



The architect in the foveal space.

Author's drawing.

Proprioception and immersion in the implicit design processes

Skrzypczak Wiktor, HafenCity University Hamburg

'Design practice that is not grounded in the complexity and subtlety of experience withers into dead professionalism devoid of poetic content and incapable of touching the human soul, whereas a theoretical survey that is not fertilised by a personal encounter with poetics of building is doomed to remain alienated and speculative and can—at best, only elaborate rational relationships between the apparent elements of architecture.' (Pallasmaa 2009, 145)

This paper postulates the preliminary hypothesis of the interactions between the soma—the sentient body and the architectural environment and their impact on the design processes and eventually on the design results. Firstly, it asks how the notion of embodiment in phenomenology can gain an operative, pragmatic relevance in architectural practice and it argues that it requires seeing the 'human embodied essence', widely addressed by Pallasmaa, against the background of the currently dominant disembodied forms of organisation which has been addressed among others by the historian Arran Gare (Gare 2013). The notion of embodiment gains then a pragmatic relevance when it is understood as a quest for the re-embodiment, that is more embodiment within the architectural design process—understood as the process of self-education through the bodily-informed practices of spatial experiencing and contemplation, spatial imagination, categorisation of spatial qualities and their assessment and spatial compositional decision-making.

Further, the paper argues that the quest for the re-embodiment of the design practice can be effectively applied if the architectural practice is understood as a confluence of explicit and implicit forces of space organisation and through the focus on the latter. This focus seems to be justified by the relatively new research available in such disciplines as embodied cognition and somatic movement education which could provide the better understanding and more importantly the better embodiment of the implicit design processes—that is a more skilled use of one's own body within them.

The concept of implicit design processes leads to implicit perception processes. The paper underlines the relevance of such processes, such as implicit visual perception, but more importantly of the proprioception for the spatial perception and imagination. It follows the reasoning of architect and scholar Matthias Ballestrem, who argues that the architectural environment impacts us not only through a conscious reflection, but also and mainly through bodily reflexes or subliminal and unconscious impressions and interpretations (Ballestrem 2014). But while Ballestrem limits his research to the implicit visual perceptions, this paper applies his argument to the proprioceptive perceptions, which in neuropsychology are considered to be constitutive for the spatial representations in the Central Nervous System (Ceunen, Vlaeyen and Van Diest 2016).

In practical terms, the paper addresses the proprioception through the lens of the somatic movement education (Eddy 2009) and derives from it the principles of somatic spatial inquiry—a practice of addressing the implicit, proprioceptive aspects of the design process in an explicit, operative way. This short analysis shows that it is a technique of recognising one's own habitual patterns of the interaction with the environment, a technique of attaining the novel, non-habitual patterns of interaction as well as a technique of releasing the internalised patterns of restriction. This experiential approach supports Walter Benjamin's opinion that the habitual use of architecture is its main, although subtle and unspoken mode of appropriation (Benjamin 1935). Interestingly, the attentive use of proprioceptive listening in somatic spatial inquiry seems to disprove Benjamin's further claim, namely that the habitual, implicit appropriation does not allow the conscious contemplation.

But which skills do such practice train and what relevance they may have in the design process? The paper argues that somatic movement practice in general and somatic spatial inquiry in particular train the designer's skill of navigating and operating in between the explicit and implicit patterns of spatial interaction. A similar skill has been assumed by Juhani Pallasmaa in Alvar Aalto's design approach and praised as leading to more embodied, that is strongly related to the existential values and thus to better architecture.

Finally, the paper ponders how the practice of somatic spatial inquiry can eventually lead to better architecture. For although it is widely acknowledged that good design practice has to be grounded in the complexity and subtlety of experience . . . [and] fertilised by the personal encounter with poetics of buildings' to speak with Pallasmaa (Pallasmaa 2009, 145), it remains unclear how such experiencing of one's own interactions with architecture exactly impacts the design results and how such impact can be empirically documented.

The above hypothesis is an attempt to describe and explain the author's design practice. It is being tested and verified through the ongoing, movement based, non-visual imagination experiments, excerpts of which will be included in the paper presentation.

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Design Driven Research

improvisation scores, bodily techniques, transmedia spatial representations

The starting point of this doctoral research was a specific problem which I have encountered in my practice of residential architecture design. I have noticed that the design process becomes more and more optimised in terms of bureaucratic efficiency but becomes less and less immersive regarding the moments of imaginary inhabitation of the conceived spaces. For that reason not the design result but rather the design process itself and in particular its phenomenological aspect is the subject of the research. Because it is grounded in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body the research uses the interdisciplinary methods of dance improvisation and of architectural ideation and representation—such as verbal scores for facilitation of the bodily and attentional movement; formats of spoken and written experience protocol; and transmedia formats of spatial representation (text into drawing or text into movement or text into mental imagination). These methods set the frame for iterative trials which aim at the facilitation of an immersive spatial experience or imagination. The results of such short trials (5-45 minutes) are then weaved back into architectural theory (such as Empathy Theory and Bachelard's Phenomenology of Imagination) and into my own theorisation of the design process. Finally, the scores for the following trials are adjusted so that the facilitated spatial experiences exist not only in the naive, subjective reality but also in the intersubjective, intellectual discourse. These adjustments aim at finding diverse application possibilities of this experiential tool—the technique of somatic spatial inquiry within the design process as a whole. The tool is developed individually by the researcher and tested with architecture students and peers.

Wiktor Skrzypczak — HafenCity University Hamburg — research@stadtliebe.eu

is a licensed architect with a background in dance improvisation. Currently, they are in the third year (out of four) of doctoral research about correlations between bodily self-consciousness and space perception in architecture. After

graduating in architecture from TU Łódź, they have been planning social housing in Hamburg. They are trained in dance (Contact Improvisation and New Dance) and have been facilitating and teaching movement since 2014. They are interested in the political aspect of the bodily dimension of the architectural practice. Since 2019 they are an associate member of International Somatic Movement Education & Therapy Association (ISMETA).