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Many books are available today to provide us with methods for urban analysis, most of them guided by rational principles imported from the exact sciences, most probably because arguments for investments are usually based on communicative rationality. I do not dispute the fact that these books dedicated to site analysis represent fundamental theoretical and methodological contributions, already capable of providing well-argued answers to the current debate on decoding context: on approaches, strategies, evolution, relevant scales and levels of analysis, consequences in design and architectural education. Against the background of this professional tradition, I discuss two major phenomenological difficulties of the methods of decoding context and translating it into architectural language: the delimitation of context in interpretation and the limits of traditions in context analysis, based on predefined criteria and parameters. The highlighted difficulties suggest the need for a more flexible design methodology guided by place-specific hermeneutics.

[3] DECODING THE CONTEXT AS PLACE INTERPRETATION

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CONTEXT DELIMITATION IN INTERPRETATION AND RECENT CRITIQUES

Research dedicated to understanding context, precisely systematised by interpretation criteria and levels of analysis, such as *Site Analysis. Informing Context-Sensitive and Sustainable Site Planning and Design* (LaGro, 2013), *Site Diagramming Information for Architectural Design Analysis* (White, 1983) and *Public Places, Urban Spaces. The Dimensions of Urban Design* (Carmona, 2021), represents a solid starting point not only for architecture students, but also for designers sensitive to the condition of place in their own projects. Beyond the multi-criteria methodologies, rationally ordered in these studies to suit the needs of any architectural office of today, a series of ontological aspects remain regarding the legitimacy of context delimitations as such in interpretation. Context is primarily a place, an existential situation. Place opens a world through our way of being in that place, through our specific concern and through our way of inhabiting it. Place delimitation implies a limit to its understanding: the scale of interpreting the context in an architectural project is a measure of the place itself and of the project anchored in that place. A phenomenological approach can specify the sense of place based on which we feel the appropriate scale in interpretation and through which the place opens to us as presence. I emphasize here a topology of thought or philosophical topology (Malpas, 2018, 2021) that implies the weakening of rationalist methods of site analysis, which are based on the separation between the analysing subject (the designer confronted with a site) and the analysed object (the site to which the project is dedicated). The condition of place presupposes relationality, historicity, and identity (Augé, 1992/1995). Place refers to concrete fragments of the world of everyday life that vary from the scale of furniture to that of geographical regions and are experienced and understood in diverse ways, through human intentionality and actions, as existential centres (Relph, 1976).

Context is primarily a place, an existential situation. Place opens a world through our way of being in that place, through our specific concern and through our way of inhabiting it.

Recent philosophical topology understands place as a complex unity, as an interweaving of people and things, which is both a delimitation and a bringing into presence of phenomena (Malpas, 2006). From a phenomenological perspective, a specific site cannot be reduced to a portion of land cut out of homogeneous, absolute, abstract and infinite space; a building site can be a part of a larger place, it can contain smaller places within it, it can be a place by itself.

Noting that the perception of a place involves a sense of it (Eyles, 1985; Feld & Basso, 1996; Vanclay et al., 2008) and adding that a place can be contained within larger ones as well as include smaller places within it, we consider an approach that could disentangle the designer who demands from architectural theory rational methods of classification, analysis, evaluation and ultimately of solving dwelling problems. In fact, without having yet reached the problems of place, we confront with the way in which we understand place and its limits.

In the post-war theory of architecture, the concept of place became the basis of existential space, distinguished from other conceptual categories like pragmatic space, perceptual space, cognitive space and logical space (Norberg-Schulz, 1971). Existential space as a socio-cultural totality implies a collectively recognised figurability through centrality, delimitation and extension, interwoven with paths and thresholds, being approachable at a series of scales related to the body that experiences places. The most extensive scale is that of the geographical domain and implies a cultural and political dimension, followed by the scale of the landscape (defined by a domain or a region), the scale of the city (defined by paths), the scale of architecture (defined by centres) and the scale of furniture objects (the smallest in this decreasing series, but also the closest to the relationship with the human body, being defined by foci of interest) (Norberg-Schulz, 1971; Auret, 2019). This approach was later challenged from the perspective of how scale categories are structurally generated and of the problematic way in which phenomena could a priori fit into categories (Auret, 2019). I note four observations regarding levels of context analysis, translated into architectural design:

_All categories and levels imposed by analysis, through the implicit division they support between the analysing subject and the analysed object, reduce the wealth of meanings that emerge by phenomenological interpretation from the life of place multiplicity. Our being in the world through care, dwelling among our fellow beings, reveals to us more nuances of place than we can impose through a rational methodology, regardless of whether we refer to the scale of approach, to the context or to the structure of these levels. Interpretation, in the sense of a hermeneutic approach, is not laboratory analysis.

_Reading the place is not in fact a linguistic decoding, a conversion from one code to another, but rather an existential revelation of meanings by the fact that we already inhabit language and narrative. Interpretation thus becomes a dynamic interaction between parts and whole that cannot be programmed in advance by any methods, but cultivated through a care for the situation, a care that is already circularly relevant both for the parts and for the whole they form (*the hermeneutic circle)*. It is not a hierarchy to be followed in descending or ascending manner, but an interplay between the component fragments and the integral tissue of which they are part; the hermeneutic circle maintains the irreducible complexity of the whole and reveals understanding as recognition of meanings and as a “wonder” in relation to this revelation, without prescribing methods (Malpas, 2012).

_Such a perspective is in clear opposition to a rationalist approach to the system of spaces, based on a priori systematisation and classification which starts from ideal categories and abstract concepts to look downward at some concrete, intractable, confused situation which resists those categories or concepts that are imposed on it through analysis. Interpretation of the place thus becomes involvement with the place, capable of bringing to light the layers of meaning that intentionally concern the designer while hiding other layers that are not yet catalysed by the care of interpretation or by “listening” to the place.

Interpretation is not validated by verifying logical correctness in relation to pre-established ideal categories and levels; instead, it gives the designer the freedom to engage with their own horizon of concern, grounded in their existential pre-understanding and inevitably confronted with other horizons in a collective, professional and urban interaction.

_Collective and existential interaction cannot be reduced to cognitive or emotional aspects or to linguistic communication skills alone. The individual horizon reveals its truth of understanding in a "fusion of horizons", to use the expression of the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/2001). In the description of the American architect Steven Holl (2009), architecture is "the most fragile art" (p. 287), produced through collaboration and sharing of worldviews. Captured in collective interaction, the fusion of horizons produces a new reality, between and beyond the participants' realities in a dialogue: this most directly concerns the problem of understanding the context and the architectural project's adequacy to a world that opens through place interpretation.

Regarding context, the levels of analysis remain possible only to the extent that the designer tempers their allegiance to the rigid categories imposed by the normative ideals of reason and systems theory. Care for place does not imply an obligation to an ideal method, but an openness to the situation that can facilitate specific interpretation and the "surplus of being" in phenomenological expression, again referring to the hermeneutics theorised by Gadamer. Understood as a totality of situated life, place interpretation offers possibilities for the architectural project, generated by the designer's regions of concern, which are limited by our embodied thinking and by the fact that we measure the extent of places through situated care. Interpretation thus brings together various places, at different scales; it is not reduced to just the physical aspects. Place already implies dwelling, concern for the finitude of life, durability of civic and spiritual values, a response to a concrete situation between the earth (topographic sensitivity) and the sky (atmospheric qualities). Context thus becomes a domain of preoccupation within the horizon of phenomenological understanding, a place of multiple possibilities for our being.

Understood as a totality of situated life, place interpretation offers possibilities for the architectural project, generated by the designer's regions of concern, which are limited by our embodied thinking and by the fact that we measure the extent of places through situated care.

An example of phenomenological understanding is the way in which the Finnish architect Reima Pietilä captures in his hesitant sketches the poetic dimension of place, outside of conventional, ordering and calculated methods (Auret, 2019). His sketches were shaped by his own sense of place, released through yielding to the topographical and atmospheric condition of the site and paying attention to the life of the place within a delimited and stable expanse that protects the abundance of its existential meanings. Such a restrained and less reason-centric interpretation is never definitive; it appears as an interweaving of lines/threads, sometimes as a tangle, and fluctuates in capturing and transmitting the qualitative features of the place.

The restraint of interpretation in the sense of a well-tempered rationality arises from the difficulty of identifying with objective precision categories and scale levels in the reading of place. The region of concern is how the designer delimits their context, the selection of elements relevant to the interpretation, in terms of extension and content. At the basis of context selection is the sense of place, or the connection between the inhabitant and their world, which allows the perception of differences between parts of the environment based on their qualities, interweaving multisensory perception, memory and imagination. The sense of place engages identification with the perceived environment within a framework of social and cultural experiences. Place identity is made up of concrete forms (physical aspects of the environment), human activities (aspects of dwelling) and meanings (spiritual aspects in the most comprehensive sense), and the identity of inhabitants in relation to a place represents first and foremost their emotional involvement and existential projection on a geographical background, in the sense that the place actually enters into our personality (Relph, 2021). Approaching a specific place makes us aware of the fact that it inevitably interrelates with other much broader places, even on a planetary scale in the extended horizon of preoccupation regarding issues related to climate change, pandemics, migrations, globalisation and military conflicts. From a pedagogical point of view, I do not believe in preselecting the scale of place for analysis before understanding the place itself with the appropriate phenomenological means. Authentic concern for the place opens through hermeneutics and the understanding of the approachable limits of a situation in the case of a specific project and therefore through the idea of project finitude.

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TRADITIONS OF CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION AND THE LIMITS OF ANALYTICAL PARAMETERISATION

A context could be a text to be read; therefore, we could compare the design process with a textual interpretation. Design as an interpretive activity becomes a practice of understanding a living situation, motivated by the surplus of being within dwelling. Not limited to solving problems, design aims at generating places. Non-places are spaces of homogenisation also designed by architects, which mix with places in everyday experience (Augé, 1992/1995), but recent theory inspired by phenomenology insists on the need for a critical approach to the formation of places. From a phenomenological perspective, architects enter the design situation through a pre-understanding of what is acceptable and desirable in the project and therefore through a vague image of the configurational process. At the same time, they develop an understanding based on the interpretation of the parts that constitute the design situation. Interpreting the parts involves

deconstructing the place into levels of analysis for argumentation and explanation. Reconstruction of the situational whole following interpretation modifies, clarifies and refines the vague image initially resulting from pre-understanding. Therefore, we do not actually start from the atomistic decomposition of reality to explain it scientifically, followed by syntheses and design decisions based on what constitutes the architectural object. Design is in fact a fluid process of tentatively moving between pre-understanding and understanding: repetitive, continuous, hesitant, fragile in its ontological dimension and loaded with care or concern for the existential situation itself. How could we reduce this living process of projective clarification, which appears as an interweaving or entanglement, to scientific methods or rationalised methodologies?

The ability to understand place with theoretical means refers to how this understanding is expressed and justified based on a series of personal filters.

Phenomenology emphasizes those complex and emotionally charged narratives about personal and collective identity, memory and anticipation, hope and fears, desires and beliefs, alienation and loss. Most of our consciousness is non-representational pre-understanding (subconscious, unconscious) embodied as everyday wisdom, allowing for affective and intellectual knowledge. The reduction of experience to images, to a privileging of visuality, is also a source of phenomenological criticism: images do not tell stories, it is only through language that we grant meanings to images, thus attributing them a narrative articulation in the lifeworld. Architectural design is inextricably linked to human existence as "life that takes place" and in this sense it is interrelational, affective and rational, subjective and objective, individual and collective.

The ability to understand place with theoretical means refers to how this understanding is expressed and justified based on a series of personal filters. At issue here are the theoretical sources, how they influence our thinking and their adequacy to the situation addressed. The complexity of this theoretical overview from several perspectives reveals in the most coherent way what expectations we can have from a place-oriented architectural project in which we are not talking about the separation between the objectives of an architecture for the city in urban design and architectural design itself. Both urban design and architecture have as their fundamental objective the configuration of better places, the avoidance of problems and the amplification of benefits. A good project must prove the ability to understand the great traditions of thought at its disposal: the visual-artistic tradition, the tradition of social usage, the tradition of placemaking and the tradition of sustainable approaches (Carmona, 2021). In addition, the architectural object is intertwined with urban processes, in a continuum of the life of the place. Reference contexts fluctuate: the local context (with its cultural, qualitative dimension), the global context (of sustainability and technology), and the power context (of economic markets and administrations). Morphological, perceptual and temporal dimensions define the local context; functional, social and visual dimensions articulate the global context; dimensions of place production and administration configure the power context (Carmona, 2021).

Beyond the morphological, perceptual, temporal, functional, social, visual, productive and administrative dimensions, there still remains in our understanding a dimension of ontological and phenomenological reflectivity, which aims to return to the origin of the place reading, to the essence of the act of observing, to the fact of being in a place, which always and already precedes any categories, dimensions or levels of analysis. The return to this depth is in fact related to the need to understand an ethics of architecture (Harries, 1998) and to the practice of an "art of life" (Norberg-Schulz, 2000).

A more recent contribution to the issue of place and architectural interpretation clarifies how fundamental ontological aspects in architecture could be addressed, including the very idea of parameter that underlies a wide range of different forms of design being discussed (Malpas, 2021). The model of "labelling", "categories", "variables" in general does not only presuppose digital technique: information technology is not equivalent to the idea of parameter; one can design conventionally, without a computer, based on predefined parameters, such as the criteria listed in a place analysis and a design concept. This can maintain an atomistic view of place, and phenomenology insists that the interpreting parameters are produced by the situation of human existence itself (*the life of place*), not by inserting them into the situation from an abstract conceptual space. We often face the problem of the quantitative dominating or suppressing the qualitative, especially in the case of investigating a sense of place or place attachment. It is obvious that the ontological perspective on the nature and types of parameters selected for place analysis become philosophical concerns for a theory of architecture dedicated to place. Place is not a geometric, social or emotional construction; place is not only a construction of human subjectivity; human subjectivity (with all its emotions) is determined by place/the situation of the lifeworld. The parameter or criterion becomes the measure, the delimitation in a fundamental sense: if the measure is only quantitative and abstract, the phenomenological observation on the eminently qualitative and singular character of the design situation will be lost sight of. Analysis criteria or parameters are not generated by computer programs, but by designers placing themselves in a specific situation; they define theoretical models and labels, thus returning the analysis to original observation and existential pre-understanding, which is not at all computational (Malpas, 2021).

Analysis criteria or parameters are not generated by computer programs, but by designers placing themselves in a specific situation.

In interpreting place, we are faced both with understanding the basic principles of architecture on a historical foundation, in which modern architecture plays a major role, and with developing an understanding of place that allows these principles to be manifested as an expression of our being and as existential meanings opened by the presence and care associated with place. Care is temporal and is the source of building, not just its result; lived time involves more than the idea of continuity and change in a linear history. The "art of care" in architecture becomes an articulation of our temporal existence, it is a comprehensive appreciation of *what is given in presence and in place*, a gratitude for the way in which we exist as a localised concern, a recognition of poetic adequacy to place. In this

way, the surplus of meaning that the place provides latently can influence the architectural project and achieve its attunement to the recognisable situation: these aspects weaken the language of architecture systematised into categories (typology, morphology, topology) and mark the concern for a grateful dwelling into the place that supports it (Auret, 2019).

CONCLUSION: FLEXIBLE DESIGN METHODOLOGY OR HERMENEUTICALLY DEVELOPED DESIGN

On a phenomenological level, place-based hermeneutics or *topohermeneutics*, as I defined it in the conclusion of a recent study (Caciuc, 2023), entails place figurability through the topographic interrelationship between a series of fundamental concepts: topology, place, space, dwelling, presence, truth, object, memory, humanism and holism. Observations formulated by Jeff Malpas (2006, 2012, 2018, 2021), Christian Norberg-Schulz (1971, 1979, 1985, 2000) and Hendrik Auret (2019) converge towards the idea of decoding context as a recognition of the language, subject to decipherment, in which the image of place and architecture in relation to it are ontologically constituted. On this phenomenological recognition is grafted the surplus of meaning when the designer and dweller read the context, understanding architecture as something anchored in place and generating place. Figurability intertwined with human life itself therefore presupposes place and architecture as narrative language, an anticipation of the meaning in the dialogue between place and architecture, the idea of meaning that depends on the adequacy to a situation and on our belonging to a tradition of thought, being aware of our limitations and prejudices in interpretation.

Snodgrass & Coyne (1996) overturn the scientific model of analysis and design based on the verification of hypotheses, on induction and conclusions drawn logically from premises by taking Gadamerian phenomenology as their direct source of inspiration (Gadamer, 1960/2001). The project as "crystallized time" represents a provisional image, configured only from the designer's specific situation of understanding; it involves a series of future expectations, a concern for the present and a past experience. Our understanding is permanently modified by "throwing into the future" and "recalling a past". The vague image of what needs to be achieved in the future depends on what we understand of the present and of the past: this is the meaning of anticipation. Decoding the context is not complete clarification; on the contrary, it is constantly reflected by a lack of intelligibility of the design tasks, but the place or life situation from which the architectural programme is born illuminates the design process and determines its development. Illumination expresses a figurability of the entire situation, a vague but motivating projection for the architectural intervention. Multiple, competing "illuminations" can occur, as possibilities in a multiplicity, of which one will be recognised in appropriateness to the place more than others.

Recognition involves understanding the place through the figurability of the project, without the design process becoming a simple sequence of logical steps towards a predetermined result. The project has an anticipated end,

directed by the designer in a dialogical process that questions the validity of the solution through the continuous confrontation with the situation addressed by the project. This is the project dialogue with the place in a conversational circularity or throwing out for discussion of values, prejudices, preconceptions, taken for granted attitudes. The project becomes fragile, vulnerable if the openness is authentic and not simulated in the face of prejudices: openness is revealing disclosure both in the sense of discovering the presences related to the architectural work and as a self-construction of the designer in this process (self-discovery through the fact that preconceptions come to light). The project, like place reading, involves the designer's dialogue with the things and people of the place, in which oscillations occur between moments of familiarity and estrangement in relation to an existential situation. In the dialogue, both the situation and the dialogue change in the wake of the modification of the designer's understanding itself. We cannot speak of objectivity here: the reading of the place reveals what we expect it to reveal to us by virtue of our momentary pre-understandings.

From this point of view, a design constituted through dialogue with the life of the place predicts a whole captured in perception. The dialogue does not have coherent hypotheses and conclusions from which the solutions of the architectural form are extracted; instead, the project makes a vague prediction, subject to oscillating questioning, in agreement with a situation of the place that is progressively clarified in its particular aspects and by revealing the whole. The beginning of the project can be a certain aspect of the place, which is constituted as a triggering factor in a design field of interaction, capable of revealing a specific formal possibility. Each interrogation, through its own horizon of expectations with which the project begins, already sheds light on the answer, vaguely prefiguring the architectural object. The answer that is progressively clarified modifies the initial questions because the emerging doubts of the other participants in the dialogue reconfigure the designer's initial understanding. Interpretations refer to other interpretations in a transformative interweaving that encompasses all participants in the conversation. The contextual elements that enter the "design event" cannot be manipulated or controlled, but, in revealing themselves, they capture the designer in their creative process.

Books such as *Imaginând evidența* (*Imagining the Evident*, Siza, 1998/2024) or *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action* (Schön, 1983) bring to light the approach of well-tempered rationality, cultivated through understanding the context, anticipatory vision of meaning and the perception of holistic figurability against the horizon of the designer's care. The project is not just a geometric configuration to which meanings are subsequently attached, but a whole already significant in its context through pre-understanding. Architecture is permanently dependent on the situation to which it belongs; thus, it liberates our meaning in a non-arbitrary way, interweaving it between other interpretations, in a hesitant, uncertain manner, through gradual advance and validation (Snodgrass & Coyne, 1996). Only in this restrained and careful way can architecture catalyse a "fusion of horizons" in interpretation, taking the poetic measure of the "imprint of place", relating both to the concrete terrain of its specific conditions (material framework, physical support, foundation, context, texture) and to the world as a transformative source of civic and private life.

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