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Mathias Detamore and Lauren Martin

Interrogating 'Experience': Phenomenology, Architecture and Erudition
disclosure interviews Mark Jarzombek.

Dr. Mark Jarzombek is the Director of History, Theory, and Criticism of Architecture and Art and a Professor of the History of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has written books and articles on a range of architectural topics, from Rabelais to Modern Catholicism. His most recent work, The Psychologizing of Modernity: Art, Architecture and History, historicizes the field of psychology and analyzes the corresponding formulations of subjectivity and modernity. Mathias Detamore and Lauren Martin, editors of disclosure, had the opportunity to converse with him during his visit to the University of Kentucky in April, 2006. His talk, "Ideology of 'Experience': The Phenomenological Turn in Architecture in the 1970's," was presented as the final installment of the Committee on Social Theory's Spring Public Lecture Series.

dC: We were wondering if you could introduce your analysis of the ideology of experience and phenomenology.

JM: Basically, I'm looking at a question or problem, from the 1970's onward, in architecture. I say there's a contemporary issue, which is about how architects and architectural historians look at emotion. How do we comment on it? And ultimately, since I'm a
disClosure interviews

historian, I want to ask how we bring it into history; as opposed to just having an opinion about who’s doing some things right and who isn’t. So I wrote a book on the psychologizing of modernity, the basic thesis of which is that psychology has a history, which is not the history of psychologists or the history that psychologists think they have, because they’re the experts. We need a history made by people who are outside of the discipline, who are looking at the contamination of psychology and culture. The book is thus an attempt at a history of psychology and an attempt at the same time at a critique of the history of psychology.

What I’m trying to do today is take a specialized problem within that larger phenomenon, as in with phenomenology. Phenomenology sort of floats through philosophy, underground mainly, and then all of the sudden in the 1970s, the doors open, and it becomes big in architecture with an equally large impact on architectural teaching. At first it was championed by a very small group, but I would say in the last ten or fifteen years it’s grown into a type of genre of authenticity – into a type of pop-phenomenology. And this concerns me because there are some in architecture who cannot separate an ideology of authenticity from authenticity itself. And so it forces some critical questions about the social construction of the field of architecture and indeed about the social construction of knowledge itself. I’m looking at large scale phenomena, but I’m trying to take one piece in center stage.

dC: Phenomenology is located in regional ideas about place. How do you feel that that has a role in our topic of emotion or emotional landscapes, and does phenomenology come off as a new grand narrative, that may be missing what’s actually happening in emotional landscapes? It’s almost trying to replicate it in a nostalgic way, but is the architecture necessarily coming back to the ground in ways that are really happening?

MJ: I would agree. Phenomenology has certainly brought the word experience to the table. When the professors tell us to go out and experience something, we don’t see it as anything devious or sinister. But we could look at that, and say well it may not be devious and sinister, but it’s definitely an ideological project that is at stake here. And, when do we say, enough? When do we say that this is not the right way, or say, yes to experience but be careful? How do we put limits, brackets, parentheses around this to watch ourselves in its operation? I mean we should “experience” Rome, but what do we really mean by that? People have been experiencing Rome from the 18th century onward. It’s a great thing to do, you can learn a lot. But in the 18th century it wasn’t to gain experiences, it was for other reasons. So what does the word then mean?

Religion floats through this in a complicated way; and Catholicism in particular. The ideas that we associated with phenomenology today were very similar to ideas developed by the Catholic Moderns in the late 19th Century and that re-surfaced in Catholic theology in the 1970’s. So how do we engage this aspect of phenomenology’s history? How do we talk about it? It has to be done historically, and at the same time, we can say maybe there are other variants, maybe experience isn’t even part of the equation.

Prior to the 1970’s, we had umpteen thousand years of architecture and no one mentioned “experience.” But all of a sudden we can’t do without it. For a long time we never used that word – we had feelings and emotions, and so forth, but the word “experience” wasn’t really in play. In 1941, Sigfried Giedion wrote a major book, Space, Time and Architecture and never once used the word. I’m saying maybe we don’t need the word either. Maybe the word is too charged, or too rubbery, maybe we could see that it serves a hidden ideological master. What happens if we just remove it? Is that such a bad thing?

dC: In geography, we also saw the rise of phenomenology in the 1970s-

JM: Yeah I should be asking you about this!

dC: and phenomenology became associated with humanism, attachment to place. Emotion, and the theoretical treatment of emotion, became more or less ghettoized in the emotive attachment to place. So when it was set by the wayside, and there are still many geographers who embrace it, but when social theory in geography critiqued it and moved on, the theoretical attention to emotion, because it was packaged with it, was also left by the wayside. Have similar things happened in architecture?

JM: No, we haven’t gone through that yet. We’re still in it; we’re still where geography was, I presume, ten or fifteen years ago, where it’s seen as one more theoretical approach. The problem is that we’re at the point where no one even recognizes phenomenology as a theoretical language. There’s a strange memory lapse. We talk about genus loci, attachment to place, and so forth, but few in the field would be able to tell you where these concepts came from. There’s this fantastical lack of interest in phenomenology’s history – which makes it exciting at some level, but tremendously frustrating. And academia has, in fact, nurtured that lack of interest. So my book was an attack against our own academic establishment, and there are other arrows that one can point in the direction of academia as well. But Phenomenology has a coherency that other theoretical directions at the moment do not have.

dC: I came across your “Money, Molecule, and Design” article which is about sustainability and that discourse emerging in architecture.
the ways in which this technological response to these needs for sustainable
design in architecture intersect with or contradict this discourse of experience.
You discuss in this article a “politics of change” in which all of this is wrapped up,
so that sustainability, sustainability science, and public policy are very much linked
in ways that academic architecture hasn’t necessarily been in the past. And I
was wondering if in architecture the move to sustainability is always couched in
these forward-thinking technological solutions, or if there is also a back-to-the-land
nostalgic trend, or if these things are included.

JM: You’re the first person to pick up on this. So I talk about these other
arrows, and this is another arrow. Part of the argument is: what is the purpose of
academia? Is it to promote and construct a certain sort of avant garde production
at the cost of intellectual critique? I think phenomenology has tried to do that.
We want to be authentic and pure and so on — to hell with the library, to hell with
research, to hell with history. Okay, I think that’s exciting, it could be interesting,
except when you get a Xerox copy of a Xerox copy. Sustainability is a similarly
fascinating problem because it claims to have an ethical mandate, akin to
Phenomenology’s moral mandate. We all want Sustainability; there’s nobody that
denies its importance. But there are three or four avenues by which Sustainability
comes to be implemented in academia and none of them are associated with
historical arguments, historical reasoning. And worse yet, in particular in the
US, they’re all detached from leftist politics. So both Phenomenology and
Sustainability as they’re done in the US are centrist or right. Whatever happened
to left liberalism? It’s gone, especially in architectural schools. Shouldn’t we worry
about this a little bit? Even Sustainability that looks left — we want to do a green,
thatched house somewhere in Nevada, we’re low-key, low-budget, not corporate,
what we think of as ‘alternative’ — is still relatively apolitical.

What’s our idea of a utopian future? All these issues are evacuated.
So, once again academia is left as a funny thing, where we become promoters of
ethical issues, but the historical and philosophical-critical reasoning that I would
associate with these different positions is left undercooked. And if you come at
the end, running after the train, you’re viewed as a mere historical pedant. I
want academia to be responsible for what it’s doing. And then decide. Say,
“Okay we’re not there yet, where we completely understand the historical and
philosophical reasoning, but let’s do, maybe, thatched houses.” At least let’s not
ignore academia’s purpose, which is to have intelligent conversations about our
rationales. I’m not opposed to ideological purpose, but I don’t want to sacrifice
discourse.

dC: Along the same lines, a lot of the sustainability seems novel. It
has become corporate at the same time it has become desert, experimental
architecture. How do you see a project like Arcosanti? It’s got this commune
thing going on. How do you think a project like that adds to the discourse?

JM: Do you know where Paolo Soleri lives? He lives in a completely
standard, very expensive suburban villa somewhere in Phoenix, so I am told, with
a swimming pool and so forth. He’s given up on it. You go there and there are
the eight or nine believers living with the pigs, dogs and cats wandering around.
It’s fantastic, I love it. I respect the attempt at least because he tried to imagine
alternatives to this world, given all the complexities. And this is something we’ve
forgotten. Where’s our outrage? I think we’ve lost some of that spirit.

One problem with Phenomenology is that it’s such a subjective individual
thing — you are responsible for yourself, you make your own world. How do
you critique something like that? I can’t invade your privacy unless you let
me. Arcosanti said “We have to get together. We have to create a new kind of
interaction, or communal thinking. And it may not work, but at least we’re trying to
do something.” Sustainability is a code word, that tries to replicate that spirit, but
it can’t. If anything it has become a code word for non-communal practices.

dC: Do you think the same is true for redrawing phenomenological types of
nostalgic architectures that come in and say “We’re going to build this?” It’s not
necessarily dealing with larger issues of collective social bodies, but is actually
more able to deal with individuals?

MJ: Phenomenology has a devil of a time trying to figure out how to deal
with community. This is why the Catholic Moderns of the turn of the 20th century
were so interesting. They had this nostalgia for more low-key barns and village
life, and for what we today would call regionalism. It was a Catholic community
associated with good, decent hard labor. But, if you’re not Catholic or if you
are and you don’t care for this type of ant-modern romanticism, then it doesn’t
work. So in the standard American version of how phenomenology works, where
Catholicism is disguised or made secret or non-existent, it becomes an extreme
version of personalism. I don’t have anything against it. It’s just that it doesn’t
make community. You can “experience” whatever you want, but only at the cost of
exclusion.

dC: Going back to the “Molecule” article, you talk a bit about moving from an
individualist to a more collectivist way of thinking and making decisions. I was
wondering what you think the responsibility of academia is in addressing that
tension between the collectivist alternatives and the individualist tendencies of
phenomenology. It’s not an either/or issue.
I'm not against individualism. In fact, one of the critiques I have against Sustainability is that it has become so corporate and so subsumed in some large corporate agenda that the individual is sort of squashed. With Phenomenology, it is the opposite, there is so much subjectivity that community disappears. So I am working both ends. With Sustainability I'm championing, if you will, the solitary person who bucks tradition, and says I'm going to be on my own. But Phenomenology does not allow this person real freedom. The person has to develop the obligation to seek the truth of materials, the truth of production etc. So it is not subjectivism. Rather almost to the contrary. What makes Sustainability and Phenomenology similar is that in both cases, they tend to erase the role that academia should have, which is to interrogate how these practices become social constructions of which we are a product. So, in both cases the academic environment is a strange appendage, like an atavism from an old world. And maybe it does go away, I don't know. But I want the tension to stay there. I want the tension between individual practices and social practices to remain. We can't all just go off and make a Marxist commune for ourselves. There has to be someone who is in a loft somewhere doing all sorts of crazy things, saying "I don't want to do that stuff." If the two were fighting about it, see that would be interesting. But that's not happening either. There's no conflict, so we don't know how to sharpen our teeth and make our decisions. And I think academia should want us to have that conflict.

I think academia's role is thus to remember that there are multiple practices within its boundaries, that there should be conflicts and that these conflicts should be opened up so that students can make a decision and come to their own terms with it, without having to be victim to whoever's getting funding. We have to understand the historical, and we have to be conversant in it in order to make the meaningful discussions happen. It's not that we have to know everything, but we have to see ourselves in operation, as best we can.

I would say that the purpose of academia, if I had to boil it down to one word, would be erudition. Erudition is a type of mediating ground in which you can have a conversation and also have difference. I was talking with a psychologist the other day and he said he had never heard of Foucault. That's okay - so now he's going to read it. Erudition doesn't mean I know everything, it means there are things I don't know. It's not about discipline - we all have our disciplinary heaps. Erudition is a sort of Milky Way around that, which is different from disciplinary knowledge.

dC: It seems in reading and conversing with people about eodesign that there is a similar tension in geography where there are very practice-oriented, planning-oriented, geographic information systems. We have our own sort of ethical battle about taking money from the Department of Defense. Do we go map places for them? Is that the kind of knowledge that we want to be producing? There is an interesting dilemma that happens in the disciplines that are required to have one foot in practice and one foot in theory and they get in fights with each other. Do you think that those tensions are productive in architecture?

MJ: They would be, if they existed. Architecture right now is lacking the fundamentals of critical debate. The only debate that exists is in historical architecture and the love-hate relationship that people have with the historical. There is no debate.

dC: It's an unfortunately internal logic. The debate is around an internal logic in architecture, whether its phenomenology or star-architecture, where the architect is like the sculptor and the building takes on its own logic. And, in architecture theory they're drawing on other disciplines like sociology, psychology, and philosophy - especially Peter Eisenman's conversation with Derrida. Do you think that architecture is ever going to get back to its own discourse, or will it always be cherry-picking other things, as far as how it internalizes theory?

MJ: When Eisenman introduced Derrida to architects and that was a fascinating moment. It didn't really work out, but the guy gets an A+ for attempting something unusual. It was courageous, and risky. Eisenman is very interesting because he's a formalist and believes very strongly in architecture being autonomous. But for architecture to be autonomous, he reaches to the likes of Derrida and Wittgenstein. That's the paradox. It's not really intellectually autonomous, but in image it's autonomous. And this is what a lot of people miss. They think you can replicate the formal autonomy without having to do the intellectual and cultural homework. So he does his homework, and he says, "Hey, I'll take some of this and that." He inhabits both sides very comfortably. And so I guess he's my ideal type of architect.

dC: In that vein, what do you feel about architects like Rem Koolhaas - whose main project is actually doing urban field-ground research?

MJ: Maybe that's a quarter-turn. You can see people saying "Oh wow, it would be really interesting if we could measure how many bicycles people use" and maybe they incorporate measurements like that into their thinking - or some sort of demographic pattern. And this is an expansion of erudition. Even though it might look factual and sociological - and be a bit of a pretend sociology - it's always regenerative. It means you can talk to Rem about all sorts of interesting things, because he's tried to take on different types of issues. And in the end it might just be a big box that he builds, and I'm not worried about that because there's a way
disclosure interviews

in which he's reasoning-through-architecture. One could say that what Eisenman was doing with philosophy, Rem is doing with sociology, introducing it in both real and fictive ways in architectural discourse. By way of contrast, phenomenology is too serious to ever accept its fictions; much less the play of language – and critique - in discourse.

Notes

4 Arcosanti is an experimental commune in Arizona which was designed by Paolo Soleri.