ARCHITECTURAL PHENOMENOLOGY:
TOWARDS A DESIGN METHODOLOGY OF PERSON AND PLACE

by David Thomas VonderBrink

This thesis document investigates the philosophical movement of phenomenology and its implications in forming an architectural design methodology. The writings of such existential philosophers and authors as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Christian Norberg-Schulz are discussed. To position the argument within a current dialectically opposing discourse, the deconstructivist writings of Jacques Derrida and his influence on the architecture of Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman are explored. Steven Holl’s Museum of Contemporary Art and Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute for Biological Studies illustrate a phenomenological approach in design through a foundation in the writings of the aforementioned authors. Through these examinations a design methodology that seeks to express the interdependent relationship between person and place is formulated. This methodology is then tested in the design of a large residential and pedestrian path sited in Cincinnati, Ohio.
Architectural Phenomenology:
Towards a Design Methodology of Person and Place

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INTRODUCTION

The essence of our existence consists of concrete phenomena. This includes everything from trees and forests, to people and animals, to stones and water, to furniture, windows, houses, streets, and cities. It also includes celestial bodies such as the sun, moon, and stars as well as impalpable phenomena such as emotion and perception.

Phenomenology, a philosophy of investigation into the things that enable us to gather the world, opposes an abstract method of viewing our world. Meaning, abstract methods of inquiry such as scientific, diagrammatic, geometric, and analytical approaches that arrive at objective knowledge do not adequately describe the structure of the concrete world. Phenomenology allows us to express the essence of our existence through architecture. Thus, seen in its totality within phenomenology; architecture becomes the “concretization of existential space”. In other words, approaching the process of architectural design through a phenomenological lens presents the possibility of bridging the interdependent relationship of human existence and the world.

To understand phenomenology in order to form a design methodology I will discuss the writings of such existential philosophers and authors as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Christian Norberg-Schulz. To position my argument within a current dialectically opposing discourse, I will discuss the deconstructivist writings of Jacques Derrida and his influence on the architecture of Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman. Illustrating a phenomenological approach in design, I will investigate, through a foundation in the writings of the aforementioned authors, Steven Holl’s Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki and Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California. Through these examinations I will formulate a design methodology that seeks to express or reveal the interdependent relationship between person and place.
Heidegger

In the text *Being and Time* (1962), the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) 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, meaning, 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 actual lived experience. In this sense, phenomenology supersedes the idealist and realist division between individual and world with a conception in which the two are *indivisible*—a person-world whole that is one rather than two.

This is Heidegger’s phenomenology, one of experiencing *Dasein* or “being there”. You are being in context, rather than *Sosein* or “being thus”, out of context with your world. In reaction to the destructive dominance of positivism in the early nineteenth century, Heidegger sought original experience through ontology, the study of the origins of language. Within an architectural discipline, Heidegger’s interpretation of *Bauen*, the German word for building, as “dwelling” is recognized. Architecture is not just about thinking, it is about feeling and that feeling depends on time, place and subject. The feelings invoked by this experience lead to poetry, narratives, and ultimately built form in order to demonstrate our existence.

Heidegger states that *things gather*, or are the intermediary between human existence and the world. In other words, built objects create a place for ontological events. These events where the gathering of the four dimensions of the world – earth, heavens, mortals, and the divine – takes place are where humans *dwell*.

Merleau-Ponty

The French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) considers phenomenology an existential philosophy like Heidegger, but
concentrates on the importance of the body and perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty begins to place one being in the world, or his or her self-awareness, as an objective engagement with the world, where the body is the objective intermediary between what Heidegger speaks of as the person-world relationship.

The mind's access to the outside world must inevitably arise from the body's movement in it, which also necessarily involves a movement of it: "Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing". Merleau-Ponty’s most famous example is that of the blind person navigating with the aid of a stick, where the stick, like a carpenter’s tool, gradually becomes an extension of the arm that holds it.

Merleau-Ponty, along with the French author Henri Bergson (1859-1941), specifically in the text Matter and Memory (1892) suggest that: "the objects which surround my body reflect its possible action upon them". Their argument places an importance on a priori structures of perception. Bergson and Merleau-Ponty propose a framework for our conceptual understanding of the things around us with the action of the body as the ultimate root of knowledge of the world. The body, in a sense, acts as an interface between our mind and the world. Our physical engagement with the things that surround us provides both the source and the limits of our understanding of those things. Hence, as the body provides knowledge of the world, the external world presents knowledge of the body (recalling Heidegger’s notion of being-in-the-world). For example, as grasping a hammer and swinging it to build or destroy speaks to our relationship to the world and things, the object of a hammer tells us about the composition, scale, and proportion of the human hand.

Norberg-Schulz

The contemporary author, Christian Norberg-Schulz applies the philosophy of phenomenology within architectural discourse to arrive at an existential emphasis on space. Rather than placing importance on abstract space, such as Modernist, universal space, Norberg-Schulz calls for a return to figurative, qualitative architecture. This investigation into how one dwells
establishes a meaningful relationship between humans and the environment. The existential purpose of building is to create place from a site, that is, to reveal the potential meanings given within a situation. Humans dwell when we are able to concretize the world in built form, where concretization is the result of art rather than science or the abstract. Architecture concretizes, or gathers the entanglements of our everyday life-world, where gathering refers to the primary aspects of humans “being-in-the-world”. Dwelling, through identification and orientation, gathers the world or environment into building.

Norberg-Schulz asks, what is the task of architecture? It is to "make a site become a 'place', that is, to uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment". Thus it becomes clear what the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin means by saying "poetically, dwells man upon this earth". This belief makes it clear that architecture facilitates a way of dwelling in a Heideggerian notion: "The way in which you are and I am, the way in which we humans are on the earth, is dwelling." If we dwell in that sense "it is through dwelling itself that we let the earth be as earth" and this might offer a solution to the current problem of individual connection to our world.

**Deconstruction**

Within a phenomenological framework and an architectural methodology, the writings of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-) provide an opposing argument on the philosophical spectrum, a movement within philosophy and architecture known as deconstruction. This movement challenges the formulations of certain basic precepts of Western metaphysics such as presence, truth, the position of the subject, and the nature of identity.

Derrida’s process materialized out of an opposition to structuralism and a desire to expose the ambiguity of language. In other words, Derrida deconstructed, or dissected the works of previous scholars in order to prove that language is constantly shifting. Using linguistics, he argued against traditional assumptions that text possesses an unchanging, unified meaning. The linguistic model he presents differs greatly from Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the subject-object relationship and
especially Heidegger’s belief that language reveals basic existential structures. Derrida redefines the creation and operation of textual meaning such that there is no movement from the marks on the page to mental concepts. He aims to show the inherent tension between the principles of clarity that rule philosophy and the inescapable shortcomings that are associated with its construction.

Derrida believed that no theory could pretend to be absolutely consistent, logical, or present itself as a self-contained system. If it did, it could only do so by hiding or repressing something that did not fit its view of things. This ideology in turn led to a loss of meaning in all levels of social interaction. Thus, it is evident that deconstructive inquiry, unlike a phenomenological or perceptually based approach, seeks to blur the lines of meaning in the world rather than attempt to arrive at a greater understanding of our relationship as humans in the world.

Deconstruction within architecture provides a method of critiquing the supposedly unifying and idealistic, movement of Modernism. As Derrida sought to dissect traditional, or metaphysical assumptions of text, deconstructivist architects focused on a series of theoretical projects and sought to de-center the concept of classical order and space. Thus, rather than attempting to uncover the meanings potentially present in a given environment, deconstructivist architects such as Bernard Tschumi and Peter Eisenman created a method of critiquing architecture that ignores experiential concerns and matters of human perception. The critique became the formation of built form and space purely for the sake of theoretical architecture.

Whereas architectural phenomenology attempts to alter the paradigm of form follows function to form follows experience, deconstruction mirrors Modernism in numerous ways by implying function is coincidental to form. Thus, the writing and accompanying built work is elitist and detached from any experiential sensibilities. The deconstructivist tendency is to discount the given conflict between poetics and pragmatics faced by architects. Individual connection, our relationship of being-in-the-world, is simply disregarded.
Bernard Tschumi

A major constructed manifestation of this method emerged in Bernard Tschumi’s Parc de la Villette in Paris (1983). His anti-modernist approach deconstructed the traditional doctrine of *form follows function*, and focused on contemporary society's disjunction between use, form, and social values. Tschumi believed these systems were completely unrelated. He superimposed three ordering systems: points (or follies), lines (or paths), and surfaces (or programmatic spaces) where violent collisions were encouraged.

The follies took the form of a collection of steel pavilions that ultimately create events within the mesh of layers that question meaning. This resulted in a match and mismatch of forms aspiring to an anti-Classical architecture of unexpected configurations. The process and arbitrary result attempted to ignore the basic tenets of architecture throughout history - composition, hierarchy and order.

The grid of red follies create reference points that are non-contextual in their form and color in order to dissolve *a priori* meaning. However, Tschumi alleges the follies lack any
historical precedent in order to create *non-meaning*, but there exists a definite influence of Russian Constructivism in the formal characteristics and use of structure; easily seen in this painting by constructivist artist, Iakov Chernikov.

![Fig. 3](image)

Thus, meaning is inherently attributed to or can be extracted from the work. The desire to create built form that points in all directions, and thus meaningless architecture, is seen here to be limited and ultimately a hollow reconfiguration of conventional form and order.

**Peter Eisenman**

The American architect Peter Eisenman also openly exploits Derrida’s methods to ground his work. Eisenman utilizes formal fragmentation, where buildings display an affinity for the distortion of volumes and recombining them according to principles of disruption and dislocation. In the same way that Derrida disrupts texts to force the reader to approach the content in a more critical way, Eisenman disrupts order and convention in built form. For example, Eisenman attempts to destroy the predominance of the right angle – the Modernist sign of rationalist order and of the predetermined. Thus, form, in the sense of a representation of things, reflects the infinite plurality and instability of experience. As seen in Eisenman’s Aronoff Center for Design and Art in Cincinnati (1996), this often meant dissolution of visual order.

Eisenman deconstructed the forms of Modern Architecture by creating apparently illogical clashes of grids, spaces, and volumes, breaking open the form of the building to expose the complex and contradictory nature of the act of building itself. For Eisenman, the form of the building expresses the infinite possibilities and solutions for the specific site, situation, program, and context. The diverse materials, unrelated construction methods, multiple axes, and disconnected volumes must express that no particular form is valuable in and of itself. By the supposedly incomplete form of the building, Eisenman attempts to state that
other options and forms are possible and in fact, there is no ultimate truth or order that can be expressed in any single building.

Part of the deconstructivist philosophy was therefore to detach architecture from function and to allow a free play of design, free from practical constraints. Indeed deconstruction would deny any direct relationship between the form and the function of a building. This relationship is a matter of coincidence. Here architectural form becomes a self-propelling thing in itself and while the program and client may offer a necessary starting point, the resulting form is inevitably unpredictable and results in mere architectural dynamics and a work of continual self-analysis void of experiential meaning. In this approach, then, the concept of the person-world relationship is completely lost.

Steven Holl

Avoiding the deconstructivist, analytical method, architect Steven Holl approaches architectural design through a phenomenological lens. Similar to Merleau-Ponty’s existential belief that one’s self-awareness and body exist as object engagements with the world, Holl focuses on human perception as one moves through space. Rather than approaching the project from the exterior
into the interior, Holl first attempts to understand the experiential relationship of the human body to light and interior space. Working conceptually from the inside out, incorporating various scales and levels, and utilizing two themes he labels as *anchoring* and *intertwining*, Holl creates sculptural spaces rich in light that form perceptual and sensual experiences. The Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki, Finland (1998), or Kiasma, exemplifies Holl’s empirical and tactile design approach; an approach that begins with the suspension of pragmatism leading to discovery and playfulness that ultimately directs his design process. He implements a mind-body experience of architecture through reflection of light off internal surfaces and overlapping perspectives created through movement.

To achieve this experiential concept that drives the design, Holl sketches with watercolor. With his intuition in control, the watercolor allows him to explore in a playfully vague manner, resulting in a process that is simultaneously conceptual and sensible. The medium allows him to capture qualities of light, reflection, and movement as he attempts to understand what the experiential qualities of the space will be.

![Fig. 7](image)

Holl’s use of metaphor also serves as a starting point. The metaphor first "anchors" a project to the site in a physical and metaphysical sense in order to not just rest on a site but also begin to explain it. Thus, the metaphor goes on to provide a conceptual frame through which to understand the project. This Heideggerian notion of anchoring *gathers* the meaning of the situation; it connects the phenomenal properties given within the site to the conceptual strategies.

In Helsinki, Holl creates two metaphors, a line of culture and a line of nature. Kiasma, a Greek word borrowed from Merleau-Ponty that means intertwining, occurs where the
Due to Helsinki’s high latitude and horizontal rays of the sun, the design curves in both plan and section to capture the distinctive natural light creating variations in light quality that invigorate the visitor with subtle but phenomenally experiential differences.

The building’s mass intertwines with the geometry of the city and landscape. The curvilinear slice through the building implies a cultural line linking the building to Finlandia Hall, a leading concert and congress hall in Helsinki. The natural line of the building connects it to Töölö Bay, the topographic heart of Helsinki. Here, within this intertwining, lie folded planes, natural light, and silent spaces for displaying works of art.

The folded planes that create overlapping perspectives in the interior are anchored in the geometry of the city and surrounding landscape. However, the resulting form and quality of these planes is derived directly from Holl’s desire to express the movement of the body through the space. The folded planes create multiple vanishing points, opening a condition of spatial parallax – meaning, an ever-changing space based on the body’s relation to the things around it and the constant flux of light gathered by those things. Thus Holl draws from Merleau-Ponty’s belief that the body acts as an interface to the world as well as Heidegger’s notion that things gather the world.

Silent space, as Holl and colleague Juhani Pallasmaa refer to it, is created within the museum by eliminating the intermediate scale of the building, thus allowing the work itself to fill that void. For example, columns, moldings, and window openings are not articulated in favor of neutral wall masses. The architecture is expressed through details such as the twist of a door handle, the edge of a stair, and the exposed thickness of a slab of glass, allowing the body and its direct connection to its
surroundings become of primary importance. Hence, within Holl’s phenomenological approach, the function of the space is tailored to the experience of being in that space. Again, it is evident here that Holl draws from Merleau-Ponty’s and Bergson’s belief that the action of the body is the framework for conceptual understanding of the things around us.

**Louis I. Kahn**

The architecture of Louis Kahn (1901-1974) also seeks to explore the interrelationship of person and world specifically in how one engages building and how a building engages site. The Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California exemplifies Kahn’s architecture of phenomenology. Kahn would ask himself, “What does the building want to be”. Thus, although he did not speak directly of phenomenology, it is evident that he thought within the framework of an experiential method, one of connection between site, building, and body.

When one first approaches the interior courtyard, what Kahn refers to as *silence* in architecture, a term applied similarly by Holl, becomes present. He poetically states, “Silence to light”, meaning the desire to express and explain through building brings possibilities into presence. The simple, relatively unadorned mass of the flanking laboratories allows such things as human activity and interaction to speak within the space. Recalling Heidegger’s notion of *gathering*, the vertical building masses, horizontal floor plane, and sky above frame one’s connection to the landscape beyond. This connection is taken a step further in Holl’s reading of the space; “There is a time of day when the sun, reflecting on the ocean, merges with light reflecting on the rivulet of water… Ocean and courtyard are fused by [this] phenomenon… Architecture and nature are joined in a metaphysics of place.”

![Fig. 9](image)

As one moves through the plaza toward the horizon, the plaza extends downward through a series of steps and
Kahn believed in revealing how a building and its materials were formed. This concept reflects Merleau-Ponty’s and Bergson’s belief in the interconnected relationship of knowledge between the body and the world. It is also evident that Heidegger’s thoughts on language and poetry seep into Kahn’s method, even if not explicitly. Through reading Kahn’s poetry and narratives, one can see the influence of language on his designs and the connection to Heidegger’s notion of being-there rather than being-thus. The emergence of essence is apparent in such writings as this:

*Silence to Light
Light to Silence
The threshold of their crossing
is the Singularity
is Inspiration
(Where the desire to express meets the possible)
is the Sanctuary of Art
is the Treasury of the Shadows
(Material casts shadows shadows belong to light)
DESIGN METHODOLOGY

In order for humans to dwell, and therefore experience concrete phenomena and place, architecture must allow the body to experience and engage the thingness of the built form that surrounds it. In this sense, the building must engage the site in order to make the site present to the body; it must physically and metaphysically explain and reflect the concept of site. The building must gather the meaning of a specific situation.

To begin a phenomenological approach, one must put into language what he or she gathers from the world. Meaning, the essence of the concrete phenomena that surrounds us and penetrates us must be deciphered. One puts into language this gathering by relying on perception, our body’s engagement and knowledge of the things that are presented to us, and past experience or memory. As exemplified in Kahn’s process, by asking one’s self: what does the site tell me about what is there or what was there, what does the building want to be, how do I want the body to experience and engage the space; language will begin to present itself.

As Holl accomplished in his watercolor sketches and metaphoric anchoring and Kahn in his poetic readings and study of material, one must arrive at the essence of the site and program to create a concept. Metaphor and language become necessary tools for finding this essence. Thus, “the essence of a work of architecture is an organic link between concept and form”.

The ontological narrative or poem then becomes a jumping off point from which to discover underlying commonalities that mark the essential core of the phenomenon. In other words, the phenomenologist perceives specific instances of the phenomenon that is site with the hope that these instances, in time, will point toward more general qualities and characteristics that accurately describe the essential nature of the place and our relationship to it; meaning, its presence and significance in the concrete lives and experiences of humans.

From this point, language must begin to inform the experience of each space within the program of the building and context of the site. That is to say that the experiential quality of each space that is
to be, and the implementation of the concept into sketches, models, paintings, etc. must grow out of one’s perception of his or her relationship to the site.

For example, the exploration of materials within modeling and other methods representing what is imagined as well as materials that would actually be used should help explain or gather the intended experiential quality of the space. Color, texture, scale, etc. should be considered as a means of expressing or fulfilling the desired experience.

This methodology denies such seemingly abstract methods of investigation or formal influence as geometry as applied within deconstruction. However, that is not to say that geometry, for example, cannot be used as a method of inquiry all together. Rather, geometric approaches may be the result of such inquiries into historic or cultural influences that may lead to experiential phenomena with a goal of metaphysically explaining a site.

A phenomenological design methodology grounded within Heidegger’s ideal of an interrelated person-world relationship and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of body establishes the possibility of creating architecture of meaning. Through this methodology, architecture will be about experience and will enable humans to dwell in places that comprise “existential space”, space that quenches our desire for orientation and identification, and built form that expresses our being-in-the-world.
ADDENDUM

As I began thinking about which site I should choose to explore this idea or method of designing through a phenomenological lens, the criteria I discovered to be necessary was actually quite limited. In other words, any site that I chose inherently had meaning, history, and an essence that could be explored and ultimately discovered. Therefore, I found it important to choose a site that first and foremost could be easily accessible on a daily and nightly basis; a site that was relatively bare in the sense of pre-existing structures so as not to have my intentions misdirected toward a discussion of renovation or re-habitation; and finally a site that seemed to be lacking something, even if I didn’t know what that was when I first began my investigation.

The site that I chose for the purpose of exploring architectural phenomenology and the person-place relationship is situated between Eastern Avenue and Columbia Parkway in Cincinnati, Ohio. The site is often referred to as Adams Landing because of its location at the base of Mt. Adams; an affluent neighborhood overlooking the Ohio River. Mt. Adams consists of steep, winding streets, quaint boutiques, art stores, restaurants, bars, market-rate housing, and high-priced single-family homes, row houses, and condominiums. The Cincinnati neighborhood is a very popular local attraction and destination for shopping and nightlife. Mt. Adams is also a hot spot due to its adjacency to Eden Park, a well-used public space home to the Playhouse in the Park, the Cincinnati Art Museum, and the Krohn Conservatory.

The Ohio River, a Cincinnati centerpiece of commercial transportation and public recreation, runs along the south of the site. Between the southwest corner of my site and the shore of the Ohio River lies Sawyer Point, a mile-long linear park that features award winning landscaping, a performance pavilion, many outdoor activities such as a children’s playground, tennis, volleyball, an ice rink in the winter months, and a Cincinnati landmark restaurant, the Montgomery Inn Boathouse. (See Fig. 11 – Existing Site Plan)

The area known as Adams Landing, a 28-acre stretch of land along Eastern
Ave., 7.5 acres of which encompass my chosen site, has experienced many design iterations for multifamily housing dating back to the late 1980’s. Once slated to bring over 1,000 units to the area, it is currently designed to house about 600 apartments, condos, and town homes throughout the entire site.

The major flaw I recognized within all of the previous master plans was the perpetuation of the proverbial brick wall between Mt. Adams and the river that already exists due to the major vehicular arteries of Columbia Parkway and Eastern Avenue. Rather than using the building program to not only create a place for persons to dwell but also to create a pedestrian connection between two wonderful amenities within the city of Cincinnati, the previous designs called for a building plan that isolated the proposed units within the site and further secluded Mt. Adams from the river. This was the thing that I felt could not be ignored.

Through extensive site investigation it became apparent that this connection was to be the focal point of the program and the design. The remaining program elements include relatively dense clusters of one, two, and three bedroom condominiums and apartments, small commercial and retail spaces, supporting parking, and interwoven plaza/green space. These elements became the framework in which to create this pedestrian connection as well as the metaphysical connection or gathering of the environment into building.

The environment that began to show itself through my site investigations was one of seemingly opposing elements. It possessed an active, energetic sensibility but also a feeling that demanded a place for calm reflection. The site spoke as both an intermediary place as well as a destination; a place in motion as well as a place that could stand still. What I felt the site wanted to be, as I discovered more and more about the environment I found myself in, was a place for living, a place for gathering one’s day through Heidegger’s notion of dwelling.

The site’s elevation change of nearly 100 vertical feet from Eastern Avenue to Columbia Parkway could not be overlooked, both pragmatically as well as metaphysically. To address this, the residential buildings step back on the southern façade to mimic the slope of the earth below. The necessary supporting parking decks below the
buildings also step with the existing contours to allow for minimal cut and fill on the site. This in turn affords a gradual stepping through the open plazas between each building, whether it be a built-in hardscape with green roofs, shallow pools, and tree planters, or mounded earth and grass above the garage below. Thus, framed by each resident’s private dwelling, public space is created for movement and interaction. (See Fig. 21 – Site Section, and Fig. 23-25 – Mass Model Photos)

Throughout the eight multi-terraced buildings I’ve proposed for the site, there are a total of 237 units – (80) one-bedroom, (121) two-bedroom, and (36) three-bedroom dwellings - a total far less than the most recent master plan, which called for nearly 400 on this seven acre plus parcel, allowing for open green space and roof terraces. This mixture of units is carried throughout each floor and from front to back to afford each type of unit many different views of the river, Mt. Adams, the interstitial plazas and green spaces, and the city skyline. (See Fig. 14-20 – Floor Plans) The buildings are mainly single-loaded to afford maximum visual connection between units, residents, and the public spaces that can be found winding through and between each building. Cantilevered walkways and exaggerated stair landings create elevated, semi-public gathering spaces for the residents and visitors alike. (See Fig. 26 – Wall Section, and Fig. 30 – Plaza)

As one navigates from Mt. Adams through the plaza and down to Sawyer Point and the River, the experience and connection between these three places and one’s body reveals itself. There currently exists a concrete stair that begins at a small park on Hill St., runs down the steep grade of the hillside, and awkwardly intersects a narrow pedestrian bridge that spans Columbia Parkway. It is at this intersection where I began my redesign of this much needed connection. I have redesigned the bridge to intersect the stair in a more direct way, eliminating the almost turnstile existing condition. I’ve widened it and gave it a gentle slope to carry visitors into my site. Once arriving, one is greeting with an extended landing and an opportunity to take in the view of the river and the Kentucky hills in the distance framed by two of the residential buildings, the main plaza, and the sky.

At this point, a gently sloping path
that is carved into the existing grade begins. The path is situated in the side of the hill so as to allow the grade to meet the path and be an extension of it at certain locations. From the arrival point at the base of the bridge, a re-circulating water feature cantilevers over the path, drops into a shallow pool that one can easily touch, and slides down a large retaining wall that doubles as the back of a concrete bench. This seating area allows for those traversing the winding path a place to rest and take in the framed view of the river and plaza while the cascading water drowns out the sound of the traffic above. (See Fig. 31 – Hillside from Stair Landing)

When one arrives physically within the building’s frame, the indication of the site’s slope still exists but in a much different way. In the existing site, the slope began to flatten out slightly here. In the proposed structure, a stepped parking garage exists below grade. With the necessity of parking to deal with, and yet still wanting to mimic the existing site conditions, I’ve created multi-leveled, tree-lined terraces that not only continue to wind persons through the site but also create numerous seating, play, and meeting spaces. The ground level units, framed by the cantilevered walkways of the units above, enter directly off of these stepped plazas, again creating a very tangible connection between semi-public and public space. From these plazas and pedestrian walkways the river is always framed and always in site. (See Fig. 32 – Plaza and River from Walkway)

The level below the residential units houses small commercial space. (See Fig. 13 – Level 514’ – Commercial) This allows for street visibility for any potential commercial users as well as pushes the dwelling units up another level above the street to give all units a view of the river and Kentucky hillside beyond. At this level one can either walk down a gently curving stair to the retail floor below (See Fig. Fig. 12 – Level 500’ – Retail) or continue across a pedestrian bridge that carries persons across Eastern Ave. (See Fig. 23 – Mass Model Photo, and Fig. 21 – Site Section)

The retail level is meant to house small supporting spaces such as coffee shops, dry cleaners, and the like for inhabitants of the site as well as those utilizing Eastern Ave. as a vehicular access into and out of the Central Business District. The form of this level
has multiple curves in plan and a large canopy to address the moving street traffic as well as create multiple sight lines for any potential tenants of the space. The plaza between the retail and the street is elevated about five feet with a series of retaining walls, trees, steps, and ramps for access from pedestrian traffic and street parking along Eastern to create a comfortable buffer from the speed of the traffic below. (See Fig. 12 – Level 500’ – Retail)

The slender pedestrian bridge crossing Eastern also creates an observation deck for the ice rink and ties into a rooftop terrace and steps that double as the roof of a small recreation center. Here, one arrives at the other anchor of the site I’ve chosen – the river and Sawyer Point. (See Fig. 21 – Site Section)

As I previously mentioned, each floor of the buildings step back to mimic the existing hillside, but just as importantly, this terraced effect also allows the built form to reach a height necessary to afford the residents two, almost sublime rooftop community spaces. These spaces are located on the top-level terrace of the buildings framing the connection between Mt. Adams and the river. On the western most terrace, the city skyline can be seen and the evening sunset can be fully experienced. Given its proximity to the CBD, I felt a metaphysical connection, like the physical connection to Mt. Adams and the river, was necessary. Here one can wind down one’s day with a cup of coffee, neighbors, and a spectacular view. An open canopy and reflecting pool frames one’s view of the city skyline and the ever-changing sky beyond. (See Fig. 27-29 – Rooftop Terrace) The opposing terrace, similar in form yet facing east, captures the sunset in a similar way allowing residents to begin their day with a moment of silence and serenity.

After tackling such a large site and program, I realized that a more intimate program would have been better suited to explore the idea of phenomenology within design methodology. I feel that having allowed myself the energy to truly get into each experience of one’s typical day, I might have come to a more concise conclusion or a more specific explanation of how a phenomenological lens could assist in designing for the human experience and our interconnectedness with the world.
around and among us. However, I feel the design decisions I made, both in program as well as form and adjacencies, begin to exemplify a thought process toward a personal design methodology rooted in the concepts of phenomenology. The program and proposed form begin to not only fulfill the pragmatic requirements of building upon a site but also speak to how a site can be interpreted and understood, ultimately adding another dimension to a proposed built work; a dimension of a person-world interconnection.

When I visited Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute, I was able to explore and begin to understand what Heidegger meant when he explained that built objects create a place for ontological events; what Steven Holl meant by anchoring and intertwining; and what Christian Norberg-Schulz meant when he urged us to “uncover the meanings potentially present in the given environment”. It is these things that I sought to uncover and exemplify in my approach, my method, and my design and hope to explore even further as I continue through my architectural career.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


