

The Bodily Perception of Details

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"Humans have the ability to go beyond mere perception, but it is through perception (of physical things) that allows us to do so." Kant

The current state of architecture is one that has become distant and cold. Contemporary buildings have turned away from materiality and are losing their connection with crafted details relating to the scale of the human body, its senses and experience. Pallasmaa states that, "the architecture of our time is turning into the retinal art of the eye."¹ Our buildings are suffering from a loss of tactile architectural details that engage the body in spatial experience. Architecture is amongst the most permanent expressions of culture²; the built environment has the ability to give us insight and connect us with our past. Instead, our contemporary buildings and structures are primarily creating objects of visual seduction.³

How did we arrive at this state where our architecture no longer speaks to us? At the root of this issue, I believe, is the result that we have forgotten the indispensable role of the perceptual body for the meaningful engagement and embodiment of the world. Architecture is not only about respect to the urban fabric of surrounding buildings or infrastructure, but should be buildings that are sensitive to the bodily dimension and senses, which can fully invite the experience of a *lived-body*. We do not initially understand a building as a complete whole, but it is revealed through spatial experiences in parts. Therefore, the quality of meaningful architectural details, can engage the body with the building; the perceiver with the making and existence of the physical world.

This paper proposes to take a look at Phenomenology⁴ to understand the essence of how our bodies engage in perception through lived experiences. A particular interest is in the works of French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), who summarizes phenomenology as,

"[...]the study of essences [...But is] also a philosophy which puts essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'."⁵

Merleau-Ponty highlighted the role of the body as the starting point and anchor of the perceptual experience, a theme previously treated only superficially and largely ignored by the philosophical tradition.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy strikes a middle ground between the classical thoughts of the Intellectualists and Realists⁶, he argued that our intellectual thought is grounded in the perceptual nature of our bodies that is situated in this world. Mind and body are not separate, nor is one superior to the other, but rather, together form the totality of one body which embodies the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the mental aspects of 'me' are embedded in a body; I am a body-subject, rather than a thoughtless and mechanical body. He claims that, "I am my body"⁷, where the lived experience of our surrounding is through the body. His philosophy shifted our understanding of existence from one of problematic body-mind dualism to one of lived-experience through bodily perception.

Drawing upon the works of Merleau-Ponty, Part I of this paper sets out to develop an understanding

of the particular of the body as the anchor and horizon in which perception takes place. The goal is to understand the importance of lived-experience; where the body itself is explored as the *detail* that connects us with the experience of world, and the architecture within it.

Part II will proceed to explore the particular (dimension) of the body as the inspiration for design. Through a large life-drawing piece, by the author of this paper, the body is not only explored individually, but in relation to other bodies and a spatial figure/ground relation.

Part III will propose the design exploration into the phenomenal qualities of two architectural details for a library, using the body as the subject of perception. The approach is to first design tactile architectural details before conceiving the whole (building). The goal is that this design methodology will enhance the sensuous experience of a library and its contents of books, engaging both bodily experience and intellectual reflection.

I. THE BODILY PERCEIVER

The presence of our body is central to our *embodiment* of the 'world'. Our existence is also profoundly different from that of objects; besides having a physical presence, we are also actively conscious of our surrounding through sensual perception. Our physical body adheres to the world through a unique perspective and temporality; it is within this system of subject to object relation that we have interaction with the world.

Merleau-Ponty's critique of classical thought was that it made a distinction and separation between the mind and body, resulting in the hierarchical ranking of the mind over the sensory body. The Cartesian view proposes that the body and world are not intrinsically connected, that the human being is a spectator rather than an actor in the play of existence, an autonomous mind contemplating a mindless "external world." When in actual experience, we depend on our sensual perception to provide the information in which to validate the world. The presence and role of the body allows us to perceive our surroundings, but also allows us to be fully part of it. "We experience a perception and its horizon "in action" rather than by "posing" them or explicitly "knowing" them."⁸ That is to say, before

we realize with our intellectual consciousness that our world is true, it already exists and continues to exist through the presence of our body.

Thus, perception of the world originates from and is anchored by our body; it is the primary mode in which we engage our surrounding. Merleau-Ponty says, 'It is through my body that I perceive 'things'.⁹ We perceive because we are a body that directly experiences the world and is involved in it. The totality of our physical and knowing body contributes to the understanding of our surrounding, revealing a different piece of the complete picture of the world with each new perspective.

Since perception is manifested through our body, it is not a private or purely mental condition. Instead, it is a result of us being a body, and the body being in the world. Merleau-Ponty believes what is essential to all aspects of our existence is our concrete finite perspective of the world, that it is rooted in our bodily presence. All human experience and understanding originates from a bodily grasp of the world that results in a bodily orientation. The bodily point of view is not just one more arbitrary appearance of the world among others, but it is *our* origin point of view. As Merleau Ponty says,

"every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception."¹⁰

Since perception occurs from the reference point of my body, it constitutes my view and my experience of the world. The body, although at times unaware of the act, is constantly adjusting to integrate our experience and maintain a *grip* onto the world. This on-going re-orientation of our bodies sets up the perceptual horizon where sensory particulars take place.

At a basic and primordial knowledge of the world, we simply experience and learn of it by the very presence of our bodies, through its senses and physical dimensions. We are able to further discover and understand an object by examining it through an extension of our body. Merleau-Ponty says, "I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject."¹¹ We can walk around the object, examine it with our eyes, pick it up, feel it in our hands, smell it and at times even taste it. For example, upon viewing

a cube, the actual geometric properties of it can never fully be understood simply by our visual experience. Intellectually we know that a cube consists of six sides and eight corners, but during our visual experience of a cube in our situated body, we cannot at the same time see all six sides or all eight corners.

“Statements such as, “It is true,” do not correspond to what is given to us in perception. Perception does not give us truths like geometry but rather, *presence*.”¹²

The unity and our understanding of objective truths, such as a cube, is an abstract notion that has a unity through an indefinite number of views experienced by our body. It is the result of our direct contact with and our bodily involvement in the world that gives us the ability to gain reflection of objects and our own bodies.

Our perceptual experience is not just sensation of our surrounding, but we have the ability to construct and rearrange our perception resulting in a meaningful embodiment of the world. The body is not simply a unified group of organs that then confront things around itself; rather, the body can be itself only by going beyond itself. Like a constant dialogue, perception leads the subject to draw together understanding of the object, while simultaneously the object solicits and unifies the intentions of the subject. The active bodily moments of perception are not sharply distinct, self-sufficient states, but are interwoven and inseparable aspects of a unified phenomenon, like two sides of a coin or two dimensions of a figure. As bodily perceivers, we are necessarily part of the perceptible world we perceive; we are not just *in* the world, but *of* it. There is a constant openness of the body to the world and world to the body. The totality of the body in perception is always both passive and active, situational and practical, conditioned and free. Therefore, perception,

“[...] is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensation, but of assisting at the birth of this knowledge, to make it as sensible as the sensible, to recover the consciousness of rationality.”¹³

With the realization of the importance of the acts of perception through our situated body in the world, we bring meaning and validation back to our consciousness.

II. THE BODILY DETAILS

Our perception experiences are a result from the world as a field that provides the grounding, or as Merleau-Ponty calls it, a *phenomenal field*, in which we are able to focus and distinguish between figure and ground, detail and whole. All perception happens through the realization of a figure/ground relationship. The world is not and cannot be experienced as a separate entity, but is the field in which our body is orientated. The elemental presence of the world subtends the relationship between the entire horizon of the world and the existential situatedness of the body, creating this figure/ground relation. Perception happens with a conception of the whole (ground) and then the conscious awareness of the particular (figure). This inter-relation of bodily embodiment and conscious awareness is what grounds our perception back to the horizon of this world. It is the constant bodily involvement in our surrounding that allows us to experience and understand the concreteness of the world, including objects and other bodies that occupy in the same field. In the act of perception, the wholeness of the world is presupposed by the body, and then conscious reflection brings to focus the particulars of the part (of the world).

The following composition of a large life-drawing (by the author of this paper) is an exploration into the perceptual idea of figure/ground and detail/whole relationship. The idea of part(s) in relation to the whole is not only revealed to the viewer as one journeys through the various areas of the piece, but was also explored during the act of drawing the composition.

The ambiguity of the parts and the whole of human figures were first drawn, layered and merging in and out of each other. There is no one central point of view in the drawing, but rather requires the viewer to be involved in the layering and merging of the figures. With the application of a “background” surrounding the figures, the figure/ground relationship becomes less distinct and somewhat homogenous, suggesting a spatial and temporal reconciliation of subjects and space.

Colour is used to bring various points of foreground and background into focus. Warm colours are used to highlight different figures and parts, while cool colours create contrast and spatial depth between



Figure 1: The progression of the life-drawing piece.

figures and background. As in our perception of the world, the totality it simply exists. We come to understand it when we consciously bring parts (in and of) the world to focus in the foreground of perception.

Our bodily perception does not simply terminate at the stages of sensations, but leads us to abstract reflection and conscious awareness. The totality of our (bodily and conscious) perception of and in the *physicality* of this world allows us to come to a common understanding of it. Furthermore, when understanding is manifested in physical form (such as texts or images), the engagement of the body (in acts of reading or viewing) is able to transcend the 'here and now'.

The Austrian designer, Frederick Kiesler, conceived of a mobile-home-library in relation to the dimensions of the human body as a way to engage the reader in the act of seeking a book. He sought



Figure 2: Completed life-drawing piece.

not only the redesign of bookshelves, but attempted to invent or evolve something new. "Knee shelves," "torso shelves," "head shelves," "overhead shelves," "step shelves," and "top shelves", as he named them, indicated that it was designed in response to the human body, its given movements and measurements of perception.

Kiesler charted these movements in the form of semi-circles to mark the interaction of the hand, eye, torso and head pivot. All these had a formative or constitutional role in developing a tool, taking the burden off man, and thus helping to control fatigue and increase efficiency of health.¹⁴ Kiesler's recognition, "[...] of a man in the center of a sphere extending himself but not beyond the reach of his extremities,"¹⁵ allowed him to be responsive to the dimensions of organization. Furthermore, Kiesler's exploration has shown the notion that access into knowledge is according to the capabilities of the body's sensory perception in spatial experience:

"One years for a firm foundation and a solid edifice of ideas on which one can build further. With this conception of implementation in a library, "architectonics" as the science of systems becomes entirely concrete, physical, and capable sense-perception."¹⁶

Our body's physicality is not a restriction or limit, but our situational existence is the potential in which to realize ourselves and the world we are

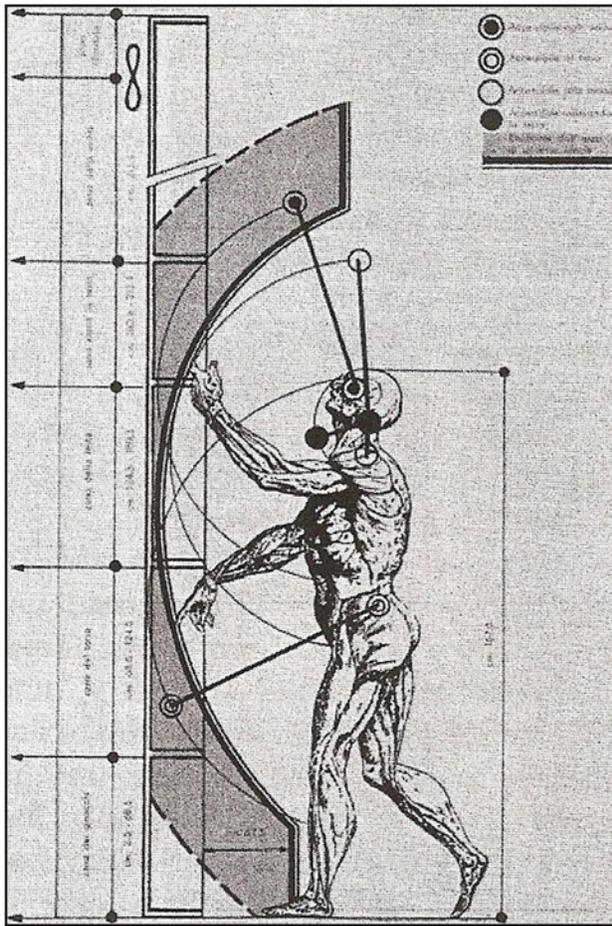


Figure 3: The haptic library, Frederick Kiesler. (Oechslin 138)

in. The establishment of libraries, therefore, is our spatial reflection of the interpretation, of systems and order, which we have discovered through the perception of our world.

III. DESIGNING FROM THE BODY: DETAILS FOR A LIBRARY

The imaginary experiences we construct when we lose ourselves in the pages of a book can be confirmed or refuted by the physical space of a library. These experiences can be affected by the bodily experience of the reader, perceiving the distance of the shelves, the crowding or scarcity of books, by qualities of scent and touch and by the varying degrees of light and shade of the library. Therefore a library space designed for the sensitivity of perception through the body, will richly engage the bodily reader.

The approach to the design began with the specific architectural details for a library. Details are to be understood as the essence of a design approach through its physical presence, rather than a sign that points to something 'other'. The underlying intention is for the detail to inform the overall design process. As Frascari writes,

"In the details are the possibilities of innovation and invention, and it is through these that architects can give harmony to the most uncommon and difficult or disorderly environment [...]"¹⁷

This design approach explores the role of architectural details at the particular moments of experience with materiality and space. 'Meaning' in details and space is given through the perception of the body. With the bodily interaction of physical details, this project will look at, "[...] the structural unit as the irreducible essence of architectural form."¹⁸

Sight gives the first incentive for a bodily interaction with objects and our surrounding. Our initial visual sense of objects intrigues us to further experience through our bodies, which is our extension into the world. However, when one approaches contemporary buildings and realizes there is no experience beyond sight, there is nothing for the other bodily senses to engage. Instead of engaging the users of the space through a discovery of details, it leaves them with an unsatisfied reading of the building and parts. There becomes a disconnection between the viewer and user, which is one and the same body.

Similar to our bodily experience of other subjects and objects in the world, which gives us reflections of our own body, we are able to experience architectural space through the composition of detail parts and materials. The carefully designed architectural details allow us to better relate to the overall scheme of the building. The physicality of architectural details, allows the body to experience spatial qualities as it reconnects us with the materials of which it is made. The location in which the details are located in relation to the bodily scale will also inform the way the body responds to it:

"The location of those details gives birth to the conventions that tie a meaning to a perception. The conception of the architectural space achieved in this way is the result of the association of the visual images of details, gained through the phenomenon

of the indirect vision, with the geometrical proposition embodies in forms, dimensions, and location, developed by touching and by walking through buildings."¹⁹

The physicality of tangible details can aid in the interaction of the reader with books as well as the spatial quality of the library. Thus, "perception is the ideas or signs of objects resulting from an interpretation of sensations that is carried out by processes of unconscious geometrical inference."²⁰ The following details are designed and explored in such a way that it is sight that first intrigues the viewer's curiosity and as they slowly approach the building and the details, the layering of materials will engage the totality of their body in perception.

Bookshelf Façade

The semi-transparent glazed façade is at the same time a bookcase, therefore the transparency and opacity of the façade is determined by the volumes of books that are stored on the shelf. The changing façade will entice the viewer from the exterior, drawing the viewer into the building to further discover the multi-layering of the detailing of the bookshelf system and the books that it holds. It visually intrigues the visitor, but then provides further discovery and engagement of their body with the books and the shelving detail, which connects to the overall building structure of the library.

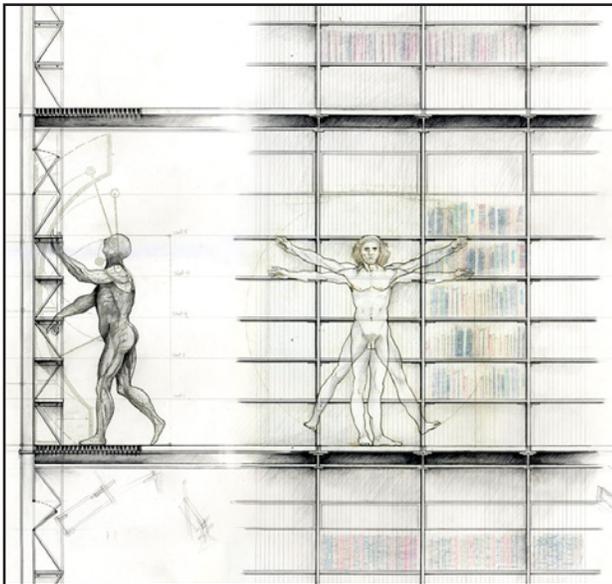


Figure 4: Detail drawing of the bookshelf façade system in relation to bodily interaction and dimensions.

"The Fragment Wall" Reading Spaces

Reading spaces will be located against the interior side of the wall fragment. This will introduce the user to have direct interaction with this historical wall, while engaged in study for reading. Exterior studs, which support the floors of the reading spaces, will intrigue the viewer's curiosity to later discover the spaces the studs create once they enter the library.

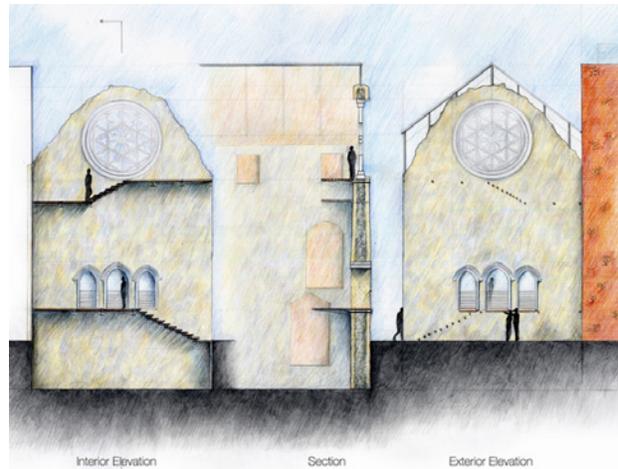


Figure 5: Drawing of reading spaces attached to a wall fragment. From left to right: Interior elevation, section and exterior elevation.

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed the importance of our lived-body as the locus for perception of the world. With this understanding, we come to realize that tactile architectural details can richly engage the body in experience. The bodily perception of this world involves an openness not only to the realm of the sensory, but also to the potential revelation of truth. It is through our embodiment of this world that there is a validation of our body, of the world and the objects within it. At the same time, perception does not simply end at the realm of sensations, but leads us to reflect and bring (physical) form and order to an understanding of the world.

With the onset of Modernity and the advancement of technology in all fields, boundaries are disappearing and becoming vague. Often times we are lost in the boundless, fragmented and abundance of ideas and information. Our current times value the virtual and the visually seductive, where our environ-

ments and objects are becoming removed from the direct contact and interaction of bodily perception; "In privileging the visual... [it] has impoverished our understanding of space [and this world]."²¹ The act of perception demands receptivity of the full ontological potential of the lived-body experience. Perception is, in effect, a self-referential system; there is nothing outside of the 'lived-body in world relation' to legitimize its 'claims'. Since the human experience is taken as its locus, the facticity of human experience is its reference point; one that none of us can empirically prove, but all have experienced.

The act of 'reading' architectural details, in which our body can physically interact, leads to metaphysical reflection and tactile connections to the whole of our world. Although physicality, of the bodily dimensions, is at times our restriction, it is not our limit for understanding. With the understanding that perception involves the subjective whole of the body, this will reawaken the importance of architecture to engage the physical dimensions and totality of the perceptual body. The physicality of this world, of our bodies and of objects, is a tactile and personal interaction which leads us back into a conscious understanding of the origins of knowledge.

Through the limited we can become limitless. Physicality leads us to experiences that are metaphysical. Through the particular we understand the order of the universal. The presence and totality of the body in perception cannot be ignored when addressing our experience from the details to the whole of architecture.

ENDNOTES

1. Holl, Steven. Pallasmaa, Juhani and Perez-Gomez, Alberto. *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology in Architecture*. San Francisco: William Stout Publishers, 2006, 29.
2. Holl, Steven. "Phenomena and Idea," *GA Architect*, no. 11, (1983).
3. Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Eyes of the Skin, Architecture of the Senses*. Great Britain: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2005, 11.
4. Phenomenology sets aside questions about the so-called objective nature of things; it recommends instead that we explore phenomena more subjectively, from within our own human experience. Phenomenology was first established by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and then developed by Martin Heidegger (1889-1973).
5. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. New York: Routledge, 2002, vii.
6. Intellectualists, such as Descartes and his famous quote: 'I think therefore I am', claim that our mind is not only distinct from our body, but our mental concepts have superiority over perception from the sensory body. While, realists take an opposite view, where perceptions of the world should be taken exactly as it is, and our minds do not organize our perception any further.
7. Merleau-Ponty 2002: 231.
8. Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences," In *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Primacy of Perception*. Edited by James M. Edie. United States: Northwestern University Press, 1964, 12.
9. Merleau-Ponty 2002: 216.
10. Merleau-Ponty 2002: 239.
11. Merleau-Ponty 2002: 215.
12. Merleau-Ponty 1964: 13.
13. Merleau-Ponty 1964: 25.
14. Sgan-Cohen, Michael Samuel. "The Mobile-Home-Library and the Laboratory for Design-Correlation from Frederick Kiesler: Artist, Architect, Visionary A Study of his work and writing. Volume I". PhD diss., The City University of New York, 1989, 303.
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16. Oechslin, Werner. "Mentalmente architettato - Thoughts in Physical Form: Immutable or Dynamic? The Case of the Library." Collection- *Laboratory- Theater*. Edited by Schramm, Helmar. Schwarte, Ludger and Lazardzig, Jan. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005, 126.
17. Frascari, Marco. "The Tell- The-Tale-Detail," *Via*, no.4 (1984), 23.
18. Frampton, Kenneth. "Rappel á L'Ordre, The Case for the Tectonic." In *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995*. Edited by Kate Nesbitt. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996, 519.
19. Frascari 1984: 28.
20. Frascari 1984: 28.
21. Leach, Neil. *Rethinking Architecture*. London: Routledge, 1997, 83.