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## **Structures of Experience: Media, Phenomenology, Architecture**

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Mobile communication technologies, integrated ubiquitous computing, public screens, digital projections, interactive building facades: acknowledging the increasingly interwoven status of media and urban space is now unavoidable. With media often no longer confined to the surfaces of individual screens or discrete devices, it is now necessary to conceptualize new forms of ambient, environmental, or “atmospheric media” – to use a term employed by Mark B. N. Hansen (2012: 501). Interpretations of this contemporary urban situation by media theorists, such as Lev Manovich, Friedrich Kittler and Alain Mons, have begun to inform, to some extent, the discourse and practice of architecture and urban planning. It is not unusual, for example, to encounter Manovich’s observations on multi-media enriched “augmented spaces” (2006) or Kittler’s theory of the city as itself a medium (1996) within the reading lists and lectures of architecture schools. Yet the movement of ideas has rarely traveled the opposite direction; the possibility that architectural theory might, in turn, contribute to our understanding of these new forms of “spatialized media” has remained largely unexplored.

This paper will chart one possible link between architectural thought and current developments in urban public media by examining an often overlooked current of design theory, that of architectural phenomenology. A precedent to postmodern and poststructuralist practice, the philosophy of phenomenology was a

particularly significant influence on the architectural discourse of the 1960s and 70s. The lineage of architectural phenomenology extends further, however, encompassing such varied figures as Jean Labatut, Christian Norberg-Schulz and Juhani Pallasmaa, all linked by their conviction that architecture's fundamental concern is the creation of a historically situated "place" for being and that the social "meaning" of buildings must be accessed directly through bodily and sensory experience. This seems an especially appropriate time to consider this history as there has been a recent resurgence in interest in architectural phenomenology as evidenced by the publishing of: reissued canonical texts, such as Steven Holl, Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Juhani Pallasmaa's 1994 book *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture* (2007); journal issues and essay collections, such as the Benoit Jacquet and Vincent Giraud edited volume *From the Things Themselves: Architecture and Phenomenology* (2012); and theoretical and historical accounts, such as M. Reza Shirazi's *Towards an Articulated Phenomenological Interpretation of Architecture* (2014) and Jorge Otero-Pailos's excellent *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (2010).

This chapter will begin by introducing some of the many architects and ideas that make up the genealogy of architectural phenomenology. It will then discuss what such a perspective might contribute to a contemporary consideration of mediated urban space, and also what limitations or challenges this viewpoint might face. Finally, the chapter will briefly consider the application of these ideas in the context of a specific media/architecture environment, United Visual Artists's

*Momentum* project, which was installed at The Curve gallery in London's Barbican Centre from February to June of 2014.

## **Architectural Phenomenology**

Discussions and practices of architectural phenomenology extend across numerous national borders and span several decades. Describing the features and central tenants of the dispersed "movement" (for lack of a better term) would be a difficult task for a book length study, let alone a short chapter such as this. I have attempted here to briefly describe a number of key proponents of phenomenological thinking within architecture, while highlighting three themes that are particularly salient in relation to questions of media and urban space: the exploration of architecture's connection to history and "place making;" the prioritization of bodily and sensory experience in relation to the built environment; and the movement's attitudes towards technology and media.

The philosophical touchstone for many of the key figures of architectural phenomenology is clearly Martin Heidegger and the Norwegian architect, historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz – author of *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, amongst many other texts – was one of the early figures to introduce readings of the German thinker to the architectural community. Norberg-Schulz invoked Heidegger, and particularly his concepts of "dwelling," to support a resistance to the "loss of place" resulting from processes of modernity and post-war urban rebuilding and expansion. Architecture's primary responsibility,

according to Norberg-Schulz, was to remain attuned to the identity or “genius loci” of a specific place, and thus capable of preserving its distinct character, meaning and coherence. He suggest that, “Architectural space as a concretization of existential space gives us the key to the problem. Architectural space concretizes man’s being in the world” (Norberg-Schulz, 1971: 69).

Architectural history had, according to Norberg-Schulz, lost sight of the total and immediate experience of building structures, partitioning them instead into constitutive elements and the historical development of stylistic traditions. Against this tendency, he introduced a method that he called “topological historiography” (in Otero-Pailos, 2010: 157) in which he sought to identify the originary visual patterns or “topologies” that underpin the specific architectural manifestations of history. The architect’s goal was thus to become topologically sensitive and therefore capable of reading and bringing forward these archetypal forms, often derived from the landscape itself, into the creation of an authentic and livable places.

In books such as *Existence, Space & Architecture* (1971: 114), Norberg-Schulz himself sought to concretize the path structures, sacred spaces, domains and fields that constitute the “coherent environmental image” of our historical urban lifeworlds. He would later use the Heidegger-inspired term “aletheic image” or “truth image” to describe the unveiling of these underlying patterns to the attentive reader of the landscape (in Otero-Pailos, 2010: 176). And Norberg-Schulz’s preferred means for illustrating his topological claims was the photographic essay (a technique adopted perhaps from his teacher Sigfried Giedion), through which he dramatically revealed visual connections amongst seemingly disparate buildings

and spaces. While maintaining that the meaning of architecture must be experienced as a kind of unified gestalt impact, many critics have noted that Norberg-Schulz's method relied almost entirely on the static visual image of the photograph, thus excluding movement and the other senses from his spatial analysis. As Eduard Führ suggests, "it is the view that constitutes the 'genius loci'; more accurately, 'genius loci' is the product of the photographic gaze" (in Shirazi, 2014: 62).

Arguably more problematic still are the adamantly anti-technological and historically conservative tendencies of Norberg-Schulz's thought. In response to the "fatal ideas of mobility and disintegration" engendered by the development of "television and rapid means of communication," he insisted that the pace of architectural change must be slow and attached to a strong and stable identity (Norberg-Schulz, 1971: 114). Otero-Pailos (2010: 174) highlights Norberg-Schulz's time as a visiting professor at MIT during the height of the university's experimentation in artificial intelligence and his sympathies with Hubert Dreyfus' phenomenological criticisms of these computational claims. In the place of technological advancement, Norberg-Schulz presents a romantic and even mythical vision of the architect as genius-creator, searching out authentic "aletheic images" from the natural landscape and warding off the emergent threats of the computer.

The writing of British architect and theorist Kenneth Frampton can be viewed, in part, as an attempt to militate against some of these traditionalistic and anti-technological tendencies, without abandoning the phenomenological principles from which they derive. Like Norberg-Schulz, Frampton was concerned with the preservation and creation of "socially experienced" places in contradistinction to

modernist notions of abstract, universal and infinite space, but he also believed strongly in the necessary utilization of advanced building techniques in the process of their realization. His close engagement with Heidegger motivated his differentiation between building (the production of vernacular places for living) and architecture (the construction of elite monumental structures with which architectural studies had been uniquely concerned). For example, in his 1975 editorial statement in the influential *Oppositions* journal, titled "On Reading Heidegger," Frampton (1975) attempts to outline the contradictory relationship between place and production, a qualitative end realized through a quantitative means. "Place," he notes, "arises at a symbolic level with the conscious signification of social meaning and at a concrete level with the establishment of an articulate realm on which man or men may come into being."

Frampton's views on the importance of place creation eventually crystallize into his architectural theory of "critical regionalism" published in 1983. Borrowing from Paul Ricoeur, Frampton (1983: 16) characterizes the problem of the age as one of learning "how to become modern and return to sources." In other words, Frampton attempts to work out a model of creation that passes through a dialectic of both history and progress. He claims at this time that architecture can only be sustained as a critical practice if it assumes what he calls an *arrière-garde* position: "one which removes itself from both the optimization of advanced technology and the ever-present tendency to regress into nostalgic historicism or the glibly decorative" (Frampton, 1983: 20). Here Frampton distances himself from both the overly sentimental strains of phenomenological architecture and the developing

post-modern architecture of historical pastiche. His efforts to address the inherent tensions between the demands of cultural memory and those of innovation are picked up by a subsequent generation of architectural phenomenologists. Writing a decade later, for example, the architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez (1994: 23) argues that the *poiesis* of architecture – its connection to meaning and “presencing” – must involve an acceptance of the discipline’s connection to the technological, while nonetheless demonstrating “the mysterious origin of technology and the impossibility of survival in a world of objectified things or cyberspace.”

In his formulation of critical regionalism Frampton argues for a method of incorporating advanced building techniques, while simultaneously placing limits on their tendencies of standardization. His approach to design seeks to allow openings for creativity and idiosyncratic form, without those processes devolving into a kind of indulgent expressiveness. Moving away from the façade and the scenographic, Frampton (1983: 28) suggests that what architecture must strive for is “the presentation of a structural poetic,” which ultimately operates on a tactile, rather than visual register. The architect’s techniques for cultivating a place for dwelling are, according to Frampton, to be directed towards the sensing body: the manipulation of light and darkness, the regulation of heat and cold, the use of texture and aroma. The tectonic architecture that he promotes is, therefore, one that offers itself up to be experienced and felt, rather than simply viewed. It would seem then that Frampton’s articulation of critical regionalism brings us closer to a set of guidelines or ideals that are phenomenological in orientation without being anti-



technological, but he, like Pérez-Gómez, remains wary of the growing influence of media within contemporary culture. In architecture's embrace of communicative media, particularly in its post-modern appearance, he sees a damaging "sublimation of a desire for direct experience through the provision of information" (Frampton, 1983: 21).

Frampton's extension of spatial perception to the tactile and multi-sensory realm of embodied experience is one of the central threads of architectural phenomenology. One of the most forceful proponents of the importance of this haptic sensibility is the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2005: 9) who goes so far as to ascribe the "inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities" to "an imbalance in our sensory system." Decrying the persistent hegemony of vision within architectural discourse, Pallasmaa (1994: 30) argues that architecture "involves seven realms of sensory experience which interact and infuse each other." He adds the kinesthesia of skeleton and muscle to the five traditional senses, placing him in potential conversation with the affect-oriented theories of contemporary philosophers like Brian Massumi (2002: 58), who stresses the intensive, "proprioceptive" awareness of the body's movement in space. But despite exploring (in his book *The Architecture of Image: Existential Space in Cinema*) the parallels between cinema and architecture in terms of their shared capacity to "create and mediate comprehensive images of life" (2007: 13), Pallasmaa again positions the expanded presence of media technology in social life as a primary contributor to modern urban alienation and isolation. The dominance of the sense of vision, and resultant experiential detachment, is reinforced, he argues, "by a multitude of

technological inventions and the endless multiplication and production of images” (Pallasmaa, 2005: 12).

For a more thorough consideration of the multi-sensory nature of spatialized media practice and the ways in which communication technologies and architectural space may be intertwined, we must, somewhat paradoxically, turn to one of the earliest figures to be associated with architectural phenomenology. It is largely thanks to the archival work of Otero-Pailos that the contribution of the French architect and Princeton professor, Jean Labatut, has recently been inserted into a history of phenomenology and architecture. The creative and intellectual trajectory of Labatut is particularly important for this discussion given the consistently central role that techniques of visual communication played within his architectural career. As Otero-Pailos (2010: 26) documents, Labatut worked as a “camouflage artist” during the first World War in France, studying the capacity of visual patterns to make buildings, infrastructure and military equipment effectively disappear into their surrounding environments. This early formation helped establish Labatut’s assertion that one of the primary concerns of architecture was “the organization of attention” (Otero-Pailos, 2010: 25) within an increasingly distracting urban field and that, in order to do so, the practice must learn from and incorporate the mid-twentieth century’s rapidly developing commercial knowledge of graphic communication arts and design.

The French architect’s other unyielding conviction was that building design was a matter of expanding the participant’s sensory experience of their surroundings and thereby achieving an augmented spiritual intensity. Labatut’s

readings of Henri Bergson – the philosopher’s concepts of duration, mobility and creativity – helped him develop a notion of architecture rooted in a capacity for “stimulating, concentrating, intensifying, and modulating the experience of movement” (Otero-Pailos, 2010: 43). His choreography of the sound and light program for the Lagoon of Nations fountain at the 1939 New York World’s Fair provided what he views as an occasion to experiment in the visual and auditory simulation of movement. The Lagoon’s impressive technical infrastructure included 1,400 water nozzles, 600 lighting drums, 300 fireworks motors and 24 loudspeakers (Otero-Pailos, 2010: 43). Blurring the roles of architect and multi-media designer, Labatut was able to create a spectacle of experience that he believed was capable of inducing a transcendent state. That this and other early explorations were appreciated more for their commercial application than their contribution to a modern avant-garde was a source of disappointment for Labatut. He moved on to approach the domain of the sacred more explicitly in his realized and unrealized designs for ecclesiastical buildings, where he continued to experiment with the effects of “moving colored light” (Otero-Pailos, 2010: 73) – through modulating projections and painted glass screens – and the “deployment of poetic events” (Otero-Pailos, 2010: 88) designed to heighten bodily self-awareness, such as: the use of tactile materials; the regulation of rhythms and movements using ramps and gradients; and the incorporation of abrupt changes in spatial scale. Labatut’s practice moved away from the spectacle and towards more subtle combinations of multi-media techniques and phenomenological experience, an interaction that he believed could unlock architecture’s spiritual dimension.

## **A Phenomenological Understanding of Mediated Urban Space?**

What concepts or directions then does this rather quick summary of phenomenological architecture introduce to our possible understandings of the contemporary intersections of media and urban space? Given the current state of property speculation and developer-driven city planning, it seems timely to re-introduce several phenomenological priorities that have, until recently, fallen out of fashion. Considering how media technologies might aid in the process of “place making” and historical engagement would certainly be a productive endeavor. Could we, in other words, be entering a moment in which media technologies may contribute to, rather than prohibit, the establishment of a contemporary architectural poetics? This would entail a technologically enabled attunement to both topographical and historical context that does not rely on modes of pastiche or descend into nostalgic sentimentalism. The potential of media to provide a layer of historical depth to an existing physical geography, rather than simply a superficial aesthetic overlay, is not difficult to envision. Location-based or “augmented space” media projects have, of course, been examining this terrain for some time (e.g. the urban-narrative works of media artist and writer Kate Armstrong), but phenomenological architecture encourages us to explore these possibilities further.

While many of the phenomenologists of the past have associated media communications with a hegemony of vision and the proliferation of images absent of meaning, our current media period is more than capable of supporting haptic and multi-sensory spatial design (e.g. Lars Spuybroek’s *Son-O-House*, in which the

motion of visitors through the architectural structure, captured through sensor technology, leads to the generation of a sound environment). While still too often operating within the register of the spectacular, media-enabled architecture has the capacity to orient itself in significant ways around the generation of experience, movement and relation. Digital media scholars and interaction designers are beginning to collaborate productively around these very themes (e.g. Fritsch, 2011). And finally, thinking in phenomenological terms, encourages us to consider spatialized forms of media as not only experiential and environmental, but also material. The physical infrastructure and systems of production required to enable place creation are never far from view in phenomenological thinking, particularly in Frampton's writing, providing a useful check on the propensity of media studies to divorce considerations of image, content or experience from those of material conditions or substrate. Interpretations of urban media must be wary of the tendency to consider "the cloud" and lose sight of the server. Infrastructure conscious communication scholars such as Lisa Parks (see conversation in this volume) and Brian Larkin (2008) are already foregrounding the materiality of media in important ways.

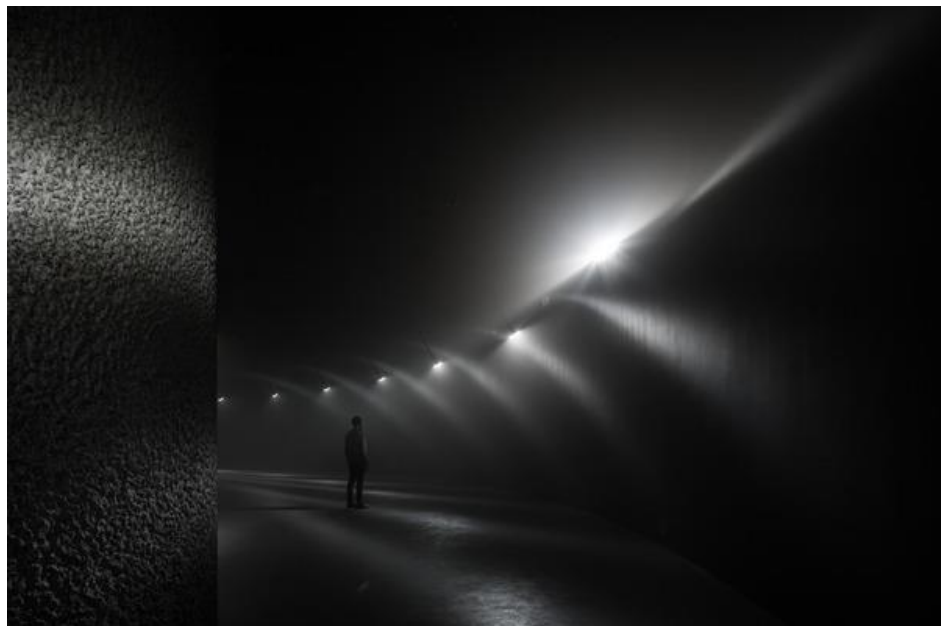
There are also, however, some important challenges or limitations that arise when we consider the application of phenomenological thought to questions of mediated space. The first relates to the issue of the spectacle. As discussed earlier, Labatut viewed architecture as a matter of "organizing attention" within an urban environment increasingly saturated with visual and sensory noise. He moved from his initial attempts to surpass competing commercial spectacles, to a later

recognition that more ambient and contemplative strategies were required. Current media-based projects in public space often continue to wage this battle for attention, relying on audio and visual techniques that can be quickly appropriated by corporate industries. The pervasiveness of the contemporary experience economy, while not something most architectural phenomenologists could have predicted, clearly complicates the unquestioned assumption that multi-sensory, rather than visual, experience offers a respite from alienation and a more immediate connection to an authentic lifeworld. We're compelled to ask whether media projects in the urban environment have the capacity to engender a qualitatively different mode of experience, perhaps more reflective, and a contrasting set of affects.

The second challenge that must, I think, be highlighted is the growing recognition that much of our contemporary media operate on a level that is actually radically inaccessible or removed from the human senses. For example, object-oriented philosophers, such as Graham Harman (see conversation in this volume) and Ian Bogost, underline the way that technological objects – like all objects – are partially withdrawn from human understanding and exist in ontological excess of the uses we make of them. Bogost (2012: 79) pays particular attention to digital media objects, acknowledging the “alien phenomenology” of their source code: “the logic that lives inside of objects, inaccessible from without.” Coming to terms with the rising influence of the technologies of data capture, algorithmic calculation and behavioral prediction, Mark Hansen (2013) has begun to refer explicitly to the “non-phenomenological” status of contemporary media. And in related work, Bernard Stiegler (2011: 57) exposes the “tertiary retentions” – an industrialized reservoir of

media content, user profiling and mnemotechniques – that undergird and pre-pattern our collective consciousness and scope for future action. We are all, according to Hansen and Stiegler, participating in the creation of a technological “lifeworld” of calculation and prediction, to which we contribute (our data, communication, desires and relationships), yet to which we also have no direct sensory access. In many ways, this media-enabled age of code and data is the apotheosis of the instrumental and abstracted optimization that horrified the first wave of architectural phenomenology. There is certainly an imperative to think very carefully about how media-infused architecture or public works may contribute to this accumulating non-phenomenological data realm, but also to consider how these projects might be capable of actually intervening in or questioning these processes of information capture and social control.

***Momentum: A Phenomenological and Non-Phenomenological Experience***



## United Visual Artists *Momentum* (2014)

With these phenomenological potentials and challenges in mind, I'd like to turn finally to a specific example of a recent project in which media technologies and architecture space are provocatively intertwined. The United Visual Artists (UVA) is a collaborative London-based art practice working across the disciplines of sculpture, architecture, installation and digital media. Their work titled *Momentum* was installed from February to June 2014 in The Curve gallery, a ninety meter-long arced exhibition space running behind the Barbican Centre's Music Hall. The project involves movement through the smoke-filled space of twelve independently programmed pendulums, each one equipped to emit both sound and light. The pendulums cycle through a varied sequence of operations, sporadically illuminating the darkened gallery with white light and filling it with atmospheric tones. At times the devices appear to be working in synchronicity or reacting to each other's movements; at other times they seem to be performing entirely independently.

Although involving a complex technical infrastructure, *Momentum* is minimal and serene in mood and aesthetic. Participants in the space of the gallery are confronted with near total darkness and must strain, through a sheet of smoke, to make out the contours of the hall, the walls of which are intermittently revealed by the light and motion of the pendulums. The experience is an initially disarming one and the installation succeeds in recalibrating the participant's habitual sensory system, periodically heightening some faculties, while diminishing others. Touch



and haptic vision are activated, as the visitor's immediate inclination is likely to reach out for the eponymous curved wall of the gallery and move along its surface. This is undoubtedly a multi-sensory and movement-oriented experience, "presencing" the gallery as a singular place with distinctive physical features, while also bringing into being a meditative temporality. An earlier version of the installation titled *Chorus* was situated in Durham Cathedral in 2009, drawing links to Labatut's ecclesiastical projects, and the pendulums in their Barbican setting still invoke the hanging lamps and incense burning thuribles featured in Christian church architecture.

UVA's installation demonstrates many of the ways in which the conjunction of media and architecture has the capacity to mobilize central themes of architectural phenomenology: from movement-oriented and multi-sensory design to a poetics of place creation. Yet *Momentum* also offers a certain element of exposure to the non-phenomenological realm of the digital articulated by the media theorists mentioned above. Unlike many media installations, the twelve pendulums that make up *Momentum* are not user activated or interactive. They operate according to their own logics of movement and exude a distinctly "alien" or non-human presence within the space of the gallery. The pendulums appear extremely probe-like when the light and sound they emit scans the walls of the gallery, as if collecting information from an unknown landscape. While the installation is beautifully hypnotic, there is also something slightly disquieting about sharing a confined space with these technological mechanisms animated by the protocols of

their algorithmic software code. *Momentum*, in other words, provides an experience of the non-phenomenological digital uncanny.

## **Conclusion**

A somewhat overlooked chapter of design history, architectural phenomenology has been the subject of a recent resurgence in scholarly interest. This short chapter has attempted to bring some of the figures and ideas associated with the movement into discussion with issues pertaining to contemporary digitally enhanced architecture and spatialized media. Architectural phenomenology's emphasis on place creation, movement and mobility, and multi-sensory experience find some significant parallels within current media-based architecture and urban design thought and practice. Yet our current data and code driven media environments present a level of experience that is radically non-phenomenological, yet equally crucial to consider. Specific design projects such as UVA's *Momentum* suggest, however, that media-based interventions within architectural space may be capable of instantiating the poetics of presence promoted by phenomenologists, while also provoking considerations of and partial contact with the withdrawn and alien "lifeworld" of data and code.

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