

# Post structuralism and phenomenology concepts in architecture



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## 1. Post-structuralism

Post-structuralism is a progression of earlier movement resulted by the work of a Swiss linguist, Ferdinand De Saussure in the 1910s and 1920s called *Structuralism*. The latter was influenced by *semiotics* (a study of signs). According to Saussure, a language is a system of signs made up of a 'signifier' (an acoustic-image) and a 'signified' (a concept).[1] Structuralism is understood as how the system works to structure their individual elements to imply a meaning.

Post-structuralism is often interchangeably linked with postmodernism and deconstruction in general, as all these movements respond to structuralism's philosophy of language but they apply those insights to a wider range of topics and radicalize some of the structuralism's premises.[2] The consideration of architecture as communication while recognizing its functionality came during the Modernism era, which revolves around the universal form and the principle of 'form follows function' phrased by American architect, Louis Sullivan. "Modern architects believed the 'functions' of diagrammatic objects would be transparent, or obvious to everyone." [3] However, the text, "*The Lesson of the Toilet Bowl*", has taught us that it is through learning that human knows how to use a 'form'.

Charles Jencks and Peter Eisenman both opposed the former movement in post-modernism and deconstruction respectively. Jencks sees communication as the main problem of modernism as modern architects abandoned the traditional 'language' of architecture and tried to design 'functional' buildings. Post-modernism is characterized as 'double-coding'[4],

highlighting multivalent, unlike modern architecture which was criticized as univalent in terms of form. While modern architecture strives to create new, independent works of art, postmodern architecture embraced diversity with the merge of ideas, styles, and characters to promote parody, humor and irony. Deconstruction, on the other hand, challenges the values of harmony, unity, and stability, and proposing instead a different view of a structure that the flaws are intrinsic to the structure.[5] Deconstructivist rejects the presence of metaphysics, as well as the function, scale, and context.[6]

In terms of design process within the discipline of architecture, structuralism revolves around the idea of binary, hierarchical, and structural thinking for example, black cannot be white and vice versa. Whereas in poststructuralism, French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze (1925-95) collaborated with the psychoanalyst, Félix Guattari (1930-92) introduced the concept of *rhizome* in *A Thousand Plateaus (1980)*. "A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo* o'." [7] The term 'rhizome' promotes connective thinking in which post-structuralists criticized the reductive and that phenomena actually occurs in a more multifarious manner. There are in between and tangents and ambiguous non-binary associations. Post-structuralist's approach argues that to understand an object, it is necessary to study both the object itself and the systems of knowledge that produced the object.

## 2. Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophical movement or approach which was inaugurated by a German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) during

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the 1800s. In architecture, the term phenomenology is the study of the essence of human consciousness through the subjective experience of phenomena. Architectural phenomenology acknowledged the importance of human experience as part of architecture; also referred as a return of lived experience.[8] This theory promotes the integration of human sensory and perception as part of built form to create an architectural and experiential space that is beyond tangible, but rather abstract, observed and perceived.

One of the key approaches in phenomenology discourse was shaped by the thought of Martin Heidegger where he defines the meaning of *Bauen* (building) as to dwell, the latter simply means creating a sense of quality space within the building, providing the sense of feeling “being at home” – to build is in itself already to dwell. However, dwelling does not necessarily occur in every building or typologies.[9]

It was later then, the Heidegger’s philosophy becomes influential among a number of architectural theorists, namely, Christian Norberg-Schulz, a Norwegian architectural theorist, who was among the first to attempt to translate phenomenological approach into architecture. Schulz argues that the “perception is inseparable from our preexisting knowledge about the things we perceive. Our perception is actually a result of our previous experiences.” This infers that every individual’s perception is very subjective to their experiences and thus, asserted as a limiting factor to the phenomenological approach.

In the architecture of today, people give too much of attention on the visual image (appearance) that the “reality of how a building an experience” has

been neglected as mentioned by Finnish architect, Juhani Pallasmaa, who explored this notion in his work titled, *The Geometry of Feeling (1985)*. Pallasmaa phrases that, “ the artistic dimension of a work of art does not lie in the actual physical thing; it exists only in the consciousness of the person experiencing it.”[10]

This statement enables us to think thoroughly that “ we do not only design a building as its physical form, and it is the images and feelings” in other words, the design aims to achieve emotions/ experiences. A phenomenological concept in architectural design strategies to develop a unique experience by taking account of phenomena factors like space, light, and form. Architecture aims to provide to human needs and therefore, it is essential that a great design considers the relation of human senses with built form in order to create a rich experience that unfolds over time and gives a memorable impact for users.[11]

### 3. Theory and Practice

Every now and then, we see theories overlap and developed from criticism, judgment, descriptive or interpretation on specific existing works.

Consequently, this provides “ alternative solutions based on observations of the current state of the discipline, or offers new thought paradigms for approaching the issues.”[12]The discourse of architectural theory and practice began after the Renaissance period when the *Art of Building in Ten Books* , which closely modeled Vitruvius' work was published by Alberti.

[13]According to Korydon Smith in *Introducing Architectural Theory* , he defined architectural theory as:

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the evolution of the objective principles and subjective values that guide individual and collective decisions about, and assessments of one's own and others' architectural works.[14]

Based on the definition, we can infer theories in architecture appear to be subjective and rather more individualistic and collective paradigms as everyone relatively do not share the same opinions or visual languages.

His work also introduced the concept of the ' dialectic' in particular, a dialogue. It arises as a dichotomy, a debate between two opposing positions, ideas, or theories (thesis and antithesis) but, through the desire to reconcile (synthesis) the debate, results in proposition. The dialectic, as such, is popularly known as Fichtean dialectics by Kant's philosophies. The idea of ' dialectic' is to be said a process using reasoning to ascertain what the truth could be.

The discourse of theoretical within the discipline of architecture focuses on the relationship between theory and practice with two very distinct views revolving on the necessity of theory to practice effectively. For Bernard Tschumi, he argues that " Architecture is not an illustrative art; it does not illustrate theories" whereas, Vittorio Gregotti insists on " theoretical research as a direct foundation of action" in architectural design.[15]Theory within the practice is resolved to be inevitable as quoted by Iain Borden, " Theory is indispensable. It is how we make sense of the world." [16]The Oxford philosophy professor John Alexander Smith phrased:

The real gain from studying philosophy is not in learning about the views of great philosophers but in understanding their arguments and in acquiring  
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confidence in one's ability to think critically, by thinking through these arguments.[17]

From this statement inferences the relation of theory and practice where two have to evolve simultaneously. Dialectics are often present within the discipline of architecture design and practice, as " a process of making incremental, though interrelated, decisions." [18] The theoretical dissertation has hugely contributed a number of architectural works today which helps to stimulate people to apply critical thinking in theory and practice and thus, the cycle repeats.

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