

MODULE TITLE: Cultural Context of Architecture III

MODULE CODE: ARC301B1

HAND OUT No: 11

Related Reading:

Moran D and Mooney T, The Phenomenology Reader, London and New York, Routledge, 2002

Phenomena and the Concept of a Causal Fabric

Phenomenology is recognisable by its insistence upon the body and world as part and parcel of human existence. As a result the concept of consciousness is usually in there somewhere as, obviously, is experience.

The reference (above) provides ample information about names and dates for those who need them or want them. It is generally a 20th Century concept with roots in earlier uses of the term phenomena and specific interest in finding out how our nervous system works.

What remains from early investigations and one might almost say the discovery of the brain by Willis in the 17th Century 300+ years ago

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=1033711>

and much closer work by Wundt and Brentano, the latter of whom taught Husserl

<http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/wundtjames.html>

and Husserl is said to have made phenomenology a recognisable approach to the problem of objects of thought.

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/h/husserl.htm>

MOST PEOPLE think of objects of thought as being in the head or brain or in consciousness and all of those kinds of thoughts are confusing because they explain some of our experience, such as thinking of an object, but fail to explain why the object we think of isn't the same as the object itself – for example when we express the object as a word other people can take it to be something that we did not think of, there is a level of ambivalence and equivocation that can be quite noticeable.

In my opinion it is best to understand the mental and spatial images as phenomena held apart from both body and world so that intrinsic links can be forged between them. The links can be strong or weak and even non-existent so that object and object can require all sorts of conditional linkages or stand as a strong link. It is possible to understand this concept if we think of getting a dog and then think of the dog we actually have, the first dog is conditional upon all sorts of attributes and values whereas the second dog, the one we have, is absolute (or unloved perhaps).

Hopefully you will realize that there must be a pre-phenomenological existence in which phenomena come into being and make themselves known to us or in which we call upon them to appear, such as trying to remember something that we have 'forgotten' or looking for something that we believe must be capable of being found or made. Phenomenology tries to address these kinds of issues and so some of it seems odd when compared to what is generally referred to as a Cartesian Theatre or a Cartesian linguistics that inform most social and cultural approaches to knowledge.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartesian_linguistics

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartesian_theater

Causal Fabric

The concept of a causal fabric is to be contemplated as being made up as a fabric with various strengths and stabilities and having weft and warp threads.

Two sets of thread or yarn that make up a piece of woven fabric. During the weaving process the warp threads are stretched from the back to the front of the loom. The weft threads are inserted across the loom at right angles to the warp; the weft threads going under and over the warp threads. Traditionally, the weft is held in a shuttle and one weft thread is inserted at a time, which limits the speed, but in some looms the weft is inserted in continuous waves across the loom.

The weft is analogous to links between resources and lives and the warp is analogous to pattern and plan. People are wefted into the fabric, it is not causal without them, and the plan is that of the pattern already woven by shuttling the weft yarn in and out of the warp yarn representing time ahead and time past.

It is an analogy rather than a metaphor and a little awkward but the term causal fabric is used by some excellent researchers to describe the loosely woven causality that applies to identities that we otherwise call cultural and social.

Those of you who wish to understand how causality may link to architecture as both phenomena and also causal fabrics can look at the work of Kevin Lynch

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_A._Lynch

and because cognitive mapping (linked with Lynch after Tolman) tends to be Cartesian rather than phenomenological you should also look at Neisser for his work on developmental cognition

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulric_Neisser

Many architects have heard of Lynch but not many have heard of Neisser because he introduces difficult concepts of culture and society into the problem of design that compromise neat rational solutions to problems.

In particular Neisser provides an uncomfortable take on knowledge as an evolving relationship that is repressed by identity so that recognition becomes functional rather than simply a familiarity with certain phenomena.

Architecture suffers a great deal from the project based relationship to making because it makes it appear as if solutions to problems on one project can be related to solutions on another project. However the influences, we could say the causal fabric, on one project is as different as one piece of cloth from another, it may be almost exactly the same, it may be as different as wool and cotton and multicoloured or plain. The analogy is not good, but the concept of transferring phenomena causally between projects is as problematic as the analogy suggests and architects often take the analogy to be a metaphor, exacerbating the problem.