 DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17939740

James Dodd*

Phenomenon

This issue of *Khōrein* is devoted to the concept of the "phenomenon." It brings together a diverse range of perspectives from classical phenomenology to architectural theory, architectural practice, and the history of both.

The theme invites diversity, arguably even demands it. What are phenomena? In philosophy, as to some extent in everyday life, the term is just another name for "things," broadly construed. Things, but approached from a certain angle. Phenomena are things that have lent themselves or have been led to being seen, thanks to some form of apprehension that conditions their visibility, or even establishes it in the first place. Thus, in everyday discourse "phenomenon" can designate something that appears to be exceptional or extraordinary, as in the "phenomenal skill" of a musical prodigy. In philosophy, the concept is decoupled from the extraordinary or the notable and given a broader range, expressing how things, whether ordinary or extraordinary, are seen thanks to the accomplishments of meaning or lived experience generally. In Kant, for example, the phenomenon is the result of the work of the faculty of understanding, thanks to which our sensuous encounter with things is subsumed under concepts and principles that integrate appearances into empirical, objective claims about the world. In Husserl, the phenomenon is the givenness of the given secured by the accomplishments of intentional life, thanks to which things are constituted in accordance with the universal possibilities of meaning. In Heidegger, the phenomenon is the very self-showing of beings, of being as self-showing (*Sichzeigende*), disclosed in such a fashion that conditions patterns of possible encounter.

Yet in philosophy phenomenon as appearance is only half the story. Time and again the descriptive or theoretical focus on phenomena qua such leads to a realization that in virtually all cases where sufficient

* James Dodd: The New School for Social Research, New York; doddj@newschool.edu.

attention is given to the phenomenality of the phenomenon what shows itself, what is seen, stands in a complicated relationship with what does not show itself, what is not seen. This is not simply a function of the limits of knowledge endemic to finite creatures like ourselves. One need not rehearse Kant's infamous distinction between phenomena and noumena to recognize that anything properly seen or understood invariably unfolds in a horizon conditioned by the unseen, whether in the sense of what has not yet been seen or perhaps in principle can never be seen at all. The visible, as Merleau-Ponty would argue (though here one might just as well cite Plato), is always found to be in an intricate dance with the invisible. We arguably "see" this as well: interwoven with the ordinary and the extraordinary is the presence of modes of being, meaning, and life that, though implicit in phenomenality and constitutive of its conditions of possibility, remain in the shadows as the unseen ground of the seen.

One might hazard that something like this double sidedness of the phenomenon, the embeddedness of the apparent in the non-apparent and the non-apparent in the apparent, of the visible in the invisible and vice versa, represents a universal *a priori* structure of human understanding and experience. One motivation to do so would be the recognition that the question is not simply one of interpretation, or ways of representing the world in a discourse that is capable of both revealing and concealing. It is also a fundamental structure of perceptual experience itself, as explored below by Philip Schauss in his "The Power of the Background: Architecture as Human Infrastructure." The perceived is such only against a background of what steps back from being perceived, setting forth a foreground that provides the basis for appearance. In perceptual life this is best understood as a movement, a dynamic transition from the one to the other, for the distinction is not one of sharp boundaries between things seen and unseen. It is an internal differentiation within the phenomenon-thing itself: something emerges as seen, coming to its own as what shows itself, only out of its own background, which itself recedes from being seen but all the while belongs to the seen as a reservoir of potential encounter. The perceived is in this way a process of emergence, always bringing with it the co-intended of the non-apparent or unseen. Any serious engagement with the idea of the lifeworld, the experience of the horizon of things as a horizon of encounter, must take the implications of this basic structure into account. It is a key theme in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body, as it is Heidegger's analyses of the worldly as a totality of significations (*Bedeutsamkeit*), all of

which were inspired by the rich Husserlian analyses that are the focus of Schauss' essay.

The double-sidedness of the phenomenon is also, Schauss argues, at work in architecture, as it is in the built world generally. Again, on the level of perceptual experience, architecture is at work in both foreground and background, organizing what arrests attention and gaze as well as what slips past or remains implicit. The description of the dynamics of our experience of architecture—a perhaps basic, but important theme of any "phenomenology of architecture"—is arguably situated precisely at this juncture of the play of what is explicitly engaged and what is not. Schauss' interpretation of Rem Koolhaas' concept of "Junkspace" is interesting in this regard: a junkspace is intrusive, yet bland and familiar; it combines a sense of being both pulled and trapped, forcing at least a cursory engagement, often for the purposes of commerce but always aimed at herding bodily comportment in one direction or other. Such spaces often invest an enormous amount into short-circuiting any pull into the anonymity of the background, only to flare out in an overheated superficiality (hot enough to "cultivate orchids") that renders them as ultimately forgettable as they were initially impossible not to see. This and many other formations of the built world can be conceived in terms of an often unsettling skill to manipulate the complex play of presence and absence that make up the meaningfulness, and often the bland meaninglessness of our experience of the built world.

Also drawing from the double-sidedness of the phenomenon is the idea of an "atmospherics" of architecture explored below in "Atmospheric Attunement," a conversation between Alberto Pérez-Gómez and his former student Robert Kirkbride. Here the motivation is rooted in the sense that advanced capitalism and techno-civilization have increasingly rendered architectural spaces devoid of regional specificity in favor of a leveling universality, depth of traditional understanding in favor of instrumentality, a critical sensibility that Pérez-Gómez has articulated in increasingly sophisticated ways since his 1983 *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science* and its 2016 sequel, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science.*[1] The theme of "atmosphere" is meant to draw attention to a dimension of the experience of

[1] See A. Pérez-Gómez, *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1985, and *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016.

meaning that is not limited to the expression of sense, or to the sense of architecture as either an instrument designed to address a specific end, or an expression social or political that bears a definitive meaning to be communicated. It has instead to do with mood, understood in a Heideggerean fashion as an attunement to the built as a place or site of events, meaning, and history. The seeming subjective ephemerality of the phenomenality of things at play in the attunement of mood belies its central importance: all built spaces are accessible as living spaces only thanks to such attunements. Even when built spaces seem to prevent those opportunities to reflect and linger thanks to which moods become an explicit theme, they nevertheless manifest, or remain manifest within a certain figure of mood, however implicit. To highlight the problems of attunement in this way brings to the fore the basic truth that the world we build is the very space of our existence, even when it is built in such a way that seems to bury this existence in suffocating indifference, often with disastrous existential and environmental consequences.

Attunement is not only a function of the way *space* is manifest, but also *time*, and not only the time of the present, but of the historical past as well. Here, the double play of phenomenal presence and absence can also take the form of the complex dynamic of remembering and forgetting, with the peculiar elusiveness that often entails. This is a dimension not only of architecture proper, but also writing about architecture, whether in the present or from a historical perspective. The intersection of architecture and architectural writing and its historical elusiveness is the subject of Indra Kagis McEwen's "On Doubling the Square and Other Phenomena," an illuminating essay on Vitrivius' embrace of Roman triumphalism that supplements her 2004 *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture*.[2] This embrace, McEwen shows, can be discerned through the reconstruction of the often overlooked allusions to Roman conquest that are found throughout *De architectura*, from the association of the Corinthian order with the destruction of the eponymous city to that of the *gnomonice* with the land-measuring *gnomon* and compass as symbolic of the domination of Rome over newly conquered territories, affirming *avant la lettre* the spirit of Ovid's *Romanae spatium est Urbis et orbis idem.* The collective effect of these allusions in Vitruvius' writing, McEwen demonstrates, represents a monument to an historical attunement

[2] I. Kagis McEwen, *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture,* MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004.

germane to a specific time and place, one retrievable from the historical background only given a reconstruction of associations that allow for the education of an ear with which to read Vitruvian prose and the eyes to see the political nature of the architecture that is the subject of his text.

The example of Vitruvius in turn points to a potential risk that accompanies an emphasis on attunement or mood: the uncritical acceptance of a saturation of architecture by meanings that either ideologically conform to predominant social and political regimes of power or occlude their presence, or both. As Joseph Bedford shows in his study "After Affect," this concern for a more fundamental critical positioning of architectural theory in part motivated a turn to *affect* in the last and first decades of the turn of the millennium. Rooted in both a biological reading of psychoanalysis and the influence of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, affect theory in the writings of figures such as Sylvia Lavin, Jeff Kipnis, and Brian Massumi sought to articulate a level of sensibility that is effectively pre-conscious, firmly rooted in the body, and prior to the conditioning of social and cultural production. Given its emphasis on a level of embodied response more basic than consciousness, more basic than understanding, even more basic than culture itself, affect theory was taken to be a position from which to criticize what was interpreted to be an overly conservative posture of phenomenology in architecture, one that all too often seemed to reduce itself to the nostalgia of the *genius loci* or the fantasy of a pre-modern lost paradise in the pursuit of an ephemeral authenticity. Embracing affect seemed to give the architect and architectural theorist the chance to regain the initiative that had seemed to have played itself out in late modernism: the ability to have a direct impact on the flow of power in a society that has proven remarkably successful in the orchestration and manipulation of affects such as resentment, hatred, and the pervasive feeling of powerlessness.

On Bedford's account, this turn to affect has seemed to run its course, proving in the end to be neither all that theoretically coherent nor even that progressive politically. This opens the possibility for a renewed engagement with phenomenology that, in the end, had always remained committed to a non-reductive, expansive understanding of the foundations of meaningful experience. And again, the question of the phenomenon and the cluster of related concepts it brings—understanding, seeing, attunement, even affect itself—retains its vital importance.

Perhaps the most important result of any exploration of the discourses around the concept of the phenomenon is the recognition that

there are many registers of phenomenality. The example of Vitruvius, specifically the relation between architectural writing and the political, points to one such register: the role of what one might call a cultivated manifestation of collective life that is essential not only for its organization, but its endurance and even reality. For the writings of Vitrivius not only document the fact of architecture, but its meaning, its sense that is established in the world thanks to that very documentation itself. Here Hannah Arendt's concept of the "space of appearance," critically revisited in Sophie Loidolt's "Phenomenal Existence and World-Building. Revisiting the Ambivalences of Arendt's Public/Private Distinction and its Relation to the Body," is of particular interest in this regard. The space of appearance is best understood, as Loidolt shows, precisely when it is clearly distinguished from other registers of phenomenality. All things appear—again, the term "phenomena" is on one level synonymous with "things," this is the first register—yet embedded in this universal showing is a second register of appearance, a modality of self-disclosure fundamental to what Arendt calls human plurality: the fashioning of a stage onto which human beings appear as a multiplicity of perspectives in concert, "in between" which the things and affairs of the world are perceived, taken up, understood, acted upon. Such a space is in turn both organized and preserved by a third register of appearance, that secured manifestation that constitutes a public reality, a *res publica* (to appropriate, perhaps violently, an ancient theme), embodied in the full scope of what Arendt in *The Human Condition* credits as the world-building function of *homo faber*: the built world, but also writing and the arts, in which the individuality of perspective enacted in words and deeds is communicated and preserved in an enduring form that projects not only a coherent "world," but its very past and future as an established human reality.[3]

Homo faber preserves and orchestrates, but can also destroy and frustrate, for the spaces we create can also deindividualize, erase, fuse us into a mass in which there is no longer any real valence to the political idea of plurality. Arendt's work is haunted, as Loidolt expresses it, with the specter of what was for her a twin threat to human civilization: the levelling of the anonymity of mass consumerist culture that eliminates the balance between private and public and the possible existential annihilation of nuclear war. Today we would add environmental devastation

[3] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958, chapter IV.

that renders our planet uninhabitable, but the underlying point is the same: how human beings live, how they fashion for themselves a world, increasingly risks the possibility of creating the conditions for the irreparable disruption of human existence as such. Loidolt makes the strong case that, whatever the limits of Arendt's political perspective, whether it be her Eurocentrism or abhorrence for pre-modern modalities of human co-existence, her phenomenological ontology provides a compelling argument for placing the question of the architecture of collective life at the center of our collective efforts to face the challenges of the economic, social, political, and environmental crises of modernity.

If there is a common thread that runs through most, if not all, the contributions to this issue of *Khōrein*, including those that have not been mentioned here, it is perhaps this sense of crisis. Admittedly, this might raise some doubts about the choice of the theme itself. How can an engagement, whether philosophical or architectural, with the concept of the phenomenon contribute positively to the myriad crises facing humanity today, crises of the political, homelessness, alienation, and ecological devastation? Perhaps only in a very limited way, one might predict. But after reflecting on the contributions in this issue, perhaps one might see in the theme of the phenomenon something indeed limited but nevertheless essential. Any response to the crisis can only be a combination of understanding and action in which we collectively pursue the question of what it means to live together in a shared world. Yet this entails the fact that our capacity to respond is ultimately bound to our capacity to see, to resist the lull of indifference and recognize what calls for understanding and action. In short, response is possible only in a horizon of shared responsibility. Such responsibility rests on our ability to navigate the phenomenal world, not only to find a home but to shoulder the responsibility for making home possible at all. We can be responsible in this way only because we are creatures who see and experience, thus the phenomenon proves essential for any dialogue between the responsible architect seeking to address the burning questions of our age and the philosopher, that perennial seeker of the conditions for responsibility as such.