new thought paradigms for approaching the issues. Its speculative, anticipatory and catalytic nature distinguishes theoretical activity from history and criticism.

Concepts of theory
Before introducing particular theoretical positions within architecture, it is worthwhile to discuss different ways of understanding theory. In its original Greek usage, theory (theories) was closely related to “contemplation” and it involved the idea of a spectator contemplating an event. Andrea W. Nightingale in The Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy (2004) argues that theories originally had a spiritual dimension. In ancient Greece theories was “a venerable cultural practice characterized by a journey abroad for the sake of witnessing an event of spectacle.” The three most prominent forms of theories in the classical period included “visits to oracular centers, pilgrimages to religious festivals, and journeys abroad for the sake of learning.” As Nightingale observes, “in all journeys of theories, the pilgrim or thereof traveled away from home to see some sort of spectacle or to learn something about the outside world, thus confronting foreign peoples and places” (Nightingale, 2004). Since then, the concept of theory has undergone a series of reformulations. It has many distinct meanings in different fields of knowledge depending on their methodologies, the context of the discussion, and the adopted paradigm.

Classifying architectural theory
Searching through the available anthologies of architectural theory, one could find many different ways of classifying architectural thought. It seems, however, that chronological and/or theme-centered ways of presenting theories are most common. Charles Jencks in his Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture structures contemporary architectural discourse as follows: Postmodern, Post-modern Ecology, Traditional, Late Modern, New Modern, and the Complexity Paradigm (Jencks, 2005). In Jencks’ work, we can see numerous authors in more than one category (e.g., Peter Wiseman, Ram Kolas, Christopher Alexander, and Kenneth Frampton) but on the other hand, under a common label such as “post-modern,” the positions are very diverse. This makes the definition of categories in terms of common theoretical foundations very difficult.
Paradigms In Architectural Research

The term “paradigm” signifies a broad, conceptual framework addressing the foundational questions of any discipline, such as the nature of knowledge and reality, the purpose of research, and the relationship between research and practice. Gobi and Lincoln (1994) defined paradigm as a belief system based on basic ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.42 The assumptions are “basic” in the sense that they “must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their ultimate Truthfulness” (Gobi and Lincoln, 1994). If there were such a way, many philosophical debates would have been resolved millennia ago.

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2008), positivism in philosophy is most generally defined as any system that confines itself to the data of experience and excludes a priori or metaphysical speculations. The basic affirmations of positivism are that all knowledge regarding matters of fact is based on the “positive” data of experience (that “mirror” reality); and that beyond the realm of fact is only that of pure logic and pure mathematics. Positivists became noted for their repudiation of metaphysics, i.e., of speculation regarding the nature of reality that goes radically beyond any possible evidence that could either support or refute such “transcendent” knowledge claims (“Positivism.” Encyclopedia Britannica, 2008).45 The positivist paradigm can be more specifically characterized in terms of its ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions.

Discussing the influence of positivism on the human sciences and architectural research, it is worthwhile to look closer at its relation to structuralism. Structuralism, roughly speaking, is a way of thinking about culture in terms of structures. Its aim, in different spheres of culture (such as religion, architecture, politics, etc.) is analogous to what grammar does for Language to explain how these systems work and how they generate meanings for their users. Although defining structuralism as a form of positivism would be an oversimplification,61 structuralism may be rightly classified as a continuation of some aspects of the positivist/post positivist tradition. Its task was to find an objective, rational, and “scientific” methodology for analyzing the data of perception.

Critical theory is a modern expression of Marxism—a materialistic, deterministic framework, closely incorporating science in its world view (dialectical materialism).60 The Marxist understanding of science is not value free; on the contrary, it puts science “in practice at the service of the community” (Brenda, 1937, in: Willis et al., 2007). Yet, as the “Lysenko Effect”61 exemplifies, “the service of community” can easily end up in manipulation, subordinating science to political ideology.62 The impact of Marxism in the domain of the social sciences was mainly through its derivation known as “historical materialism.” In this view, changes in human and social behavior across history are caused by material objects and the efforts of various social groups to obtain material goods at the expense of other groups. Furthermore, Marxism holds that if we are to understand a given phenomenon, we have to understand a context in which it operated.

Critical theory was introduced to architectural discourse by Manfred Tauries and the School of Venice. Different aspects of critical thought are present in writings of such scholars as Michael K. Hays, Diane Girard, Kenneth Frampton, Bernard Schimer, and Peter Wiseman. There is also a growing body of feminist and postcolonial critiques of architecture within this paradigm. Most commonly, however, critical theory in architectural discourse is coupled with elements of the constructivist framework.

Terry Eagleton, in his book After Theory (2003), argues that the utility and vitality of critical theory has come to an end. Eagleton admits that in the years between 1965 and 1980, one could see the full effect of critical theory’s potency as an interdisciplinary critique of the global, socio-political status quo; but since that time, critical theory has lost its efficacy and cultural relevance, mainly because postmodern discourse has disengaged itself from social and political analyses, dismantled the notion of “absolute truth,” and turned away from the debate on moral imperatives.

Constructivism69 may be seen as a reaction to a certain “crisis” which emerged in relation to: The failure of logical positivism as a philosophy of science; the impact of such works as Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962); Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations (1953); Fey era bend’s Against Method (1975), Austin’s How do Things with Words (1962) and Bergen & Linkman’s the Social Construction of Reality (1966); An increase in the perceived relevance of both Continental and linguistic philosophy; Contributions from philosophers such as Derrida, Rorty, and Foucault (Hubbard, 2005: vii).

User Involvement As An Ethical Issue

Jeremy Till’s recent work Architecture Depends (2009) provides a relevant point of departure for further investigations. Till situates the question of user involvement in the perspective of architectural ethics. He argues that the notion of ethics is used all too freely and vaguely in architectural discourse, often equated with formal expression76 and misappropriated as a “smokescreen” used to cover unethical values (Till, 2009:171). Furthermore, according to till, one of most commonly made mistakes is to confuse the codes of professional conduct (whose primary aim is professional self-protection) with an ethical position (Till, 2009).

Till, referring to Emmanuel Levin as, defines architectural ethics ontologically as “being-for the other.” Assuming an ethical stance means here “to assume responsibility for the other.” The “Other” refers to “the diverse mix of people whose political and phenomenal lives will be affected by the construction of the building and its subsequent occupation (Till, 2009).
Yet, it is not entirely clear how to understand this responsibility. As Steinbeck observes, conventionally being responsible for the other is considered as taking over a project in place of the other. This may lead to a patronizing relationship that “can easily develop into a pattern of domination or one-sided dependency” (Steinbeck, 1995). A worthwhile alternative to this approach could be an understanding of the responsibility for the other in Terms of co-participation in the process of determining what is to be done for the benefit of the other.

The way of approaching ethical issues within a given paradigm is to a large extent determined by the conceptualization of the relation between theory and practice (Gobi and Lincoln, 1994) within this paradigm. The relation between theory and practice within specific paradigms therefore has a crucial importance for the discussion on the position of user-related concerns in contemporary architectural discourse.

Grounds for the ethical problems

It seems that the grounds for the ethical problems that can be identified in contemporary architectural discourse should not be seen primarily in the lack of a normative aspect. The word “normative” has its origins in “the Latin Norma, carpenter’s square, pattern, or rule, whence it's common meaning as establishing a norm of standard […] or most frequent value or state of something” (Johnson, 1994). Most of the architectural theory perspectives imply a certain way of acting; in this it they have a more or less explicit normative aspect. For instance, “post criticality” suggests that to follow market forces and technology development, to explore their possibilities, and to abandon social and historical considerations is the most appropriate way to act for architects. This suggestion may be identified in such texts as Kolas’ S, M, L, XL (1994) or so no'l's and Writing’s “Notes around the Doppler Effect and Other Moods” (2002).

A Niche For The Research

The analyses conducted in this chapter indicate that currently dominating approaches within architectural theory tend to underestimate the value of user’s perspective. Positivist/post positivist frameworks concentrate primarily on quantitatively measurable phenomena; prioritize scientific, expert knowledge; and refrain from considering subjectivity. Structuralism, although it takes into account the dimension of meaning, to a large extent rejects the concept of human freedom and choice and focuses instead on the way that human behavior is determined by various structures.

Phenomenology: Concepts, Pers Pectives

This chapter begins with a general introduction to phenomenology. Further on, it explores the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of phenomenology, focusing on concepts particularly relevant in conceptualization of user involvement: life world, lived experience (Earle bins), and interpretation. The final sections of the chapter focus on further Implications of phenomenology for the user involvement debate discussing the phenomenological account of space as given in lived experience, and the views of art and ethics grounded in the life world.

Phenomenology: A Brief Introduction

Martin Heidegger describes phenomenology as “the science of phenomena” (Heidegger, 1977). Phenomenology in its etymological sense is the activity of giving an account (logos) of the way things appear (phenomenon). In other words, it is concerned with phenomena (anything that presents itself to consciousness) and aims to depict them directly as they appear.

Phenomenological Framework For A User-Oriented Practice

Ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions of phenomenology make this framework particularly relevant in the argument for the value of user perspective in any domain of professional practice, including architecture. The following sections explore these assumptions concentrating foremost on the concepts of “lived experience,” “life world,” and “interpretation.”

Towards Architecture: Art, Ethics, And Space

The aim of this section is to relate the previously discussed concepts of phenomenology (experience, life world, interpretation) more specifically to architectural discourse, with a focus on the possible implications for the user involvement debate. The writings of Heidegger and Gaudier will be the primary source of references here.139

Summary

One may argue that addressing architecture goes beyond the sphere of “pure” philosophy. However, as Sven-Otto Wallenstein remarks in the context of Heidegger’s works and their influence on architectural theory: the “impiety” of many adaptations of Heidegger in this field need not to be construed as just misreading of a “pure” philosophy […] but could, or even should, be seen as a way to enact and transform the text of “thinking” into something else. What Heidegger’s texts in the final instance mean is dependent on what we do with them, and there is no way to once and for all draw the line between uses and misuses. (Wallenstein, in: Zahakis et al., 2003) Adopting a phenomenological perspective in relation to architecture, means to accept the primer duality of the life world, a social, cultural, and historical realm in which we live prior to reflective analysis, a background on which all things appear as meaningful. As it has been already
indicated, getting a user’s direct feedback should not be equaled with an effort to access a user’s lived experience. While the former may suffer the same consequences as relying on the professional (i.e., express an uncritical acceptance of the view of the world conditioned by modern science and technology), the latter avoids it by being primarily based on an empathetic consideration of the meanings of the user’s life world, which may appear more clearly in a painting, a film, or a novel than in a direct survey of user’s opinion. Art seems here particularly relevant, considering that the meaning of lived experience cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination.

Pheno Menology: New Challenges

As Steinbeck ob serves, perhaps one of the major criticisms facing phenomenology today is that it cannot treat problems of contemporary concern” (Steinbeck, 1995). The aim of this chapter is to explore the relevance of phenomenology for Architectural discourse in present-day conditions, defined to a large extent by technological development and globalization processes. In this context, post critical and constructivist positions are discussed from a life world perspective. On November 2, 2002, Roger K. Lewis emphasized in the Washington

Post two opposing forces that affect contemporary architectural practice: One force seeks to safeguard and promulgate established indigenous architectural traditions, forms, decorative motifs and technologies. It advocates historical continuity, cultural diversity and preservation of geographic identity, all symbolized by a particular architectural vocabulary, just as spoken languages and local dialects impart identity.

Technology And Everyday Life

Although there is no consent sues regarding the definition of globalization, scholars within the domain of social science mostly agree that, at its core, there has been a fundamental change in the spatial and temporal framework of social existence. What is particularly important for architectural discourse is the fact that a considerable reduction in the time required to connect distinct geographic al locations has resulted in a compression or even “annihilation” of space. Therorists of globalization generally agree that these alterations in a way of perceiving space and time have transformed the meaning and importance of local boundaries in many arenas of human activity.

Diagrammatization Of Architectural Theory

Within contemporary architectural theory, there may be observed an increasing (sometimes exclusive) emphasis on the new means of architectural representations and new technologies, along with their possibilities. Architectural theory not only addresses these issues, but also to a certain extent imitates their character, abandoning traditional modes of discourse. This tendency cannot be observed on a similar scale in the social sciences, even though they also address the issues of technological development and globalization. It is, therefore, worthwhile to pose the following question: should architectural thought transform itself in order to follow the current technology-related developments or rather should it adapt a certain distance to the ongoing, rapid changes? In other words is it necessary, in order to grasp the “essence” of the investigated phenomenon, to follow its rapidly changing conventions (stylistic, linguistic, etc.)? Or, is it better to look at it in the perspective of established discourse traditions?180 A related, but often overlooked question is whether the essential human needs and purposes develop on the same level and at the same pace as technology does, and most basically, what is the place of human-related concerns in a given discipline? If we assume that human needs transform at a similar pace as the sphere of objects, then the most natural approach will be probably to follow technology development and to search for the new means of expression. But if we maintain (following phenomenology) that the sphere of human needs and purposes is relatively stable,181 and human-related concerns are foundational in a given discipline, then a critical reappraisal of technological development from an interdisciplinary distance and in a wider social and cultural context will likely be a more reasonable path towards future. Nevertheless, as Leach (1997) argues, architectural theory has been very deficient in the tools of self-reflexivity.

Discussing the emphasis on the new means of representation and “diagram mitigation” of architectural discourse, it is worthwhile to address the role of media and architectural criticism. With the development of new information and communication technologies, architecture has gained a lot of public attention. It seems that increasing media coverage of architecture may contribute to the rise in public engagement in architectural issues.

Sustainability Concerns

The multi-dimensional impact of globalization on human existence generates many philosophical questions and normative challenges. Sustainability issues are the essential part of this debate. Since the late 1980s, human influence on the global environment has been widely discussed at an international level. In 1987, the Brand land Commission formulated probably most commonly quoted definition of sustainable development: the development that “meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainability, which entered into the consciousness of architects towards the end of the 20th century, is one of the main challenges for contemporary architectural discourse.
Conclusions: The Relevance Of Phenomenology Today

The main question posed at the 1997 “After Postmodernism Conference,” organized by University of Chicago, was “If we absorb postmodernism, if we recognize the variety and ungroup deadness of grounds, but do not want to stop in arbitrariness, relativism, or amphora, what comes after postmodernism?” In this context, many scholars argued for the relevance of phenomenology. What makes phenomenology a still-valid approach in contemporary conditions? According to Gary B. Madison, the two main features that make this position relevant today are “(1) that it is as ‘postmodern’ as any other form of postmodern thought, but (2) unlike other forms of postmodernism (‘poststructuralist,’ ‘neoprene gratis’), it does not lead into the dead-end of relativism and nihilism” (Madison, 1997).

Approaching architectural practice

The preceding chapters reexamined phenomenological concepts in terms of their implications for the role of user in architecture. One could ask, however, how to proceed with this knowledge, how to incorporate it in the real world practices. This chapter explores the relation between theory and practice in the phenomenological perspective. In this context, it emphasizes the relevance of rhetoric for architectural discourse. It also refers to Donald Scion's seminal work, The Reflective Practitioner (1983), a book on the role of knowledge in professional conduct. The concept of a “reflective practice” may be conceived as a model for a user-oriented architectural practice, which in many aspects coincides with the phenomenological framework.

Phenomenology's practical philosophy

Alberto Perez Gomez (1983), referring to Husserl’s Crisis of European Sciences (1936), maintains that separation of architectural theory and practice originates in the modern transformations, i.e., conceptual shifts that took place after the beginning of the nineteenth century. What were the consequences of these changes for architecture? As Perez Gomez remarks, architectural theory—similarly to modern science—has been devoid of a reference to transcendental meaning and the “lived world.”

Epistemology of professional practice

The question of the role of knowledge in the actual design process is an important aspect of the discussion on the relation between architectural theory and practice, and in this context, between architect and user. As the following quotations illustrate, there seems to be a certain rift between how theories conceptualize their relation to practice and how practitioners actually use theory. An architect does not arrive at his finished product solely by a sequence of rationalizations, like a scientist, or through the workings of the Zeitgeist. Nor does he reach them by uninhibited intuition, like a musician or a painter. He thinks forms intuitively, and then tries to justify them rationally; a dialectical process governed by what we may call his theory of architecture, which can only be studied in philosophical and ethical terms. (Collins,1965:16).

Moving towards a reflective contract

Scion's idea of a reflective practice has important implications, among others for professional’s role in the society; his autonomy and authority in relation to clients; the kinds of research and education most likely to be beneficial for practitioners; and the institutional contexts of professional practice. It also implies a certain vision of social progress and well-being, which may be used to justify professional activity (Scion, 1991). The following discussion will focus on the professional-client relationship. 214 Scion argues that the idea of reflective practice questions the traditional understanding of the professional as a technical expert and implies the need for the “demystification” of professional knowledge, not in a sense of showing up the falsity of practitioners’ claims to knowledge, but as making professional knowledge more transparent, opening it up to inquiry.215 “Mystification consists in making knowledge-in-practice appear to be more complex, private, ineffable, and above all […] more closed to inquiry, than it needs to be” (Scion, 1991:289). Harold Rosenberg216 (1959) highlights one aspect of such “mystification”—the over complication of professional language: Thus the essential mark of a profession is its evolution of a unique language […] The more incomprehensible the lingo is to outsiders, the more thoroughly it identifies the profession as such and elevates it out of the reach of mere amateurs and craftsmen. (Rosenberg, 1959, quoted in: Moles worth et al., 2003:33) Further, Rosenberg suggests that the continuous use of Latin by the medical profession appears as single-minded compared to what some professions have been able to accomplish in English in the recent decades. This seems particularly relevant for numerous examples of contemporary architectural writings.

Final reflections

Contributions to existing knowledge

This study has undertaken an examination of the theoretical background needed for a more user-sensitive and culturally-responsible architectural practice in the present-day globalized conditions. This research contributed to the existing bodies of knowledge in several ways. Another focus of this survey of contemporary architectural discourse and its underlying paradigms was the relation between theory and practice. This relation determines the position of ethical
concerns within a given framework. The theory survey revealed that, within an architectural discourse, there exists a tendency to interpret paradigms in a way that expands the distance between theory and practice; even if the understanding of paradigms within human sciences suggests a close relation between these domains (this is particularly true in the case of critical theory and constructivism). One consequence of the gap between theory and practice is the marginalization of ethical questions and the disregard of user-related concerns that follows.

Indications For Further Research

This research addressed the question of user’s perspective in architecture on a fairly general level. More specific considerations of the category of “user” would be advantageous in order to influence a real-world architectural practice. Different types of users may be further discussed in particular contexts. This may include a categorization of individuals according to the way they use a given architectural artifact, i.e., primary, secondary, and tertiary users (Eason, 1987). In this context, the possible links between the kinds of users and the types of subjectivity discovered in the life world may be established.

On The Route

Not unexpected in perhaps any research, this study has been a process of learning and exploration. Starting from the concept of the user, this venture extended with a whole set of questions, all equally important for architecture. Consequently, the concept of user, initially central, at times may seem marginal in the study. Yet, this is not accidental; instead, it shows that a consideration of the user alone is not possible in the phenomenological framework. Starting with the user, one has to address a complex net of interrelationships, encompassing different dimensions of the life world—social, cultural, environmental, etc. Similarly, starting from any other category, phenomenological research will unavoidably come to address the individual experience.

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