

Introduction

Lived Places, Environments and Atmospheres: Phenomenology and the Transformations of Experience

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From its very beginning, phenomenology manifested a constant and multifaceted interest in the exploration of the lived space. The phenomenological reflection on space started already with Husserl's analysis of the constitution of space through movement and with Heidegger's critique of the uniformity of the abstract space in the modern science. Later on, Bollnow specified from an anthropological perspective Heidegger's reflections on the existential dimension of dwelling, while Erwin Straus elaborated on the structures of spatiality that correspond to different senses. Merleau-Ponty enriched this body of thinking by stating the primacy of depth as the third dimension of space and by emphasizing the role played by the imaginary in the experience of the "anthropological space". Also whereas Gaston Bachelard focused on the positive value of intimate inhabited spaces, Bernhard Waldenfels disclosed the inescapable intrusion of alterity into one's own place and the responsive structure of being "here" in an ethical context. Underlying such historical ramifications, there is a common interest in the first person experience of dwelling in space which distances phenomenological investigations from scientific approaches to spatial relations. Roughly speaking, from a phenomenological perspective, space is first and foremost lived and not abstractly known, and it is therefore qualitative, plural, centred on the subject's body and inextricably linked to objects and to human practices. This feature is most evident in Hermann Schmitz' taxonomy of lived space based on the spatiality of the body.

The phenomenological interpretations of dwelling and building exerted a positive influence upon the architectural thinking, in particular after the failure of the functionalist architecture and urban planning, with their objectivistic

way of thinking and claim to universality. In the wake of the phenomenological reflection on space, theorists of architecture rediscovered the geographic and historical *genius loci* that is supposed to grant character to a place. Regional traditions related to a series of architectural problems, such as the use of materials, the language of forms, the reaction to the natural environment and climate and, last but not least, the cultural meaning of space symbols, are opposed to universal algorithms of building (Christian Norberg-Schulz, Kenneth Frampton). Also the phenomenological “topology” inspired the architects’ concern with sustainable natural and built environments as an alternative to the postmodern instant environment machine (Christopher Alexander, Edward Relph). The commitment to a multisensory and life-enhancing architecture (Juhani Pallasmaa) was clearly informed by the phenomenology of the embodied subject. Heidegger’s and Hermann Schmitz’ phenomenology of moods inspired the aesthetics of atmospheres, conceived as emotional qualities of spaces and integral entities that are difficult to describe but are experienced intersubjectively and have a *fundamentum in re* (Gernot Böhme). Arnold Berleant followed up his phenomenologically inspired analysis of art experience as relational field with an account of multisensory engagement with the environment that is at the same time embedded in cultural traditions and mediated by symbolic systems.

In spite of their explicit delimitation from the scientific approaches to space, phenomenologists and other philosophers more or less indebted to the phenomenological body of thinking often resorted to other disciplines that dealt with specific experiences of space, such as dwelling, the cognitive exploration of space or its production. All the more after the “spatial turn” of the human and social sciences, the phenomenological insight into lived, non-measurable and heterogeneous places is expected to wake a renewed interest. In this context, the question arises of how phenomenology and other human or social sciences could cross-pollinate each other. For example, anthropologists and (in particular postmodern) cultural geographers investigate lived spaces in their entanglement with the social practices of embodied subjects; however, only some of these, such as Jürgen Hasse, openly acknowledge the influence exerted by phenomenology on their thinking.

The necessity to reflect on the legacy of the phenomenological tradition must go hand in hand with the imperative to cope with the ongoing transformations of spatial experience. Classical phenomenology focused on the physical presence in specific places but we now have to face a wide range of challenges, given that places increasingly have to compete with non-places and the inhabited physical space with the virtual one. The “natural” perception is nowadays being shaped by new media and technology; this results in the paradox that, given the very expansion of the experienced space to mega-phenomena beyond the Earth as well as to nano-objects, the space itself seems to have shrunk so much that inaccessibility has almost lost its meaning. The everyday

experience of space and of common dwelling has become unthinkable without technological devices and prostheses that support bodily orientation and modify or even simulate physical distances. High-speed transportation and new communication technologies shed new light on the metaphysical definition of space as order of coexistences. The modern antinomy between the private and the public space and the traditional primacy of stability over mobility have been subjected to critique due to the spread of nomadic life forms and of new means of communication in a global and digital age. Migration flows add new levels of complexity to the physical movement, which has been considered for a long time the basic experience of space in phenomenology. Dwelling competes nowadays with travelling and shopping, in other words, with the touristic and consumerist consumption of places. How does this commodification of space affect the way we experience it?

Places as former sites of identity degenerate into non-places where one encounters only anonymous hypostases of the Other, and the spaces of the cultural and social Other are in turn appropriated through practices of emplacement. Places of consumption are designed as emotionally tuned environments, in which the experience of space turns into a hyperaesthetic ecstasy. In other contexts, space is mainly regarded as a resource that has to be occupied, defended and territorialised by individuals or groups of interests. Under the impact of new media, places are deterritorialised again and undergo a massive process of visualisation, being often experienced as no more than images, or they grow in clusters called scapes, be it in landscapes, waterscapes, cityscapes or aircapes. The genuinely phenomenological “*zunächst und zumeist*”, the primacy of the common experience, oblige the thinker committed to this kind of reflection to take into consideration all economic, socio-political and technological developments that influence the way in which spaces are encountered, lived and produced in the everyday life. In addition to this, the phenomenon of social exclusion, no less than various types of sensory impairment, generate types of dwelling that are not at all new, but are still awaiting pertinent phenomenological descriptions and interpretations.

In this light, the task of the phenomenological theory is twofold. Firstly, it consists in unveiling aspects of the experience of space in a context characterized, on one hand, by the emergence of spaces that are not objectively “given”, and, on the other hand, by the requirement of (re)including a dimension of “nature” in our life-world. Secondly, it consists in bringing forward new concepts that better describe the transformation of the experience of space prompted by the new structures of the lived places and environments that we inhabit. Last but not least, we like to think that phenomenological reflections may inspire practitioners of other disciplines to provide viable alternatives to the invasion of uniform “blandscapes” and sterile non-places in a globalised world and to enhance the liveability of natural and built environments. Calling to put the space in the right perspective may stimulate attempts to find

ways to inhabit the virtual space without falling into escapism and alienation. The reflection on space can eventually support a critical stance towards strategies of manipulating the experience of space for diverse interests and endorse environmental commitment. By doing that, phenomenology may contribute to forging a renewed sense of space, in which both material and atmospheric qualities constitute liveable vibrant places.

An explorative spatial analysis is one of the primary tasks of the phenomenology of space. How our spatial surroundings become not only intelligible, but also meaningful to us as human beings can be disclosed through a variety of practical encounters within a changing world. The description of particular aspects of space experience is not an end in itself and it does not exhaust the richness of the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology embarks on a more difficult mission, namely that of elaborating the concepts and theories able to capture the modern experience of space and its constant transformation.

The dossier opens with *Arnold Berleant's* brief outline of the main assumptions of environmental aesthetics. Firstly, aesthetic theory shifted its focus in the past decades from (artistic) objects to experience, conceived as a complex field of relations. Secondly, the aesthetic experience is "aesthetic" (from the Greek "*aisthesis*": perception) and implies a complex multi-sensory engagement of a subject with a cultivated sensibility. The author identifies seven layers of the aesthetic mode of sensibility, ranging from perceptual acuteness to atmosphere and perceptual meaning. Aesthetic experience is no longer of objects but of natural and built environments conceived as a constant flux that integrates human beings.

Gernot Böhme elaborates the concept of atmosphere starting from its common use, inspired by meteorology, and turns it into the prototype of a phenomenon situated between the subject and the object. Atmospheres are qualities of objects or people and fill places, but have to be felt as such *in situ* by entering these places. Also atmospheres can be deliberately created; therefore, since in our days almost everything is staged, the theory of atmosphere finds a wide range of applications, from the understanding of architecture and performative arts to the critical reflection on media, on the pervasive commodification of life and on political power.

While environmental sensibility and atmosphere have been discussed primarily in the framework of aesthetics in general, the next contribution shifts the focus from the perspective of the lived space to urban studies and architecture. Inspired by the profound reframing of aesthetics through the (phenomenological) concept of sensibility, *Jürgen Hasse* makes the case for the primacy of corporality and sees the complex space of the city as a milieu of vitality. Against the primacy of visual aspects in considering the city, Hasse applies the metaphor of the "skin" of the city to the structure and the dynamics of the urban space, in terms of daily "breathing" and historical aging. Also the "face"

of a city refers both to its rather constant physiognomy and to the situational changing of its daily “expressions”. Finally, Hermann Schmitz’ phenomenology of the body serves as a guiding thread for the interpretation of the living “body” of the city and of the meaning of urbanity, with particular focus on its unpredictable agency.

Tonino Griffero interprets atmospheres as bridge-qualities, founded on the corporeal communication and on the specific knowledge of the one who knows exclusively while performing and acting. In his view, atmospheres function as (transmodal) affordances that permeate the lived space, i.e. as ecological invites or meanings that are ontologically rooted in things and quasi-things. Exploring Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world and Gibson’s concept of being-in-nature, *Vincent Blok* brings arguments in favour of the idea that Gibson’s affordance theory enables us to reconnect being-in-the world with being-in-nature, which is rooted in “primordial” nature as its infinite origin.

The concept of liveable place entails a specific phenomenology of hostile spaces in contrast to the intimate ones. Building on Bachelard’s reflection on space, *Anton Vydra* claims that the understanding of intimacy has to be contrasted with the experience of danger and openness. The occupancy field, which consists of a spatial layout of bodies organized by a principle of practicability, is the topic that *Gunnar Declerck* chooses to bring forward. His analysis of the characteristics of the occupancy field demonstrates primarily that bodies and space are co-dependent on an intentional level. Therefore, the presentation of space relies on an anticipatory relationship with the possible.

Another important aspect of the phenomenology of lived spaces is the experience of connecting spaces, such as the connection between rooms. Relying on a description of two Japanese bridging structures, *Michael Lazarin* claims that if transitional spaces can be successfully realized, then everything in the room will naturally fall into place with anything else. This insight can be useful to understand the relation between a building and other buildings in the city and ultimately the relation of the city with the natural environment. Sunlight deprivation, for example, although not a totally new or unknown phenomenon, came to the attention of architects and urban planners once the signs of a so-called Little Ice Age have become more visible lately. Based on Relph’s critique of urban planning, *Abraham Akkerman* finds that the unplanned place in the open air—a dilapidated street corner in St. Petersburg or the Romanesque streetscape of Old Copenhagen—emanates authenticity.

Patricia Limido-Heulot’s paper shows that the notion of landscape is a typical phenomenological object. She supports the idea that all kinds of landscape—the sensory, bodily, perceptual, geographical, pictorial, built, or the existential—depend on original forms of experience; within all landscapes, as embedded in them, we can read various ways of living, dwelling or being in the world. The description of the choreographic space could serve as a basis for the understanding of the artistic experience of space. The day-to-day

relationship of the choreographer with the space provides her or him with a valuable spatial knowledge that *Elsa Ballanfât* interrogates by extending Heidegger's reflections on sculpture. The dossier closes with *Dragoș Duicu's* paper about Jan Patočka's phenomenological treatment of the concept of space. Patočka's pronominal proto-structure of interpellation is brought forward to counter the tendency to reduce spatiality to temporality.

The papers gathered in the current issue of *Studia Phenomenologica* show that space, place and atmosphere are fruitful research topics that deserve to be explored both from the viewpoint of phenomenology and aesthetics. They demonstrate also the capacity of phenomenological concepts to produce new, different ways of framing the issues of inhabiting and building our world.