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PhD-project
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UNSPOKEN DIALOGUES

– Human Interactions with Material Structures

This textual delineation will provide an overview of the incentives, problems, and methodological questions of the project Unspoken Dialogues (hereafter UD). A reason for concern is the present focus on quality determinators in architecture. The particular authority of certainty, predictability, and accountability on this issue can be seen to subsume architectural decision-making to explication, incidentally under objective rule. Unintentionally, therefore, the determining of quality promotes fidelity towards abandonment of values that cannot be explicated. At the same time it is clear that the value the built environment has for us depends also on qualities that are indeterminable and inexplicable (e.g. the notion of home.) I will argue that our possibility for addressing questions of value and quality in architectural decision-making depends on a better understanding of the nature of the interactions between person and object. UD will contribute here through a phenomenological and aesthetic examination of such interactions, with focus on the role and nature

of their dynamics¹, and with the hypothesis that the dynamic nature of the interaction process may be decisive for aesthetic experience in architecture. Based in architecture itself, and within the framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology, I will appose the subjective perspective of phenomenology and the objective perspective of science². The purpose of this unlikely apposition is, faced with a research object that appears elusive (we are aware of it, but it is not visible) and that escapes empirical evidence, to elicit its nature as appearance within the relief³ that the apposition presents. From this appearance, the nature of the interactions can then be described as a phenomenon, which then, on the intersubjective level, will be discussed and interpreted in relation to alternative theories of aesthetic experience. So, rather than postulating mutual exclusiveness between the perspectives of science and phenomenology, they are seen as interdependent in their contribution to revealing the nature of the research object. It is my aim that UD can contribute to overcome the subjective-objective cleavage that seems to prevail in architectural theory. That it further

can be understood as a contribution to the practise of architecture, in the light of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in its stress on the epistemological importance of presence (not a presence of essence but of meaning) and meaning that unfolds in the reciprocal process of expression-and-perception – in the Unspoken Dialogues of architecture.

Architecture and the Research Problem

The fundamental thesis is that of architecture as a living, evolving thing. Our culture's striving towards civilization is manifested in the places, houses and cities that it creates. As well as providing a protective carapace [outer shell], these structures also carry symbolic value, and can be seen as being continuous with and emerging from the life of those who inhabit the built environment.⁴

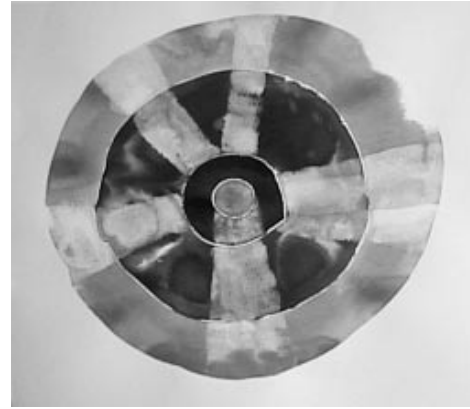
Gordon Pask here frames architecture and architect within their social and cultural context, emphasizing how our lives are inseparable from the things we create and how we might see experience and production of architecture to be interwoven.⁵ The premiss, thus, is a non-reductive view of architecture, where we are in a continuous relation with the world, or rather, to say it with Merleau-Ponty: there is reciprocity between the world and us. It is my thesis that exactly some of the issues that cannot be translated to explicit and determinable concepts might most potently distinguish objects of architecture as the carriers of symbolic value in Pask's model and as meaning-giving relations in our lives with them.

The clarity and richness of an aesthetic experience often stands in sharp contrast to the theories trying to describe or explain it. The issue in UD is not to make judgements about objects of art or architecture, but rather to understand the interactions between person and object and what it is about these interactions that might make aesthetic experience in architecture possible.⁶

Field of Research

Extensive research has been and is done on the experience of architecture. The focus has been on structure (form, materials, colours etc.), on placement with

in existing built and natural environments, on physical use, on psychological affect, art historical reception, etc. UD will add another dimension to these through the investigation of the development of experience as



experiencing, seeing interactions between person and object as dialogues, as processes evolving in time, with focus on the nature and role of their dynamics and with the possibility for other kinds of knowing.⁷ The disciplines that could contribute to a better understanding of the interactions between person and object are many and diverse. Four main criteria have been decisive in selecting the disciplines that are included in UD.⁸ The main disciplines chosen are psychology, physiology, and mathematics, in addition to a phenomenological investigation. I will take the field of relevant disciplines, the field of research, literally as a field and propose a map serving as a theoretical arena for negotiations and discourse.⁹

The Map – Theoretical Arena for Discourse

The red centre denotes the research object, that which is between person and object. Person and object are denoted in diametrical distance on the rim of the red centre circle and the relation between them is the red field. The dark green ring circumscribing the red denotes architecture itself as a particular level of investigation. It circumscribes the research problem immediately because the problem is an architectural problem. The next two rings denote the epistemological and the ontological levels, the blue and the yellow respectively. The disciplines are denoted as enlightened

sectors on the map. Only one of the sectors, architectural theory, reaches through architecture. The reason for this is that the perspective taken in UD is from inside architecture. Circumscribing the yellow ontological level is the lived world. The placement of UD within the framework of phenomenology changes this map. To phenomenology, the lived world is fundamentally that which justifies and gives meaning, also to science. The consequence for the map is that there is a connection between the research object and the lived world. This means that the outer rim of the map folds in on the research object and so forms a torus, or a doughnut. For Merleau-Ponty, with his epistemological thesis of the primacy of perception and the correlate ontological thesis of the primacy of phenomena, this means that lived experience can be the fundamental justification of knowledge. For UD this change in the map means that there is the possibility to appose the phenomenological perspective and the objective perspective of science.

One Strategy – Three Ways of Thinking

While the map denotes the arena for discourse, the field of research and the levels of investigation, the methods now become strategies for moving in the map. For UD there are two alternative methods, depending on how we see the problem.

A problem is a question which I pose to myself and then resolve by considering different givens which are external to me. [...] in philosophy we must work out a very singular type of problem. In these problems, the one who poses them is also engaged. This person is not a spectator in relation to the problem, but is rather caught up in the matter, which for him defines the mystery.¹⁰

One approach then, where the researcher is a spectator to the problem, would see knowledge from the relevant disciplines as “givens” that might be joined to solve the problem or parts thereof. The second possibility is a philosophical approach, where the problem is a singular problem that only can be posed from an engaged point of view. I have chosen transdisciplinarity¹¹ in the former and existential phenomenology, particularly as developed by Merleau-Ponty, in the latter.¹² An exhaustive treatment of the questions posed by UD, I argue, requires the mobilization of both these methods

within a third way of thinking which is the apposition of the two.

Apposition and the Relief

The question is now how the two approaches above together might contribute to clarification. I have announced the intention to appose the subjective perspective of phenomenology and the objective perspective of science. This apposition is not a third method to be applied. It is, rather, a way of seeing in order to describe the two perspectives together. The purpose of this unlikely apposition then, is to consider the relationship between the disclosures of science and the elucidation of phenomenological descriptions with the thesis that between them they might yield a phenomenon that is still situated within architecture. The occasion for this elaborate intermediary, before we can come to reflect on the issue and discuss our findings in relation to other theories, is that the two perspectives cannot be compared directly because they are fundamentally different. We must therefore establish a common ground between them.

For an apposition to be meaningful it must be something more than mere juxtaposition, something more intimate must lie between the elements apposed. The thesis above was that the two perspectives are different ways of seeing the same research problem, as problem and as mystery. According to Merleau-Ponty their common ground is the perceived world:

The perceived world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value and all existence. This thesis [the primacy of perception] does not destroy either rationality or the absolute. It only tries to bring them down to earth.¹³

With this then, we can establish a common ground, but an apposition still has another request from the apposed: It implies interrogation, a sort of questioning and contributing in making the issue more precise. It is in the nexus then, of their common ground in perception, that the apposition of the subjective perspective of phenomenology and the objective perspective of science can be seen to build a relief. What is absent in each of them thematically is “filled in” by the other, accommodated in the shadows of the relief, in the sha-

dows of their methodological differences. In scientific disclosure it is de facto absence of that which is particular to individual subjective experience, e.g. what it feels like to experience in a certain way; in the phenomenological description it is absence as “hidden,” of some necessary conditions for the development of the experiencing process, e.g. internal bodily processes of which we cannot be conscious.¹⁴ The relief, thus, is our alternative to choosing between perceptual faith and objective analysis; and it is in this way that the relief enables a non-reductive description of the nature of the research object as a phenomenon.

Because the relief can accommodate absence as well as presence, it leaves open the question of aesthetic experience. This is important because the hypothesis does not postulate an ætiological examination into what might cause aesthetic experience, but to investigate the nature of the dynamics and its role as a possible



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condition for aesthetic experience in architecture.

Reflection, Analysis, and Discussion

Within the delineated conceptual and methodological framework above, the issues of the nature of the dynamics will be discussed extensively. The nature of the dynamics, then, appearing as a phenomenon in the relief above, can be seen to be an architectural phenomenon because the research problem is already situated within architecture, as it became clear in the map above. Having thus moved from a research problem that appeared as an elusive “mystery” to the description of it as a phenomenon, it becomes possible to discuss and interpret it in relation to alternative theories of architecture and aesthetic experience, including the af-

finity between ethics and aesthetics as this relates to questions of value and quality in important ways.¹⁵

Conclusively, UD must be seen as what is called foundation research, and its main contribution in this sense lies in that it can be the ground for further research. It can e.g. be seen to contribute to the possibility for describing the limit of determinability in architecture. It might be possible to describe this limit in such a way that it explains why qualities that are indeterminable and inexplicable must be included explicitly in discussions on issues of value and quality, but that attempts to translate them to determinable and explicit concepts frequently destroy their nature. These issues of quality often pertain to the personal contribution and responsibility of architects. They are fragile in the sense that freedom is fragile; they require workable “spaces” within which they can be developed. But they are also strong in the sense that freedom is strong; they carry the power that enables us to act humanly.

Notes

1. By seeing interactions between person and object as a processes, one can speak of their dynamics in the sense of development of experience in time.
2. To appose is away of making more precise by ranging side by side or putting one thing to another.
3. By relief I mean, metaphorically, the concept in the plastic arts.
4. Gordon Pask, “Foreword,” in John Frazer, *An Evolutionary Architecture* (London: AA Publications 1995), p. 6.
5. For an outline of this argument, see: Helene Stub, “Bridging Lived World and Modelled World with Personal Experience,” in *Ethics in Architecture: Architectural Education in the Epoch of Virtuality*, Transactions on Architectural Education No. 08, ed. Anne Elisabeth Toft (Aarhus: European Association for Architectural Education 2000), p. 90.
6. When I speak of aesthetic experience I refer to the original philosophical meaning of aesthetic where it was distinguished between aistheta, meaning things perceptible by the senses; or, perceptive, sharp in the senses, as opposed to noeta, things thinkable or immaterial. With experience it is important to unfold the inherent ambiguity of the word in English. I refer here to the distinction made by Hans-Georg Gadamer between experience as *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The experience of architecture, I suggest, is different from the experience of a work of art in that it can be seen to be both *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.

7. E.g. knowing someone as in “I know my friend,” or Michael Polanyi’s “personal knowledge” (“tacit knowing”).
8. First, vocational relevancy through the role played by the disciplines in my seeing the possibility for the hypothesis and in formulating it; second, traditional influence and hegemony; third, their persistence in relevancy throughout the research; and, fourth, their relevancy as historic roots to the framework I have chosen for the research, the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty.
9. It is important to emphasize that the map is not a model of how things are, but a theoretical mapping of the levels of inquiry as coloured circles and the disciplines as enlightened sectors.
10. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosophy of Existence,” in *Texts and Dialogues: On Philosophy, Politics, and Culture*, eds. Hugh J. Silverman and James Barry, Jr., trans. Michael B. Smith et al. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1996, reprint), p. 133.
11. In difference to interdisciplinarity, which is concerned with the transfer of methods from one discipline to another, “transdisciplinarity concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across different disciplines, and beyond all discipline.” Basarab Nicolescu, Extract from the book *Transdisciplinarity – A Manifesto*, trans. Karen-Claire Voss (Paris: International Center for Transdisciplinary Research 1999; <http://perso.club-internet.fr/nicol/ciret/>).
12. Phenomenology, generally, is the in-depth study of how things appear to consciousness. It studies our individual subjective perspectives. The appropriateness of phenomenology for UD is particularly clear in Merleau-Ponty’s existential phenomenology. For him the basic task of phenomenology is to overcome the limitations of determinant and objective investigations by describing the way experience develops. Merleau-Ponty has his own kind of reduction: From the objective to the subjective; from the abstract to the concrete. Throughout his work his methodological genius was the way he combined phenomenology with psychology.
13. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1964, eighth paperback printing 1989), p. 13.
14. These processes are “hidden” in phenomenological descriptions because, although we cannot be conscious of them separately, these processes are part of our being alive, which we are indeed conscious of.
15. For an outline of this argument, see: Helene Stub, in *Ethics in Architecture: Architectural Education in the Epoch of Virtuality*, pp. 85–94.