

A Way of Seeing People and Place: Phenomenology in Environment-Behavior Research

David Seamon

Abstract

This review examines the phenomenological approach as it might be used to explore environmental and architectural issues. After discussing the nature of phenomenology in broad terms, the review presents two major assumptions of the phenomenological approach: (1) that people and environment compose an indivisible whole; (2) that phenomenological method can be described in terms of a “radical empiricism.” The review then considers three specific phenomenological methods: (1) first-person phenomenological research; (2) existential-phenomenological research; and (3) hermeneutical-phenomenological research. Next, the article discusses trustworthiness and reliability as they can be understood phenomenologically. Finally, the review considers the value of phenomenology for environmental design.

Keywords: phenomenology, place, architecture, landscape, environmental experience, home.

1. Introduction

In simplest terms, phenomenology is the interpretive study of human experience. The aim is to examine and clarify human situations, events, meanings, and experiences “as they spontaneously occur in the course of daily life” (von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3). The goal is “a rigorous description of human life as it is lived and reflected upon in all of its first-person concreteness, urgency, and ambiguity” (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 5).

This preliminary definition, however, is oversimplified and does not capture the full manner or range of phenomenological inquiry. Herbert Spiegelberg, the eminent phenomenological philosopher and historian of the phenomenological movement, declared that there are as many styles of phenomenology as there are phenomenologists (Spiegelberg 1982, p. 2)— a situation that makes it difficult to articulate a thorough and accurate picture of the tradition.

In this article, I can only claim to present my understanding of phenomenology and its significance for environment-behavior research. As a phenomenological geographer in a department of architecture, my main teaching and research emphases relate to the nature of environmental behavior and experience, especially in terms of the built environment. I am particularly interested in why places are important for people and how architecture and environmental design can be a vehicle for place making. Empirical phenomenological studies with which I have been involved range from the use of my own personal experience to understand the nature of a particular place (Seamon, 1992) to the interpretation of photography and imaginative literature as a way to understand essential experiential qualities of the person-environment relationship (Seamon, 1990a, 1993). I have also written on the ways that the phenomenological approach might be used to interpret architecture and to contribute to better environmental design (Coates and Seamon, 1993; Seamon, 1990b, 1991, 1993b, 1994; Lin and Seamon, 1994).

In demonstrating in this chapter the value of phenomenology to environment-behavior research, I occasionally draw on my own studies but give most attention to phenomenological work done by other researchers, since the breadth of phenomenological possibilities is considerable, and my work indicates only a small portion of the potential whole. Throughout the chapter, most of the studies to which I refer are explicitly phenomenological, though occasionally I incorporate work that is implicitly phenomenological in that either the authors choose not to involve the tradition directly (e.g., Brill, 1993; Pocius, 1993; Tuan, 1993) or are unaware that their approach, methods, and results parallel a phenomenological perspective (e.g., Krapfel, 1990; Lipton, 1990; Walkey, 1993). I justify the inclusion of these studies because they present aspects of human life and experience in new ways by identifying generalizable qualities and patterns that arise from everyday human life and experience—for example, qualities of the built environment that contribute to a sense of place, order, and beauty (Alexander, 1987; 1993; Alexander et al., 1977; Silverstein, 1993b; Rattner, 1993).¹

Specifically, I discuss the following themes in this chapter:

- the nature of phenomenology;
- key assumptions of a phenomenological approach;
- the methodology of empirical phenomenological research;
- trustworthiness and phenomenological research;
- phenomenology and environmental design.

2. The Nature of Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a critical, descriptive science that is related, in method and philosophical outlook, to other interpretive traditions that include existentialism and hermeneutics (Stewart and Mukunis, 1990). Phenomenology includes different conceptual approaches that range from the transcendental or “pure” phenomenology of philosopher Edmund Husserl to the hermeneutic phenomenology of philosopher Paul Ricoeur to the existential phenomenology of philosophers Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Spiegelberg, 1982). In using the term here, I refer to a way of knowing that seeks to describe the underlying, essential qualities of human experience and the world in which that experience happens (Burch, 1989; Pollio, 1997; Valle, 1998; van Manen, 1990).

I therefore define phenomenology as the exploration and description of phenomena, where *phenomena* refer to things or experiences as human beings experience them. Any object, event, situation or experience that a person can see, hear, touch, smell, taste, feel, intuit, know, understand, or live through is a legitimate topic for phenomenological investigation. There can be a phenomenology of light, of color, of architecture, of landscape, of place, of home, of travel, of seeing, of learning, of blindness, of jealousy, of change, of relationship, of friendship, of power, of economy, of sociability, and so forth. All of these things are phenomena because human beings can experience, encounter, or live through them in some way.

The ultimate aim of phenomenological research, however, is not idiosyncratic descriptions of the phenomenon, though such descriptions are often an important starting point for existential phenomenology. Rather, the aim is to use these descriptions as a groundstone from which to discover underlying commonalities that mark the essential core of the phenomenon. In other words, the phenomenologist *pays attention* to specific instances of the phenomenon with the hope that these instances, in time, will point toward more general qualities and characteristics that accurately

describe the essential nature of the phenomenon as it has presence and meaning in the concrete lives and experiences of human beings.

3. Some Core Assumptions of a Phenomenological Approach

In the last several years, there has appeared a growing number of works that discuss the relation of phenomenology to the scholarly and professional worlds in general terms (Burch, 1989, 1990, 1991; Embree, 1997; Stewart and Mukunis, 1990) and to specific disciplines—e.g. anthropology (Jackson, 1996; Weiner, 1991); art (Berleant, 1991; Davis, 1989; Jones, 1989); education (van Manen, 1990); environmental design (Berleant, 1992; Condon, 1991; Corner, 1990; Dovey, 1993; Mugerauer, 1994; Howett, 1993; Vesely, 1988); geography (Cloke et al., 1991, chap. 3; Relph, 1989a, b, 1990; Seamon, 1997); psychology (Moustakis, 1994; Pollio et al., 1997; Valle, 1998); philosophy (Casey, 1993, 1996); and natural science (Bortoft, 1997; Heelan, 1983; Jones, 1989; Riegner, 1993; Seamon and Zajonc, 1998).

In much of this work, commentators have placed phenomenology within the wider conceptual and methodological rubric of *qualitative inquiry* (Cloke et al., 1991; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Low, 1987). For example, Patton (1990, pp. 66-91) associates phenomenology with such other qualitatively-oriented theories and orientations as ethnography, heuristic inquiry, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, and ecological psychology. Patton argues that, in broadest terms, all these perspectives present variations on “grounded theory” (e.g., Glaser and Strauss, 1967)—in other words, perspectives assuming “methods that take the researcher into and close to the real world so that the results and findings are ‘grounded’ in the empirical world” (Patton, 1990, p. 67). This perspective approaches theory inductively, in contrast to “theory generated by logical deduction from a priori assumptions” (ibid., p. 66).

Patton's identification of phenomenology with qualitative orientations is certainly acceptable, though it is also important to realize that these various qualitative perspectives involve as many differences as similarities, thus, for example, ethnographic inquiry typically studies a *particular* person or group in a *particular* place in time; in contrast, a phenomenological study might begin with a similar real-world situation but would then use that specific instance as a foundation for identifying deeper, more generalizable patterns, structures, and meanings. Similarly, both symbolic interactionism and phenomenology examine the kinds of symbols and understandings that give meaning to a particular group or society's way of living and experiencing. The perspective of the symbolic interactionist, however, most typically emphasizes the more explicit, cognitively-derived layers of meaning whereas a phenomenological perspective defines meaning in a broader way that includes bodily, visceral, intuitive, emotional, and transpersonal dimensions.

Phenomenology, therefore, can be identified as one style of qualitative inquiry but involving a particular conceptual and methodological foundation. Here, I highlight two broad assumptions that, at least for me, mark the essential core of a phenomenological approach:

- Person and world as intimately part and parcel;
- Phenomenology as a radical empiricism.

I emphasize these two broad assumptions because the first relates to the particular subject matter of phenomenology, while the second relates to the means by which that subject matter is to be

understood. I hope discussion of these two assumptions gives the reader a better sense of what makes phenomenology distinctive and how this distinctiveness can offer a valuable tool for environment-behavior research.

3.1. Person and World Intimately Part and Parcel

A central focus of phenomenology is the way people exist in relation to their world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) argued that, in conventional philosophy and psychology, the relationship between person and world has been reduced to either an idealist or realist perspective. In an idealist view, the world is a function of a person who acts on the world through consciousness and, therefore, actively knows and shapes his or her world. In contrast, a realist view sees the person as a function of the world in that the world acts on the person and he or she reacts. Heidegger claimed that both perspectives are out of touch with the nature of human life because they assume a separation and directional relationship between person and world that does not exist in the world of actual lived experience.

Instead, Heidegger argued that people do not exist apart from the world but, rather, are intimately caught up in and immersed. There is, in other words, an “undissolvable unity” between people and world (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 9). This situation—always given, never escapable—is what Heidegger called *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*. It is impossible to ask whether person makes world or world makes person because both exist always together and can only be correctly interpreted in terms of the holistic relationship, being-in-world (Pocock, 1989; Relph, 1989a; Seamon, 1990a). In this sense, phenomenology supplants the idealist and realist divisions between person and world with a conception in which the two are *indivisible*—a person-world whole that is one rather than two. A major phenomenological challenge is to describe this person-world intimacy in a way that legitimately escapes any subject-object dichotomy.

One broad theme that phenomenologists have developed to overcome this dichotomy is *intentionality*—the argument that human experience and consciousness necessarily involve some aspect of the world as their object, which, reciprocally, provides the context for the meaning of experience and consciousness (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 90; Pollio, 1997, p. 7). In examining peoples' intentional relationships with their worlds, environment-behavior researchers using phenomenology have typically drawn on two central notions that I review here—*lifeworld*, and *place*. These notions are significant for a phenomenological approach to environment-behavior research because each refers to a phenomenon that, in its very constitution, holds people and world always together and also says much about the physical, spatial, and environmental aspects of human life and events.

3.1.1. Lifeworld

The lifeworld refers to the tacit context, tenor and pace of daily life to which normally people give no reflective attention. The lifeworld includes both the routine and the unusual, the mundane and the surprising. Whether an experience is ordinary or extraordinary, however, the lifeworld in which the experience happens is normally out of sight. Typically, human beings do not make their experiences in the lifeworld an object of conscious awareness. Rather, these experiences *just happen*, and people do not consider how they happen, whether they could happen differently, or of what larger experiential structures they might be a part. One of my earliest phenomenological efforts was a book-length study that sought to identify the underlying geographical aspects of the lifeworld, which

I explored in terms of three existential themes—*movement*, *rest*, and *encounter* (Seamon, 1979).

One research focus relating to the lifeworld in recent phenomenological research is its perceptual taken-for-grantedness (Abrams, 1996, Pocock, 1993). For example, partly influenced by the seminal works on the acoustic dimensions of the lifeworld by Schafer (1977) and Berendt (1985), there have been phenomenological studies of the multimodal ways in which the senses contribute to human awareness and understanding (Jarvilouma, 1994; Pocock, 1993; Porteous, 1990; Schonhammer, 1989; Tuan, 1993). Other phenomenological researchers have considered how particular circumstances relating to the environment or to the person lead to particular lifeworld experiences, thus Behnke (1990) and Rehorick (1986) examined the experience of earthquakes phenomenologically, while Hill (1985) explored the lifeworld of the blind person and Toombs (1992a, 1995a, 1995b) drew upon her own experience of chronic progressive multiple sclerosis to provide a phenomenological explication of the human experience of disability.

One insightful study relating to material aspects of the lifeworld is Palaasma's architectural examination of how the design aesthetic of Modernist-style buildings largely emphasized intellect and vision and how a more comprehensive architecture would accommodate an environmental experience of all the senses as well as the feelings (Pallasmaa, 1996). Another study linking lifeworld with the physical environment is Nogué i Font's efforts at a phenomenology of landscape (Nogué i Font, 1993). He attempted to describe the essential landscape character of *Garroxta*, a Catalanian region in the Pyrenees foothills north of Barcelona. In developing a phenomenology of this region, Nogué i Font conducted in-depth interviews with five groups of people familiar with *Garroxta* in various ways—farmers, landscape painters, tourists, hikers, and recently-arrived residents who were formerly urbanites.

In this study, Nogué i Font addressed a central phenomenological question: Can there be a phenomenology of landscape in its own right, or does there exist only a phenomenology of that landscape as particular individuals and groups experience and know it? He concluded that both phenomenologies exist, and one does not exclude the other. In describing the meanings of *Garroxta* for the farmers and painters, for example, Nogué i Font found that, in some ways, the landscape has significantly contrasting meanings for the two groups. In spite of these differences, however, both farmers and painters spoke of certain physical elements and experienced qualities that mark the uniqueness of *Garroxta* as a “thing in itself.” For example, both groups saw the region as a wild, tangled landscape of gorges, precipices, and forests that invoke a sense of respect and endurance.

3.1.2. Place

One significant dimension of the lifeworld is the human experience of place, which, in spite of criticism from non-phenomenologists (e.g., Rapoport, 1993), continues to be a major focus of phenomenological work in environment-behavior research (Barnes, 1992; Boschetti, 1993; Chaffin, 1989; Hester, 1993; Hufford, 1988; Oldenburg, 1989; Pocius, 1991; Porteous, 1989; Relph, 1993; Seamon, 1992, 1993; Sherry, 1998; Smith, 1989; Weimer, 1991).

In philosophy, Casey (1994, 1996) has written two book-length accounts that argue for place as a central ontological structure founding human experience: “place, by virtue of its unencompassability by anything other than itself, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists...[P]lace serves as the *condition* of all existing things... To be is to be in place” (1994, pp. 15-16). Drawing on Merleau-

Ponty (1962), Casey emphasized that place is a central ontological structure of being-in-the world partly because of our existence as *embodied* beings. We are “bound by body to be in place” (1994, p. 104), thus, for example, the very physical form of the human body immediately regularizes our world in terms of here-there, near-far, up-down, above-below, and right-left. Similarly, the pre-cognitive intelligence of the body expressed through action—what Merleau-Ponty (1962) called “body subject”—embodies the person in a pre-reflective stratum of taken-for-granted bodily gestures, movements, and routines (Ediger, 1994; Hill, 1985; Seamon, 1979; Toombs, 1992a, 1995a, 1995b).

The broad philosophical discussions of Relph (1976, 1990, 1993, 1996) continue to be a significant conceptual guide for empirical phenomenologies of place (Boschetti, 1991, 1993, 1996; Chaffin, 1989; Masucci, 1992; Million, 1993; Seamon, 1993). Perhaps the most comprehensive example is provided by Million (1993), who examined phenomenologically the experience of five rural Canadian families forced to leave their ranches because of the construction of a reservoir dam in southern Alberta. Drawing on Relph’s notions of insiderness and outsiderness (Relph, 1976), Million sought to identify the central lived-qualities of what she called *involuntary displacement*—the families’ experience of forced relocation and resettlement. Using in-depth interviews with the families as her descriptive base, she demonstrated how place is prior to involuntary displacement with the result that this experience can be understood metaphorically as a forced journey marked by eight stages.

Becoming uneasy, struggling to stay, and having to accept emerge in Million’s study as the first three stages of involuntary displacement whereby the families realize that they must leave their home place. The process then moves into *securing a settlement* and *searching for the new*—two stages that mark a “living in between”—i.e., a middle phase of a forced journey and a time when the families feel farthest away from place. Finally, with *starting over, unsettling reminders, and wanting to settle*, the families move into three stages of a rebuilding phase. Million’s study is significant because it examined the foundations of place experience for one group of people and delineates the lived stages in the process of losing place and attempting to resettle.²

3.2. A Radical Empiricism

If one key phenomenological assumption is the intimate connectedness between person and world, a second assumption relates to what I call “radical empiricism”—the particular manner in which this person-world connectedness is to be studied. In using this descriptive phrase, I attempt to encapsulate the heart of phenomenological method by indicating a way of study whereby the researcher seeks to be open to the phenomenon and to allow it to show itself in its fullness and complexity *through her own direct involvement and understanding*. In that this style of study arises through firsthand, grounded contact with the phenomenon as it is experienced by the researcher, the approach can be called *empirical*, though the term is used much differently than by positivist scientists who refer to data that are materially identifiable and mathematically recordable.

If, in other words, phenomenological method can be called empirical, it must be identified as *radically* so, since understanding arises directly from the researcher's personal sensibility and awareness rather than from the usual secondhand constructions of positivist science—e.g., *a priori* theory and concepts, hypotheses, predetermined methodological procedures, statistical measures of correlation, and the like. More precisely, one can make the following claims about

phenomenological method as a radical empiricism:

1. *The study must involve the researcher's direct contact with the phenomenon.* If the phenomenologist studies a person or group's experience, then she must encounter that experience as directly as possible. Methodological possibilities include the researcher's participating in the experience, her conducting in-depth interviews with the person or group having the experience, or her carefully watching and describing the situation supporting or related to the experience. If the phenomenon being studied is some artifactual text—for example, photographs, a novel, music, or a landscape—the researcher must find ways to immerse herself in the text so that she becomes as familiar as possible with it. Thus, she might carefully study the text and thoroughly record her experience and understanding. She might ask other parties to respond to the text and provide their insights and awareness. Or she might study other commentator's understandings of the text—for example, reading reviews of the novel or studying all critical commentaries on the author or artist in question.

In short, the researcher must facilitate for herself an intimacy with the phenomenon through prolonged, firsthand involvement.

2. *The phenomenologist must assume that she does not know the phenomenon but wishes to.* Ideally, the phenomenologist approaches the phenomenon as a beginner—in fact, phenomenology is often defined as a “science of beginnings” (Stewart and Mukunas, 1990, p. 5). Whereas, in positivist research, the student typically begins her inquiry *knowing* what she does not know, the phenomenologist, does *not* know what she doesn't know. The phenomenon is an uncharted territory that the student attempts to explore.

The phenomenologist must therefore always adapt her methods to the nature and circumstances of the phenomenon. A set of procedures that work for one phenomenological problem may be unsuitable elsewhere. In this sense, the central instrument of deciphering the phenomenon is the *phenomenological researcher herself*. She must be directed yet flexible in the face of the phenomenon.

In short, the phenomenologist has no clear sense of what she will find or how discoveries will proceed. The skill, perceptiveness, and dedication of the researcher are the engine for phenomenological research and presuppose any specific methodological procedures.

3. *Since the researcher as human instrument is the heart of phenomenological method, the specific research methods she uses should readily portray human experience in experiential terms.* The best phenomenological methods, therefore, are those that allow human experience to arise in a rich, unstructured, multidimensional way. If the interview format seems the best way to gather an account of the phenomenon, then the researcher must be open to respondents and adapt her questions, tone, and interest to both respondents' commentaries and to her own shifting understanding as she learns more about the phenomenon. If the researcher uses a novel, photograph or some other artifactual text to examine the phenomenon, then she must be willing to return to its parts again and again, especially if an exploration of one new part offers insights on other parts already considered.

In short, phenomenological method incorporates a certain uncertainty and spontaneity that must be

accepted and transformed into possibility and pattern. The phenomenological approach to a particular phenomenon must be developed creatively and allow for a fluidity of methods and research process.

4. Specific Phenomenological Methods

Having considered, broadly, some central components of phenomenological method, I next wish to review attempts to identify specific methodological types of phenomenological research. For the most part, it has been *psychologists*—specially psychologists associated with what has come to be called the “Duquesne School of Phenomenological Psychology”—who have sought to establish reliable procedural methods for conducting empirical phenomenological research (Giorgi et al., 1983; Valle, 1998; also see Moustakas, 1994).

Drawing on the designations of Duquesne phenomenological psychologist von Eckartsberg (1998a, b), I discuss two methodological approaches—what von Eckartsberg calls the *existential* and the *hermeneutic*. I also add a third approach that I call *first-person*. I describe this approach first, since it draws on the realm of experience closest to the researcher—her own lived situation.

4.1. First-Person Phenomenological Research

In first-person phenomenological inquiry, the researcher uses her own firsthand experience of the phenomenon as a basis for examining its specific characteristics and qualities (Chaffin, 1989; Lane, 1988; Shaw, 1992; Wu, 1991). For example, this approach was one of several I used in trying to understand the unique character of *Olana*—19th-century American landscape painter Frederic Church’s home looking out over the Hudson River (Seamon, 1992). Through being on the site and walking, looking, writing, sketching, and so forth, I attempted to empathize with and identify the architectural, environmental, and human qualities that make *Olana* a special place, at least for me as a representative 20th-century visitor. Another example is the work of Violich (1985, 1998), who examined the contrasting qualities of place for several Dalmatian towns with varying spatial layouts. Using such techniques as sketching, mapping, and journal entries, he immersed himself in each place for several days and sought to “‘read’ each as a whole” (1985, p. 113).

One of the most sensitive and exhaustive uses of first-person phenomenological research is the work of Toombs (1992a, 1992b, 1995a, 1995b), who lives with multiple sclerosis, an incurable illness that affects her ability to see, to hear, to sit, and to stand. In her work, which most broadly can be described as a phenomenology of illness, she demonstrated how phenomenological notions like the lived body provide “important insights into the profound disruptions of space and time that are an integral element of changed physical capacities such as loss of mobility” (Toombs, 1995b, p. 9).

Toombs’ method involved a continual dialectic between phenomenological notions as conceptually understood versus their concreteness as known directly in her own lived experience. For instance, to provide an understanding of how the disabled person’s loss of mobility leads to a changed interaction with the surrounding world, Toombs recounted in detail a typical experience—her journey by airplane to a professional conference. At one point in her narrative she described airport check-in:

Once in the terminus I go to the airline check-in counter. In my battery-operated scooter I am approximately three and a half feet tall and the counter is on a level with my head. All my transactions with the person behind the counter take place at the level of my ear. The person

behind the counter must stretch over it to take my tickets, and I must crane my neck and shout to be heard (ibid., p. 14).

From such lived examples, Toombs drew phenomenological generalizations--for example, she described how her loss of upright posture relates to Merleau-Ponty's broader notions of bodily intentionality and the transformation of corporeal style (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 76). Thus the loss of uprightness is not confined to problems of locomotion but also involves deeper experienced dimensions like the diminishment of one's own autonomy and the tendency of able persons to treat the disabled as dependent or even subnormal.

Another way in which the first-person approach can be used in phenomenology is as a starting place from which the phenomenologist can bring to awareness "her preconceived notions and biases regarding the experience being investigated so that the researcher is less likely to impose these biases when interpreting [the phenomenon]" (Shertock, 1998, p. 162).

Provided the phenomenologist has access in her own experience to the phenomenon she plans to study, first-person research can offer clarity and insight grounded in one's own lifeworld. This understanding is derived from a world of one, however, and the researcher must find ways to involve the worlds of others. This need leads to the method of existential-phenomenological research.

4. 2. Existential-Phenomenological Research

The basis for generalization in existential-phenomenological research is the specific experiences of specific individuals and groups involved in actual situations and places (von Eckartsberg, 1998a, p. 4). In the discussion of lifeworld and place research above, Million's phenomenology of involuntary displacement (Million, 1998) and Nogué i Font's phenomenology of landscape (Nogué i Font, 1993) are good examples in that the basis for generalization is the real-world experiences of the ranchers forced to relocate or the farmers and landscape painters of Garroxta. Similarly, in my work on a "geography of the lifeworld" (Seamon, 1979), I asked volunteers to participate in discussion groups and share accounts of their own environmental and place experiences (Seamon, 1979).

Phenomenological psychologists, particularly those associated with the Duquesne School, have devoted considerable effort to establishing a clear set of procedures and techniques for this style of phenomenology (see Valle, 1998). For example, van Eckartsberg (1998b) speaks of four steps in the process: (1) identifying the phenomenon in which the phenomenologist is interested; (2) gathering descriptive accounts from respondents regarding their experience of the phenomenon; (3) carefully studying the respondents' accounts with the aim of identifying any underlying commonalities and patterns; and (4) presenting results, both to the study respondents (in the form of a "debriefing" about the study in ordinary language) and to fellow researchers (in the form of scholarly presentation).

Other phenomenologists have discussed the steps in existential-phenomenological work in ways that more or less echo von Eckartsberg's four stages (e.g., Giorgi, 1985; Churchill et al., 1998; Wertz, 1984). Whatever the particular phrasing, the common assumption is that the individual descriptive accounts, when carefully studied and considered collectively, "reveal their own thematic meaning-organization if we, as researchers, remain open to their guidance and speaking, their disclosure, when we attend to them" (von Eckartsberg, 1998b, p. 29).

In claiming to generate accurate generalization, the existential-phenomenological approach makes one important assumption: that there is a certain equivalence of meaning for the respondents whose experience the researcher probes. In other words, the claim is that “people in a shared cultural and linguistic community name and identify their experience in a consistence and shared manner” (von Eckartsberg, 1998a, p. 15). Procedurally, this claim means that respondents (1) must have had the experience under investigation and (2) be able to express themselves clearly and coherently in spoken, written, or graphic fashion, depending on the particular tools used for eliciting experiential accounts. Ideally, the respondents will also feel a spontaneous interest in the research topic, since personal concern can motivate the respondent to provide the most thorough and accurate lived descriptions (Shertock, 1998, p. 162).

These requirements mean that inquiry is not carried out, as in positivist science, on a random sample of interchangeable subjects representative of the population to which findings will be generalizable. Rather, some respondents will be more appropriate than others because of their particular situation in relation to the phenomenon studied or because they seem more perceptive, thus better able to articulate their experience. Usually, in phenomenological research, “subjects” are instead called “respondents” or “co-researchers,” since any generalizable understanding is a function of the sensibilities of both respondent and researcher

In practice, there is no exact step-by-step procedure for conducting existential-phenomenological research beyond the general stages identified above. As explained earlier, the individual style of the researcher and the specific nature of the phenomenon are much more important for establishing the specific research procedure and tools of description. In her study of involuntary displacement, for example, Million (1993) spent much time locating participants who wished to share their experience and who appeared to be able to offer that sharing in a thoughtful, articulate way. She involved these participants in several in-depth interviews, the formats of which shaped and reshaped themselves as she learned more about each family’s experience and the broader events of the dam construction. In addition, she lived with some of the ranch families and asked them to accompany her on “field trips” to the flooded areas that used to be their ranches. In short, Million’s specific methods and procedures were auxiliary to the nature and needs of her own individual research style, her research participants, and her phenomenon of involuntary displacement.

4. 3. Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Research

Most broadly, hermeneutics is the theory and practice of interpretation (Mugerauer, 1994, p. 4), particularly the interpretation of *texts*, which may be any material object or tangible expression imbued in some way with human meaning—for example, a public document, a personal journal, a poem, a song, a painting, a dance, a sculpture, a garden, and so forth. The key point hermeneutically is that the creator of the text is not typically available to comment on its making or significance, thus the hermeneutic researcher must find ways to discover meanings through the text itself. As von Eckartsberg (1998b, p. 50) describes the hermeneutical process:

One embeds oneself in the process of getting involved in the text, one begins to discern configurations of meaning, of parts and wholes and their interrelationships, one receives certain messages and glimpses of an unfolding development that beckons to be articulated and related to the total fabric of meaning. The hermeneutic approach seems to palpate its

object and to make room for that object to reveal itself to our gaze and ears, to speak its own story into our understanding.

In my own phenomenological research, hermeneutic study has been important—for example, I used the New York photographs of pioneer photographer André Kertész as a way to examine the person-world relationship and urban lifeworld (Seamon, 1990a). Similarly, I drew on the novels of writer Doris Lessing to develop a phenomenology of human and place relationship (Seamon, 1993a).

Overall, much of the phenomenological work relating to environment-behavior research has been hermeneutic because the aim is often an understanding people in relation to *material* environments, whether furnishings, buildings, cultural landscapes, settlement patterns, and the like (Alexander, 1987, 1993; Alexander et al., 1977; Anella, 1990; Brenneman, 1995; Chaffin, 1989; Chawla, 1994; Chidester and Linenthal, 1995; Condon, 1991; Harries, 1988, 1993, 1997; Hieb, 1990; Lin, 1991; Lipton, 1990; Mugerauer, 1993, 1994, 1995; Norberg-Schulz, 1980, 1988, 1996; Paterson, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Relph, 1976, 1990, 1992; Riegner, 1993; Seamon, 1991, 1993a, 1994; Silverstein, 1993b; Stefanovic, 1994; Sturm, 1990; Swentzell, 1990; Thiis-Evensen, 1987; Walkey, 1993; Wu, 1993).

One useful example of the value of a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach in environment-behavior research is the work of Norwegian architect Thiis-Evensen (1987), who proposes a universal language of architecture by focusing on the experienced qualities of *floor*, *wall*, and *roof*, which he says are “the most basic elements in architecture” (ibid., p. 8). Through a hermeneutic reading of many different buildings in different cultures and historical periods, Thiis-Evensen suggests that these three architectural elements are not arbitrary but, rather, common to all architectural styles and traditions. The essential existential ground of floor, wall, and roof, he argues, is the relationship *between inside and outside*: Just by being what they are, the floor, wall, and roof automatically create an inside in the midst of an outside, though in different ways: the floor, through *above* and *beneath*; the wall, through *within* and *around*; and the roof, through *under* and *over*.

Thiis-Evensen demonstrates that a building’s relative degree of insideness or outsideness in regard to floor, wall, and roof can be clarified through *motion*, *weight*, and *substance*—what he calls the three “existential expressions of architecture” (ibid., p. 21). Motion relates to the sense of dynamism or inertia evoked by the architectural element—i.e., whether it seems to expand, contract, or rest in balance. Weight involves the sense of heaviness or lightness of the element and its relation to gravity. Substance refers to the material sense of the element—whether it is soft or hard, coarse or fine, warm or cold, and so forth. The result, claims Thiis-Evensen, is an intricate set of tensions between architectural elements and experience.

In his work, Thiis-Evensen assumes that architectural form and space both presuppose and contribute to various shared existential qualities—insideness-outsideness, gravity-levity, coldness-warmth, and so forth—that mark the foundation of architecture as human beings experience it (Seamon, 1991). For example, if one studies the lived qualities of stairs, one realizes that narrow stairs typically relate to privacy and make the user move up them more quickly than up wide stairs, which better express publicness and ceremonial significance. Similarly, steep stairs express struggle and strength, isolation and survival—experienced qualities that sometimes lead to the use of steep stairs as a sacred symbol, as in Mayan temples or Rome’s Scala Santa. On the other hand, shallow stairs encourage a calm, comfortable pace and typically involve secular use, as, for example,

Michelangelo's steps leading up to the Campidoglio of Rome's Capitoline Hill (Thiis-Evensen, 1987, pp. 89-103).

I discuss Thiis-Evensen's work at length here because it is an exceptional example of one researcher's effort to look at a text—buildings in many different times and places—and to identify a series of experiential themes that do justice to “the integrity, complexity, and essential being of the phenomenon” (von Eckartsberg, 1998b, p. 50). One test of the value of Thiis-Evensen's experiential theory is that other researchers have found his interpretation to be a useful language for examining in detail the work of specific architects and specific architectural styles (e.g., Kushwah, 1993; Lin, 1991; Lin and Seamon, 1994; Ramaswami, 1991). At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Thiis-Evensen does not claim that his way of architectural interpretation is the only way, and clearly there could be other hermeneutics of architecture that provide other ways of presenting and understanding architectural meaning (e.g., Harries, 1988, 1993, 1997; Mugerauer, 1993, 1994; Alexander, 1987, 1993). This is a key aspect of all hermeneutical work: there are many ways to interpret the text, thus interpretation is never complete but always underway.

4.4. Commingling Methods

Very often the phenomenological researcher uses the first-person, existential, and hermeneutic approaches in combination, thus, for example, Nogué i Font (1993), in his phenomenology of the Garroxta landscape, made use of interviews but also did hermeneutic readings of 19th-century Garroxtan photographs and the pictures of artists associated with the nineteenth-century Garroxta school of landscape painting.

One of the most sensitive examples of a phenomenological study drawing on multiple methods is Chaffin's study of one Louisiana river landscape as it evokes a sense of place and community (Chaffin, 1989). Chaffin's focus is Isle Brevelle, a 200-year-old river community on the Cane River of Louisiana's Natchitoches Parish. His conceptual vehicle to explore this place is simple but effective: to move from outside to inside, first, by presenting the region's history and geography, then by interviewing residents, and, finally, by canoeing the Cane River, which he comes to realize is the “focus of the community-at-home-and-at-large” (ibid., p. 41). As he glided by the river banks, he became aware of a rhythm of water, topography, vegetation, and human settlement:

Once on the water, the earlier feelings of alienation and intrusion were gone. I came directly in contact with a spatial rhythm. As the valley's horizon is formed by the surrounding sand hills, so the river's horizon is formed by the batture [the land that slopes up from a waterway to the top of a natural or artificial levee], silhouetted against the sky when viewed from a canoe. I had the paradoxical sensation of being both high and low at the same time; held down between the banks, yet as high as the surrounding fields.

The meanders of the once-wild current organized this experience. As I paddled around the bends, the rhythm unfolded. On the outside of the curve, I was contained by a steep bank, emphasized by red cedar sentinels. Only rooftops and cars passing along the river road hinted at a world beyond. On the inside, I was released into a riverside world of inlets, peninsulas, and undulating banks softened by black willows, some even growing directly from the water on submerged bars.... As the curves changed direction, the containment and release offered by the two sides of the river altered in turn and, in “my own little world of the

river,” everything seemed to fit (ibid., p. 102).

In his study, Chaffin began with a hermeneutic study of the natural and cultural landscape through scientific and historical documents. He also observed the community of Isle Brevelle firsthand and recognized a strong sense of place, which he understood more fully through an existential stage of study involving interviews. Finally, through the first-person experience of canoeing on the river, he saw clearly that the river is not an edge that separates the two banks but, rather, a seam that gathers the two sides together as one place.

5. Reliability and Phenomenological Research

Though phenomenological research in the human sciences has been criticized on a number of grounds,³ perhaps the most significant concern among conventionally-trained, positivist social scientists is the issue of *trustworthiness*—in other words, what criteria can be used to establish the reliability of phenomenological descriptions and interpretations?

From a phenomenological perspective, the issue of reliability first of all involves *interpretive appropriateness*: In other words, how can there be an accurate fit between experience and language, between what we know as individuals in our own lives versus how that knowledge can be accurately placed theoretically? As von Eckartsberg (1998a, p. 15) explains,

How is it that we can say what we experience and yet always live more than we can say, so that we could always say more than we in fact do? How can we evaluate the adequacy or inadequacy of our expression in terms of its doing justice to the full lived quality of the experience described?

Beyond the issue of phenomenological interpretation’s rendering experience faithfully is the potential dilemma that several phenomenologists, dealing with the same descriptive evidence, may present their interpretations differently and arrive at entirely different meanings. In an article comparing three phenomenologically-based interpretations drawing on the same descriptive evidence, Churchill and colleagues (Churchill et al., 1998) attempted to deal with this issue of interpretive relativity. They pointed out that, in conventional positivist research, reliability refers to the fact that one can establish an *equivalence* of measurement, where measurement refers to quantification according to an predetermined scale or standard (ibid., p. 64). If, however, “measurement” must be applied to the qualitative descriptions of phenomenological research, the required equivalence is much more difficult to establish: “[N]ot only is the criterion for agreement between two verbal descriptions not clearly defined, but also an agreement among judges regarding the equivalence of descriptions becomes equally difficult to establish” (ibid., p. 64).

As a way to consider the issue of reliability phenomenologically, Churchill and colleagues organized the following phenomenological experiment: They presented the same set of narrative descriptions to three researchers all trained in phenomenological method.⁴ Each researcher was free to bring his or her set of concerns and questions to the descriptions. After studying the three resulting interpretations, Churchill and colleagues concluded that, though there were some differences in emphases, there was also a common thematic core.⁵ This result indicates that phenomenological interpretation offers *some* degree of equivalence, since a “somewhat coherent set of themes can be gleaned from three different interpretive research results” (ibid., p. 81). On the other hand, there were also differences among the three interpretations, but these differences do not so much indicate

the failure of phenomenology as a method but, rather, demonstrate the existential fact that human interpretation is always only *partial*.⁶

In this sense, reliability from a phenomenological perspective cannot be defined as some equivalence of measurement based on some predefined scale of calculation separate from the experience and understanding of the researcher. Rather, reliability can only be had through what can be called *intersubjective corroboration*—in other words, can other interested parties find in their own life and experience, either directly or vicariously, what the phenomenologist has found in her own work? One can conclude that the conclusions of any phenomenological study are no more and no less than interpretive *possibilities* open to the public scrutiny of other interested parties. As Giorgi (cited in Churchill et al., 1998, p. 81) explains:

Thus the chief point to be remembered with this kind of research is not so much whether another position with respect to the [original descriptions] could be adopted (this point is granted beforehand) but whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoints as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he agrees with it. That is the key criterion for qualitative research.

In spite of the relativity of phenomenological trustworthiness, there have been efforts by phenomenologists to establish qualitative criteria that can help to judge the validity of phenomenological interpretation—at least in broad terms (e.g., van Manen, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1983). Polkinghorne (1983, p. 46), for example, presented four qualities to help readers judge the trustworthiness of phenomenological interpretation: *vividness*, *accuracy*, *richness*, and *elegance*. First, vividness is a quality that draws readers in, generating a sense of reality and honesty. Second, accuracy refers to believability in that readers are able to recognize the phenomenon in their own lifeworlds or they can imagine the situation vicariously. Third, richness relates to the aesthetic depth and quality of the description, so that the reader can enter the interpretation emotionally as well as intellectually. Finally, elegance points to descriptive economy and a disclosure of the phenomenon in a graceful, even poignant, way.

Using these four criteria, one can evaluate the effectiveness of specific phenomenological work—for example, the above-mentioned first-person studies of Toombs and Violich. Note that, from a conventional positivist perspective, the reliability of this work would immediately be called into question because of the issue of subjectivity and first-person interpretation: How can the reader be sure that the two researchers' understandings of their own experiences speak in any accurate way to the realm of human experience in general?

But also note that, in terms of Polkinghorne's four criteria, the issue is no longer subjectivity but, rather, the *power to convince*: Are Toombs' and Violich's first-person interpretations strong enough to engage the reader and get her to accept the researchers' conclusions?

In this regard, Toombs' first-person phenomenology of illness (Toombs, 1993a, 1993b) succeeds in terms of all Polkinghorne's criteria: Her writing is vivid, accurate, and rich in the sense that the reader is drawn into the reality of her descriptions and can believe they relate to concrete experiences that she, the reader, can readily enter secondhand. In addition, Toombs' work is elegant because there is a clear interrelationship between real-world experiences and conceptual

interpretation. In sum, the reader can imaginatively participate in Toombs' situations and conclusions. What she says “seems right” as her connections between phenomenological theory and lived experience allow the reader to “see” her situation in a thorough, heartfelt way.

On the other hand, Violich’s portrait of Dalmatian towns can be judged as less trustworthy in terms of Polkinghorne’s four criteria because Violich’s interpretations seem too much the image of an outsider experiencing place for only a short time. He describes these towns largely in terms of physical features and human activities as they can be read publicly in outdoor social spaces. There is no sense of what these places mean for the people who live and work there. The resulting interpretation seems incomplete and lacking in the potential fullness of the places as they are everyday lifeworlds.⁸

Ultimately, the most significant test of trustworthiness for any phenomenological study is its relative power to draw the reader into the researcher's discoveries, allowing the reader to see his or her own world or the worlds of others in a new, deeper way. The best phenomenological work breaks people free from their usual recognitions and moves them along new paths of understanding.

6. Making Better Worlds

In the end, the phenomenological enterprise is a highly personal, interpretive venture. In trying to see the phenomenon, it is very easy to see too much or too little. Looking and trying to see are very much an intuitive, spontaneous affair that involves feeling as much as thinking. In this sense, phenomenology might be described as a method to cultivate a mode of seeing that cultivates both intellectual *and* emotional sensibilities, with the result that understanding may be more whole and comprehensive.

As Thiis-Evensen’s work indicates, many of the more recent phenomenological works relevant to environment-behavior research use phenomenological insights to examine design issues.⁷ Because architecture and design also regularly involve a process of intuitive awareness and discovery, a phenomenological approach may be one way to rekindle designers' interest in environment-behavior research—an interest that seriously waned as architects and other designers became uncomfortable with the strong positivist stance of environment-behavior studies in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Franck (1987, p. 65), a key reason for this discomfort was the unwillingness of social scientists to “understand or accept the [more intuitive] strategies and priorities of the design professions” (ibid). Franck emphasized that one of the greatest values of phenomenology is its potential for providing a place for dialogue between designers and social scientists because it gives attention “to the essence of human experience rather than to any abstraction of that experience and because of its ability to reconcile, or perhaps to bypass completely, the positivist split between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’” (ibid., pp. 65-66).

In placing phenomenological work in today’s broader intellectual landscape, Mugerauer (1993, pp. 94-95) points to critics on both the “right” and “left.” On the “right” are the positivists, who see phenomenology as “subjective,” “soft,” and “anecdotal.” On the “left,” are the poststructuralists and deconstructivists, who question phenomenology’s belief in commonality, continuity, pattern, and order.⁸ In phenomenology and hermeneutics, Mugerauer sees a *middle way* between the absolutism of positivism, on one hand, and the relativism of post-structuralism, on the other. This is so, says Mugerauer, because in its efforts to see and understand human experience and meaning in a kindly,

open way, phenomenology strives for a balance between person and world, researcher and phenomenon, feeling and thinking, and experience and theory. This effort of balance, he believes is crucial “if we are to adequately understand, plan, and build a socially pluralistic and ecologically appropriate environment” (ibid., p. 94).

The long-term impact of phenomenology on environment-behavior research remains to be seen. The advances in the last ten years are encouraging, though the approach is still obscure among many mainstream researchers. I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter that phenomenology offers an innovative way for looking at the person-environment relationship and for identifying and understanding its complex, multi-dimensioned structure. I also hope to have suggested that phenomenology provides a useful conceptual language for reconciling the environmental designer's more intuitive approach to understanding with the academic researcher's more intellectual approach. In this sense, phenomenology may be one useful way for the environment-behavior researcher to reconcile the difficult tensions between feeling and thinking, between understanding and designing, and between firsthand lived experience and its secondhand conceptual accounts.

7. Notes

1. In this article, I largely highlight research of the last ten years. For discussions of earlier phenomenological work relating to environment-behavior research, see Seamon, 1982; Seamon, 1987; Seamon, 1989.
2. Closely related to the theme of place are three other significant phenomenological topics: first, *sacred space* (Barnes, 1992; Brenneman and Brenneman, 1995; Chidester and Linenthal, 1995; Cooper Marcus, 1993; Eliade, 1961; Lane, 1988; Lin, 1991; Lin and Seamon, 1994; Mugerauer, 1994, chap. 4; Whone, 1990; Wu, 1993); second, *home and at-homeness* ((Bachelard, 1963; Barbey, 1989; Bollnow, 1961; Boschetti, 1990, 1993, 1995; Casey, 1993; Chawla, 1994, 1995; Cooper Marcus, 1995; Day, 1995; Dovey, 1985; Graumann, 1989; Koop, 1993; LeStrange, 1998; Mugerauer, 1994; Norris, 1990; Pallasmaa, 1995; Rouner, 1996; Seamon, 1993a; Shaw, 1990; Silverstein, 1994; Sinclair, 1994; Stefanovic, 1992; Winning, 1991, 1992; Wu, 1991); and, third, work dealing with a *phenomenology of environmental ethics* (Abrams, 1996; Cheney, 1989; Foltz, 1995; Margadant-van Archen, 1990; Stefanovic, 1991; Weston, 1994).
3. I have discussed a number of these criticisms elsewhere (Seamon, 1987, pp. 15-19).
4. The description related to the current sexual practices of a young woman who had previously been the victim of a date rape.
5. This thematic core involved a common focus on “a vacillation within the [respondent's] experience from active to passive agency, with passivity emerging precisely at those moments when a decision is called for on the [respondent'] part. Likewise, all three see her as ‘disowning’ her body—disconnecting ‘her self’ from her actions when her integrity is at stake. Finally, all three see that her integrity within the situation is a function of her... desire for a sexual experience that is ‘shared and reciprocal’” (ibid., p. 81).
6. From a phenomenological perspective, Churchill's experiment is artificial in the sense that the researchers interpreting the lived description did not actually gather it from the respondent, thus they

had no sense of the lived context out of which the description arose. In addition, these researchers were recruited after the description was already solicited, thus they had no personal interest or stake in the phenomenon being studied. It is significant that, in spite of these weaknesses, the three researchers were able to identify similar core themes.

7. On the other hand, Violich's work is still important because it serves as one model for first-person phenomenologies of place. More such studies are needed, coupled with other ways to read place as in Million's and Chaffin's work (Million, 1993; Chaffin, 1989). Other useful models include Hufford's interpretation of the New Jersey Pinelands (Hufford, 1986), Lane's work on American sacred spaces and places (Lane, 1988), Mugerauer's hermeneutic readings of the contemporary North American landscape (Mugerauer, 1993, 1994), Pocius' in-depth study of a Newfoundland harbor village (Pocius, 1991), and Walkey's presentation of the multi-story, guild-build houses of mountainous northern Greece, western Turkey, and the adjoining Balkan states (Walkey, 1993).

8. Examples include: Alexander, 1987, 1993, et al, 1977; Barbey, 1989; Boschetti, 1990; Brill, 1993; Coates, 1998; Coates and Seamon, 1993; Cooper Marcus, 1993; Dorward, 1990; Dovey, 1993; Francis, 1995; Hester, 1993; Howett, 1993; Mugerauer, 1993, 1994, 1995; Munro, 1991; Paterson, 1993a, b; Porteous, 1989; Seamon, 1990b; Silverstein, 1993a, b; Thii-Evensen, 1987; Violich, 1998; Walkey, 1993.

9. Post-structuralism and deconstruction have become be a significant conceptual force in social science and, especially, in architecture (Mugerauer, 1994, chap. 3). For deconstructivists, meaning, pattern, and quality are plural, diverse, and continuously shifting. The aim is relativist interpretation and "deconstruction"—the undermining and dismantling of all assumed and taken-for-granted givens, be they existential, cultural, historical, political, or aesthetic. The aim is the freedom to change and to reconstitute oneself continually. To have this shifting freedom, one must vigilantly remember that all life is a sham and so confront the unintelligible, relative nature of the world and human being (Mugerauer 1988, p. 67). An excellent discussion of the poststructural-deconstructivist criticisms of phenomenology is Mugerauer, 1994, especially chap. 6.

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