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Transforming Space into Place: Exploring Phenomenology in the Built Environment

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Abstract: *Phenomenology has always been a part of designing, but has been underutilized for years. By acknowledging certain senses, a space can grow from being just a "space" into a "place". In order to create a truly unique and memorable place, it needs to access more than one sense in the visitor. Introducing the concept of phenomenology into a designed space can shed a new light on the space and create an overall better experience for the environment its in. To comply with this type of thinking, I hereby propose a study ofdesigned spaces at the University of Illinois Urbana---Champaign that successfully acknowledge the use of phenomenology. This study is to be carried out in a qualitative manner, determining why the visitors repeatedly come to the building and what about the building attracts them. The results will determine if the phenomenological outlook on the space was successful and what successes should be applied to other spaces. The findings aim to provide insight into how sensory-rich environments influence behaviour and attachment, offering strategies for future designs to better resonate with users. The purpose of the study is to highlight the need for architects and designers to move beyond visual aesthetics and embrace multisensory design elements to enhance the user's experience leading to a profound connection between people and place.*

Keywords: Phenomenology in design, place-identity, sense of place, multisensory design, built environment, environmental psychology

Research Question:

The primary focus of this research is to determine how a person's sense is activated within a space and if that activation has a direct correlation to the success of the design. By looking at a specific designed space and its factors as well as the visitors within the space, the research can then answer the following question:

How can the use of phenomenology in design change an individual's perception of a "space" into a "place"? What creates a 'place---identity' within the built environment?

Rationale:

When looking at design, it is important to determine what it is about the design that makes it successful to both the new and reoccurring visitors. A person's activated senses are a strong factor

in determining how the design interacts with the people as well as the surrounding environment. The concept of phenomenology in design is highly underutilized. By providing evidence that a design can activate each sense individually; it can be said that the relationship between the senses and the design should be parallel meaning that one reacts to the other and visa versa.

Compiling this research will then determine how a designer can alter an individual's perception of a space. The ultimate goal of a designer is to have the individual react positively to the space and want to come back. By determining how that change of turning a "space" into a "place" occurs through the individual's perspective, the designer can then apply that rationale to future endeavours. It is also important to create a "place---identity" within a design, meaning it needs to register with the visitor as a specific, memorable design in the built environment rather than unremarkable space.

Introduction

How can design change an individual's perception of a "space" into a "place? The answer to this carefully crafted question has a broad connection with how the built environment is ultimately designed. Without considering how a person is going to react to or interact with a space, it fails at its transformation to a "place". The designed space has no importance to the person or the environment as a whole if it cannot create some type of impact. The term 'place', unlike 'space', implies a strong emotional tie between a person and a particular physical location (Sime 1986). There has been much research and many experiments done to understand what it is about a built environment that truly connects with a person.

However, there are only a few theories that have been developed concerning what makes a "space" into "place" throughout all the of the research done on the topic. These theories ultimately express why and how the built environment connects with the visitors and users and why that connection makes the environment successful as a place. There are existing standards that people consider when talking about successful design, but it is not only about the physical design. The space needs to connect with people it was ultimately built for. When a design of the built environment can involve phenomenology or is strong enough to create a memory by exceeding expectations, then the design can be considered successful in developing a Sense of Place.

Phenomenological approach to design:

Designed environments that successfully enable users to develop a sense of place enable a direct connection between the people within the environment and the design of the environment. The best way for a person to both react to and interact with a design is by establishing a sensory connection to the design that goes beyond the visual sense. A person first reacts to a design by viewing it and digesting the design through their eyes. The phenomenological perspective on design questions design decisions by determining how the physical environment is meaningfully (or intentionally) grasped (Seamon 1982). By adding another sensory connection to the design beyond sight, people have stronger attachments to the design and the environment as a whole.

Phenomenology is a growing approach to architectural design because of its ability to address an individual's sensory functions while in a space. By introducing touch, sound, or even smell to the environment, a person can create a stronger relationship with the design. Both designers and researches are now encouraging a multisensory approach to design because a person's reaction grows stronger as more senses are introduced (Lee 2013). Seamon identifies bodily intentionality and emotional intentionality as important modes, which are often neglected within design (1982). By establishing the intentions of the design itself and the intentions of how people should react to the design, a phenomenological approach can largely influence how a design is viewed and ultimately how a space is used. Emotionally weighted information attracts a personal more quickly and enhances memory strength of a place, ultimately solidifying the sensory success of a design (Lengen 2012).

Phenomenology in design has quickly dismissed the typical quantitative reasoning in environmental psychology and strictly looks as the qualitative methods as ways of understanding the essential meaning of place for individuals and the emotional role places play in people's lives. Consequently, most research done on exploring a phenomenological lens uses interviews and

observations rather than numerical data (Auburn 2006). The goal of this research is to see beyond or beneath this ‘‘natural attitude’’ and gain a more accurate understanding of the behavioural patterns people develop within a space (Schroeder 2007).

The goal of applying phenomenological understanding to the design process is to create a more universal identity of the place that people can comprehend and that also enables them to develop their own self---identity with the environment. Design works best when the concept of the design as well as the use of the design are apparent to the individual and there is no better way of revealing these features than by gradually introducing multiple sense---activating features to the built environment (Lengon 2012). By taking into consideration the taken---for---grantedness (or natural attitude) of people within the built environment, a phenomenologist can assess how and why people react the way they do and to improve that interaction with a space (Seamon 1982). The final goal of phenomenology is to study a person’s behaviour in a space and how that affects the individual as well as the space itself. By observing this behaviour and determining whether it is relevant to the design, the use of sensory factors can change the existing feeling of a space and leave a lasting impression on its users.

The contribution of memory

In order for a place to play a significant part in an individual’s life or in the life of a community, it needs to create an impact in someway. The impact may be cultural, ecological, but ultimately the place makes the most impact if it can attach itself to memory. According to Giuliani, the experience of a place is primarily defined by its ability to affect people, by creating a strong, long---lasting emotional attachment of the person to a location (1993). By striking some emotional chord within a person and attaching itself to a memory, the space changes its definition from a space within the environment to a place within the built environment. Current research demonstrates that the bond between a person and the built environment is strongest if the design can endure its identity through a changing social and physical environment (Proshansky 1974). The strongest place identity forms when a person can establish an intense memory link to a place that can remain certain through a changing context.

Forming a memory of a place creates a cognitive and emotional connection to the architectural design that alters the view of the environment. This altered view can change both the individual’s outlook on the design as well as the use of the space. The use of the space can also be altered by the expectations the user has for the space. If the expectations of a designed space are not met or fall short for the individual, the memory of the space. could be modified into an unsatisfied one. Research has reinforced the importance of an individual’s interaction with the environment as well as the experiences and memories of those experiences that create the bond with the built environment (Kyle 2004). The strength the expectations have on an individual within a space can be used to establish a strong emotional tie and memory of the design eventually creating a bond with the built environment.

The creation of sense of place

Environment refers to a large spatial domain than the word “place” is typically used to describe. The term “place” gives a more intimate feel to an environment, making it more manageable for an individual to establish a relationship with the space and eventually create a Sense of Place. A place is never merely a space, but part of a larger environment that is being felt through the ‘actual’ experience of memorable events. The experience is felt through all the senses and the place experience is in fact a “total sensual experience”, eventually creating sense of place that the design needed in order to move to the more intimate level of environments (Genereux 1991). Sime (1986) argued against the limitations of a purely cognitively driven definition of place. The definition of sense of place lies in the beholder’s senses and mind. By combining the emotional attachment from the senses and the cognitive attachment from the memory and expectations of a space, an individual creates his own definition of sense of place differing from anyone else’s definition. Each person creates his own sense of place. Essentially, the

term 'place', looks beyond geographic space to the experience people have of being in particular environments establishing their own definition of that environment. Designers strive to create an environment that is sensorially rich and through that richness allow users to develop within themselves a sense of place and identify a connection to a place as a "place" and not just a "space". Without a sense of place in a design, it fails as a part of the cultural and systematic environment.

In order to create this all---important sense of place, the design needs to use the qualitative findings identified by previous research showing that the design needs to affect multiple senses while altering cognitive response to the space at the same time. By combining these to phenomena into one overarching experience, the design takes on a whole new meaning to the visitors. The design is not just a physical environment nor is it an emotional altering space, but the perfect consolidation of the two.

Research Plan:

For this proposal, all research will be done in a qualitative manner. The point of this research is to determine "why" a person feels so attached to a space and "how" that attachment occurs. In order to determine this, two different methods should be used. Both methods need to occur in conjunction with each other. The space chosen must activate more than one sense at a time and must be a highly used space. For this proposal, the Business Instructional Facility [BIF] atrium will be the place of study. This space works because it is highly populated and stimulates multiple senses on first contact.

First, the researcher must observe the spaces in question through photography. This provides a basis for the further research. Photographs will be taken for the atrium in four different scenarios; in the late morning on a weekday, after school hours on a weekday, in the late morning on a weekend, and in the evening on a weekend. These four different times will show multiple uses for the spaces ranging from an in between class break space to a late-night study hall. These times will show how a person reacts when the building is being used for class versus when it is being used for leisure/personal use. Each observation period should last up to 45 minutes to determine how an individual reacts to and within the space. The analysis of these photographs determines patterns and behaviours of the individuals within the space looking for the answers to the following questions

- Is the individual here for leisure or work?
- Where to people tend to gather?
- What areas are left vacant?
- Do the individuals seem to prefer artificial or natural light?
- Do the individuals react to the smell of the café?
- Approximately how long does the average visitor linger for?

These questions will set a basis for the second method of research, which is providing a questionnaire to the visitors. The questionnaire is given to the person while he is present in the space so that his senses are activated while he answers the questions. These questions provide further insight into how an individual feels about the space and why he may have developed a "place---identity" to the atrium. This questionnaire is distributed during the same time periods as the observation method to provide a level of consistency between the two methods. The questions provided are as follows:

- Do you feel like this space satisfies your expectations of a school atrium? (strongly disagree to strongly agree).
- Do you feel some type of attachment to this space? (strongly disagree to strongly agree)
- Do you enjoy visiting the space outside of class time? (strongly disagree to strongly agree
- Do you enjoy visiting the space outside of class time? (strongly disagree to strongly agree)

- What senses do you feel are activated in this space? [with list of senses to choose from]
- What type of senses do you think need to be activated MORE within the space? [with list of senses to choose from]
- When not present in space, what aspects come to the mind first? [work, school, café, other]
- What aspect of the space do you like most [seating, openness, windows to garden, proximity to classes, studying space, café smell, sunlight in space, quietness at night, activity during day]
- How many times a week do you visit the atrium?
- What aspects of this space would you change?

These questions allow for a varying range of answers and also provide a space where the individual can express his or her own opinion on the atrium. Analysis of these questions includes finding consistency of what senses are activated and how that correlate to the individual's level of attachment to the atrium. The questionnaires are analysed individually to determine a pattern on an individual basis and then are analysed against each other to determine an overarching pattern.

Together, the methods provide insight into how phenomenology has an effect on the space as well as the individuals inside the space.

Pilot Test 1:

Observation through photography

Plan:

Data will be both qualitative and quantitative

- Qualitative – how people are reacting in space, what zones they are attracted to?
- Quantitative – number of everyday visitors, number of uncommon visitors, time duration.

Tools needed:

- Camera
- Paper to make notes during observation
- Floor plan of space being observed (BIF)

Size of pilot test:

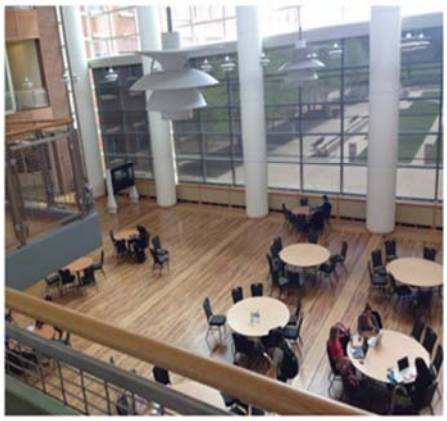
Observe at two different times of day, two times each

- During class time
- During night time or weekend observation

Pilot test:

- Wednesday 11am --- taking pictures of atrium space from different angles and levels
- Wednesday 6:30pm --- taking pictures of atrium space from different angles and levels
- Saturday 11am --- taking pictures of atrium space from different angles and levels
- Saturday 6:30pm --- taking pictures of atrium space from different angles and levels

weekday daytime (11:00am)



observations:
- students using atrium as rest space between classes
- working on school work
- using cafe/lunch break area
- group work
- people sitting a larger tables
- tend to face large windows or cafe area when seated
- large shades pulled down, dimming sunlight
- more people walking around rather than sitting

weekday evening (6:30pm)



observations:
- students using atrium as group project gathering space
- students tend to sit all together
- lively place in atrium
- more people sitting rather than walking around
- facing all directions
- not as many people seated near cafe

weekend daytime (11:00am)



observations:
- atrium used for group meetings/study space
- very few people roaming around rest of space
- people tend to sit at tables near each other
- shades down, so people facing away from windows
- tables nearest cafe more populated, waiting ofr it to open? (assumption)
- less of a social space, not at noisy on weekends

weekend evening (6:30pm)





observations:
- students using space as study area
- very quiet compared to other visits, not much commotion
- very few sitting near cafe because closed, no use of tables when not open? (assumption)
- no one sitting at upper level seating
- shades down again, so few facing out to courtyard

Needed changes:

The atrium needs to be observed more frequently and at different times during the day. Also, it needs to be observed on weekends as well to show how the space is utilized during non---class days. Also need to ask more of the visitors what the purpose of their visit is to determine why they are using the space instead of just how.

Pilot Test 2: Surveys

Plan:

Data will be both qualitative and quantitative

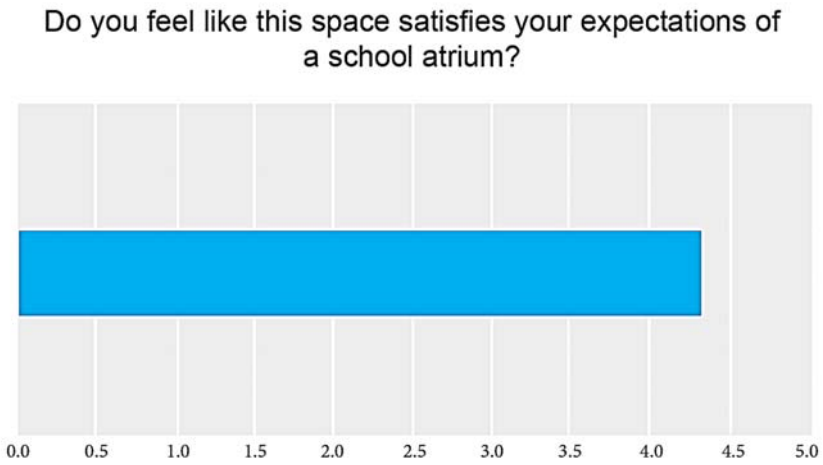
o Qualitative – seeing people's emotional reaction to space

Tools needed:

o Paper survey questionnaire or computer/tablet for online based survey

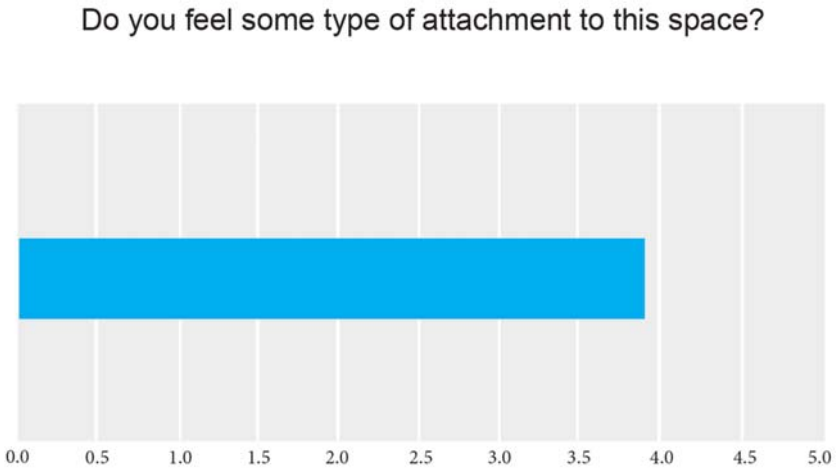
Pilot test:

- Do you feel like this space satisfies your expectations of a school atrium? (strongly disagree to strongly agree)
- Do you feel some type of attachment to this space? (strongly disagree to strongly agree)
- Do you enjoy visiting the space outside of class time? (strongly disagree to strongly agree)
- What senses do you feel are activated in this space?
- What aspects of this space would you change?



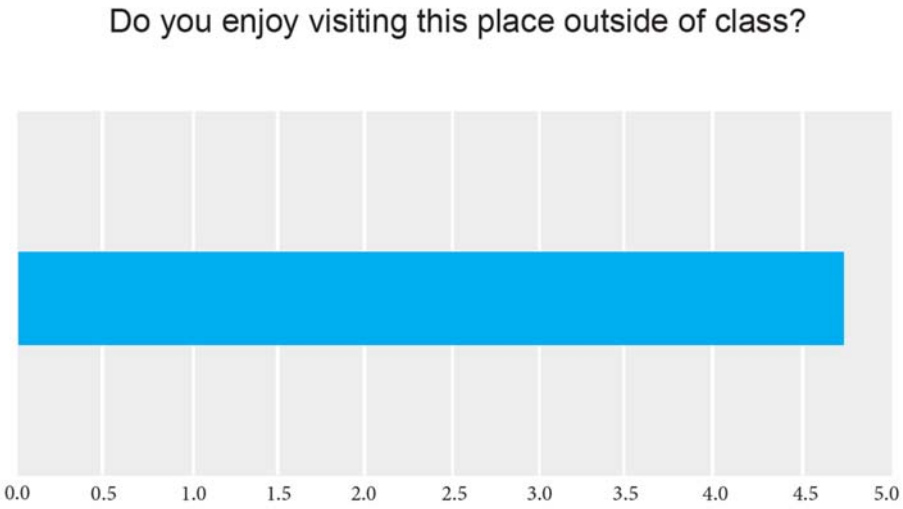
Average rating: 4.33

Agree to strongly agree



Average rating: 3.8

Neutral to agree



Average rating: 4.67

Agree to strongly agree

What aspects of this space would you change?

- more comfortable seating on ground level
- more casual seating in atrium space
- more outlets to charge laptop
- easier access to garden/courtyard
- more display areas for announcements
- larger cafe area
- more flexibility of table layout
- better ventilation from coffee area

Conclusion

Design, and its 'creation of places', is an artistic development. The transformation from space to place is an emotional and cognitive change within each individual being that can only be assessed by studying why people react certain ways and how to get the desired reaction within the built environment. Throughout the research done in environmental psychology, several factors of designed spaces determine if it will resonate with a visitor for long after the visitors have physically left the environment. Beyond the idea that a design is successful if it is being used to its full potential, it is equally as important to determine if it is having the desired affect on an individual. Through these methods, it is evident that the more a space stimulates multiple senses and provides diverse uses, the stronger its emotional impact on individuals, facilitating the shift from space to place. The understanding gained here emphasize that people are drawn towards not only aesthetics but also by the atmosphere, memories, and comfort a place offers, all of which deepen their attachment to the environment. The phenomenological approach therefore encourages designers to think beyond visual appeal and consider how subtle sensory interactions might create memorable experiences, forming a meaningful sense of place. For example, a school design is not just considered successful if it is used for only a school. The students desire an environment that is inviting, inspiring, and open to learning. If the school is dark and confining, none of the previous, good characteristics of the school will show through. A great, memorable design uses as many emotional triggers as possible, mostly through the five senses, to generate the largest impact on the space (Lee 2013). Using this idea of phenomenology, which is becoming quite prominent in future designs, to promote the development of emotional memories furthers the evolvement of a ‘space’ to a ‘place’, eventually leading to an individual’s own sense of place.

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