

A phenomenological ecology of personalisation as a dimension of intimacy in the public interior.

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Abstract

This paper brings together phenomenology and ecology to present perceptual and interrelational epistemological paradigms in the study of the mechanisms through which personalisation can contribute to visitors' ability to develop positive and even deeply felt emotional connections with the environment of the public interior. This conception of environmental experience is referred to as intimacy, presented here as the emotional dimension of personalisation. It is explored through the study of environmental conditions in the public interior to correlate individual and collective experiences. Thus, whilst upholding the phenomenological foundation of perception, bringing body, mind and world together through embodied experiences, this paper also advocates an ecological perspective to account for the interrelational character of lived experiences.

Keywords

Phénoménologie écologique, personnalisation, intimité, sensoriel, émotions.

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Introduction

Phenomenological ecology emerged in the 1980s as a philosophy at the intersection of phenomenology, broadly defined as the study of experience, and environmental studies on the relationship between human and non-human organisms and the natural environment. Seamon expands this conception to the built environment and defines phenomenological ecology as:

An interdisciplinary field that explores and describes the ways that things, living forms, people, events, situations and worlds come together environmentally. A key focus is how all these entities *belong* together in place, why they might not belong, and how they might better belong through more sensitive understanding, design and policy-making.¹

¹ D. Seamon (ed.), *Dwelling, Seeing and Designing. Toward a Phenomenological Ecology*, State University of New York Press, New York, 1993, p.16.

Seamon's definition foregrounds the primacy of connectedness. It opens enticing possibilities for phenomenological ecology to frame the study of environmental experience across spatial and social dimensions. Here, experience is contextualised through the hypothesis that personalisation in the public interior can contribute to visitors' ability to develop positive and even deeply felt connections with their environment. Drawing on the original meaning of intimacy as a deep and positive emotional connection between people, this conception of environmental experience is referred to as intimacy. There are antecedents in using the term intimacy in an environmental context although it is often reduced to the notion of intimate distance between body and space. Bica² however defines intimacy as a positive emotional state of mind when advocating a human-centred approach to designing buildings. He expands the definition of intimacy beyond its original reference to human relations and beyond the narrow context of intimate distance to reconsider architecture as a platform for emotions and human sensibilities. Drawing on Bica, this conception of intimacy is transposed to spatial and social experiences of personalisation in the public interior.

Personalisation in the public interior

Public interiors are part of the shared destinations that constitute our experience of the city. Research shows that the quality of the public realm impacts on emotional attachment, social cohesion and the quality of life in cities. Although somewhat neglected in discussions about the public realm, public interiors can also impart these essential qualities to the public life of individuals. They are places where individual and collective experiences converge. Drawing on Mallgrave's definition of experiential design, public interiors provide an ideal context to explore "the great complexity of the human organism in its interaction with the physical and social environments".³ Here, the discussion centres the concept of personalisation as one of the many contexts through which the visitor experience unfolds. Kuksa and Fisher⁴ structure personalisation around two processes, 'personalisation for a person' and 'personalisation by a person'. In the public interior, these become 'personalisation for visitors' and 'personalisation by visitors'. 'Personalisation for' refers to spatial and social practices, the design and organisation of the interior space and the management of the visitor experience. These practices impact on 'personalisation by', visitors' ability to personalise their experience

² A. Bica, *Bringing Back Emotion and Intimacy in Architecture*, TEDx Talks, Canada, 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNqL3iA5xKE> (Accessed: 26 July 2022).

³ H. F. Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience. The New Culture of Architectural Design*, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, London, 2018, p.49.

⁴ I. Kuksa, T. Fisher (eds.) *Design for personalisation*, Routledge, New York, 2017, p.1.

through their activities, the way they engage and interact with the space and with each other. The visitor's agency is relative because it is contingent on spatial and social practices (personalisation for visitors). However, visitors can also exert a relative agency on spatial and social practices as the way they personalise their experience of the public interior may in turn influence the way it is managed. Thus, the correlation between 'personalisation for' and 'personalisation by' is likened to an ecosystem contributing emotional qualities to the visitor experience. In this sense, 'personalisation for' is framed by the concept of cultivation. As a derivative of culture, cultivation is defined by its original meaning of tending, growing, nurturing to reflect the notion that spatial and social practices pertaining to personalisation can cultivate intimacy. Mallgrave puts forward a biological metaphor to propose that culture is "best imagined in the biological sense of growing something in a prepared medium, the human organism in its built and cultural environment".⁵ Here, the prepared medium is characterised by the physical and social environments of the public interior. It is prepared because it is personalised for visitors through spatial and social practices and personalised by visitors as they enact needs and desires. The public interior is the medium, personalisation the experiential context and intimacy is the desired outcome. This suggests that intimacy requires certain environmental conditions (or ecosystem) to flourish, and although this notion is rooted in experience, a phenomenological perspective alone may be too reductive. It is not simply about finding out what it feels like for the individual to experience personalisation in the public interior. It is also about collective interrelations across spatial and social environments. This perspective highlights the need to consider not only the perceptual dimension of intimacy but also its interrelational dimension.

The perceptual dimension of intimacy

A phenomenological epistemological paradigm frames the perceptual dimension. Intimacy emerges "in and through lived experiences"⁶ in the lifeworld of personalisation, which should not be confused with the environment of the public interior. Ingold⁷ defines the environment as the place we inhabit, we are part of it, and explains that through the practice of habitation it becomes part of us. Drawing on Ingold's definition, the environment of the public interior can incorporate any experience, including but not exclusive to those related to

⁵ H. F. Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience. The New Culture of Architectural Design, op.cit.*, p.4.

⁶ R. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2000, p.2.

⁷ T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Routledge, London & New York, 2011, p.95.

personalisation. Thus, the lifeworld of personalisation is only one experiential context in the environment of the public interior. In this lifeworld, the physical and social environments converge in and through lived experiences of personalisation. Gallagher explains that:

[The lifeworld] is connected to the fact that we are already situated in the world. It is the collection of situations in which we find ourselves involved - it is the world as we live it, not just the world as it opens up in front of us as perceiving subjects, but the world which is at the same time something *already there* operating as a meaningful background for all of our actions and interactions.⁸

Here, three fundamental principles characterise the nature of the lifeworld of personalisation in the public interior. First, visitors are situated in this lifeworld. The notion of being situated is expressed in phenomenology by Heidegger through the concept of being-in-the-world, *Dasein* in German, literally translated as “being there”.⁹ Second, visitors are ontologically situated because the lifeworld of personalisation is the world as they live it. In architecture, this philosophical notion is expressed by Pallasmaa as “the fusion of the object and the subject”.¹⁰ This is not to advocate a dualist perspective but to emphasise that visitors to the public interior are not bodies (subject) contained in space (object), they are intimately entwined with the lifeworld of personalisation. They contribute to this lifeworld, they feel a certain way about it and as such, it is also part of them. Third, the lifeworld of personalisation is cultivated through spatial and social practices (personalisation for), while visitors enact this lifeworld through the way they engage with the physical and social environments of the public interior (personalisation by).

The phenomenological paradigm foregrounds the embodied character of lived experiences and the primacy of sensing in embodied perception. Drawing on Husserl, Cerbone¹¹ articulates how the body intertwines with perception, presenting the Body as the organ of perception, emphasising that the Body with a capital ‘B’ refers to the German word *Lieb*, the living body or *the body-as-lived*. Merleau-Ponty also places the *body-as-lived* as the primary means of perception. He emphasises what he calls “the “permanent presence” of the body in our perceptual experience”¹² stating that it is through the body that we develop our

⁸ S. Gallagher, *Phenomenology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, Hampshire, 2012, p.2.

⁹ D. R. Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology*, Acumen Publishing, Durham, England, 2006, p.42.

¹⁰ J. Pallasmaa, “Space, Place and Atmosphere: Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, in C. Borch (ed.) *Architectural Atmospheres. On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*, Birkhauser, Basel, 2014, p.20.

¹¹ D. R. Cerbone, *Understanding Phenomenology, op.cit.*, pp.100-101.

¹² M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Routledge, London & New York, 2012, p.105.

perspective on the world and emphatically declaring that “[a]ll knowledge is established within the horizon opened up by perception”.¹³ Mallgrave¹⁴ explains that for Merleau-Ponty, perception is an event of the whole body and there is no distinction between body and mind or even between body and environment. Hale concurs; a disembodied mind could not perceive the world, a disembodied mind could not be-in-the-world. He explains that “it is only because we know what it feels like to occupy a space by virtue of our own embodiment that we can understand the world itself as made up of material objects in space”.¹⁵ It is by virtue of their embodied nature, the body’s own materiality, that visitors to the public interior can perceive spaces, objects, people, sounds, smells, colours, textures, etc., the sensory phenomena constitutive of the physical and social materiality of the environment. Indeed, as discussed above, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty define the body as the organ of perception bringing attention to the corporeality of embodiment and more specifically here, to the way visitors’ perception of the environment of the public interior emerges in and through bodily engagements with sensory phenomena. Experiences of personalisation are lived, not only because they are embodied but also because they are individually and collectively enacted.

Active sensing is thus a primal dimension of perception, one that is always multi-sensory. Mallgrave explains that “human perception is not the faculty of a single sensory modality but a whole organism event”.¹⁶ Visual, acoustic, kinaesthetic, haptic and olfactory phenomena converge in the visitor experience of the environment of the public interior. This occurs because perception is cross-modal, the senses collaborate. Bachelard poetically calls it “the polyphony of the senses”.¹⁷ Although each sensory organ fulfils a specific role in providing information about the environment, in perception, they interrelate and collaborate. For example, I see an apple and recognise it as an apple, but I may touch it and smell it before I decide to eat it, while the taste of the apple provides another layer of perception. Although the example of the apple is useful to illustrate how the senses collaborate, it is an extreme simplification. Perception is more complex because experience has a wholeness, it is a continuous process, which always flows from one thing to another. This means that we first perceive situations as unified wholes because of the primacy of their pervasive qualities.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.215.

¹⁴ H. F. Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience. The New Culture of Architectural Design*, *op.cit.*, p.45.

¹⁵ J. Hale, *Merleau-Ponty for Architects*, Routledge, London & New York, 2017, pp.12-13.

¹⁶ H. F. Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience. The New Culture of Architectural Design*, *op.cit.*, p.44.

¹⁷ G. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1971, p. 6.

Referencing Husserl, Gendlin and Young¹⁸ explain that we don't hear sounds as distinct sensations, we hear the meaningful wholes of motorcycles or doors slamming. Embodied perception is not a passive process involving the body's sensory organs recording individual and distinct sensations but the grasping of situations as meaningful wholes. The body is neither a passive receptor, nor is the world a blank canvas. Experiences are lived through the perceptual act of the sensing body, mind and world coming together and visitors' lived experiences cannot be reduced to the study of individual sensations because it is not the sensations themselves that we perceive but the wholeness of situations.

The interrelational dimension of intimacy

While the phenomenological paradigm illustrates the study of what it feels like for the individual to experience personalisation in the public interior, the ecological paradigm frames the interrelational dimension of personalisation, the interconnectedness between embodied perception and dynamic interactions in the collective environment. Escobar asserts that “[p]lace is a crossroads of flows and events and an inevitable space of transformation on an always-shifting ground”.¹⁹ The lifeworld is dynamic and lived experiences can be described as flows where patterns of perception, sensing, feeling, thinking, doing, interrelate. As such, the lifeworld and lived experiences cannot be conceived as a stable and ordered system with clearly defined boundaries such as a network. Here, this study draws on Ingold's theory of the Meshwork in ecological anthropology to illustrate the dynamic condition of the lifeworld. Ingold describes the meshwork as “entangled lines of life, growth and movement [...] the world we inhabit. [It is] not a network of connected points, but a meshwork of interwoven lines”.²⁰ Ingold foregrounds the fluidity of the lifeworld by highlighting that it is relational, always in flux and unbounded. In the context of this discussion, the Meshwork is where situations pertaining to personalisation unfold. The tangled and woven texture of lines of interaction characterise the cultivation and enactment of lived experiences in the lifeworld of personalisation, while situations unfold as the lines temporarily intersect (see Figure 1).

¹⁸ E. T. Gendlin, D. Young, “Introduction”, *A Process Model*. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2018, p.xx.

¹⁹ A. Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse. Radical Independence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*, Duke University Press, 2018, p.38.

²⁰ T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, *op.cit.*, p.63.



Figure 1: Interpretation of the Meshwork of lived experiences of personalisation by the author, adapted from Ingold's theory of the meshwork to illustrate the dynamic lifeworld of personalisation. The Meshwork is represented as a cell where lines of interaction intersect to form situations. The image of the cell draws on the biological metaphor and notion of ecosystem discussed in this paper. The outer frame (dotted line) is not part of the Meshwork illustration.

Ingold's theory of the Meshwork expresses the changeability of the lifeworld and the diffuse boundaries of the perceptual field. This theory also consolidates the description of the correlation between 'personalisation for' and 'personalisation by' as an ecosystem, and Mallgrave's biological metaphor referenced earlier to illuminate the notion of cultivation. The meshwork brings an ecological dimension to the phenomenological perspective.

This complex ecosystem, the dynamic nature of the interrelation between visitors and the environment of the public interior, is also experienced across time as lived experiences are conceptualised through sensed perception, direct perceptions in the present, and sense perception, the cumulative effect of prior experiences. Sensed perception relies on the

evaluation of qualities in the environment through direct sensations and this process includes an abundance of details. This does not mean that people are consciously aware of all sensations, the process is selective. Mallgrave describes the senses as “highly selective in their act of seeking information”²¹ and stresses that “[b]ecause aesthetic perception is selective in what it attends to within the sensory bombardment of stimuli, it is an act inherently meaningful or imbued with significance”.²² By being selective, visitors can evaluate qualities in the environment of the public interior. In addition, sensed perception intertwines with the cumulative effect of prior experiences, sensate perception, also referred to in the literature as mental images. Referencing Downing, Malnar and Vodvarka provide a detailed definition of mental images and their attributes:

Mental images are an active, vital repository of information gathered through sensual experience – through sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. [...] [A mental image] does not include all the environmental information contained in a particular place or event experience. Instead, the mental image presents a version of experience that is most important to the individual or situation at a particular moment in time.²³

Although the use of the term ‘image’ may suggest a visual recollection, Downing points out that mental images arise through multi-sensory phenomena, and although mental images are less detailed, what is most significant is retained and recalled. As with sensed perception, a process of selectivity is also at work in sensate perception. In the public interior, sensed and sensate perceptions are governed by a selective process focusing the visitors’ attention on what they consider to be most significant amongst a multitude of phenomena in the environment.

Downing’s perspective also highlights that although sensed and sensate perception are described as two distinct processes, one in the present and the other as a recollection of mental images, they are concomitant. The following example illustrates how sensed and sensate perception can happen at the same time; how together direct experiences and mental images can contribute to intimacy. I see a flower, a sensed perception in the present. I become aware of the beauty of the petals and of the colour of the flower. I have seen flowers before, and I have a mental image which tells me they can smell nice. I wonder about the

²¹ H. F. Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience. The New Culture of Architectural Design*, op.cit., p.46.

²² *Ibid.*, p.90.

²³ J. M. Malnar, F. Vodvarka, *Sensory design*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004, p.22.

smell of this flower and, based on the mental image I have of flowers, I expect it to be a pleasurable experience. I smell the flower and it smells wonderful. The experience confirms my expectations and I feel rewarded. I retain this experience as a mental image, which compounds previous mental images of similar experiences I associate with flowers. Thus, the concomitance of sensed and sensate perception connects me to flowers in a positive way. Objectively, the flower has a shape, a colour and a smell, but it is my experience of pleasurable visual and olfactory qualities and the mental image that I retain from the experience that are conducive to my ability to develop a positive and even deeply felt emotional connection with flowers.

The fluid and diffused nature of situations also indicates that there isn't one universal perception of reality. Not all visitors will have the same experience; the way they enact personalisation in the public interior is relative to each individual (the subject of perception), placing the experience of personalisation as a dimension of intimacy in a relativist ontology. Gray and Malions explain that in a relativist ontology, "realities exist in the form of multiple mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific, dependent for their form and content on the persons who hold them".²⁴ Here, the theory of Umwelt, a relativist model of perception by ethologist Von Uexküll, frames the ontological perspective that underpins the visitor experience of personalisation in the public interior. Mallgrave provides a concise description of the way organisms enact their own world according to the theory of Umwelt:

An organism's perception is always bounded in its own "surrounding environment", whose limits are defined by sensory "carriers" of meaning particular to that organism. Humans, for instance, may perceive a flower as an ornament, but an insect may perceive it as an impediment or a meal. Each organism in effect enacts its own world.²⁵

Von Uexküll²⁶ highlights that this occurs because of the differences in the physiology of sensory organs in organisms and through the way the organism transforms sensory stimuli into properties, such as the property of being an ornament or the property of being a meal. This principle aligns to the selective process discussed above; it enables visitors to conceptualise sensory phenomena into qualities conducive to intimacy in the environment of

²⁴ C. Gray, J. Malions, *Visualizing Research. A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*, Ashgate, Farnham, Surrey, 2004, p.20.

²⁵ H. F. Mallgrave, *From Object to Experience. The New Culture of Architectural Design*, op.cit., p.44.

²⁶ J. von Uexküll, "An introduction to Umwelt", *Semiotica*, 134(1/4), 2001, p.108.

the public interior. Ingold explains that “von Uexküll maintained that what he called the ‘quality’ (*Ton*) of a thing, by virtue of which it has significance for a particular creature, is not intrinsic to the thing itself but is *acquired* by virtue of its having been drawn into that creature’s activity”.²⁷ This description resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s definition of phenomena as “the things as they appear to us”.²⁸ The theory of Umwelt brings body, mind and world together by placing the body-as-lived as the primary means of perception and sensing as a primal dimension of perception, albeit in a biological rather than philosophical context. It also explicitly links embodied perception to enactment. As Mallgrave noted in the above quote, “each organism in effect enacts its own world” and similarly, Merleau-Ponty places the lived body as “a set of possibilities for actions”.²⁹ There is a clear affinity between the theory of Umwelt and the phenomenological theory of embodiment, and in the case of Merleau-Ponty, the former influenced the latter. The theory of Umwelt underlines how visitors to the public interior can enact their own lifeworld while its biological context also consolidates the position in phenomenological ecology. When expanding the theory of Umwelt to personalisation in the public interior, it is important to remember that whilst visitors can specify and enact personalisation (personalisation by) by selecting the phenomena in the environment of the public interior that are most significant to them, this ability is also bounded to spatial and social practices (personalisation for). Kuksa and Fisher define personalisation as a principle emerging from “the relative agency of ‘persons’ in different scenarios”³⁰, embedding a relativist perspective into the concept of personalisation from the outset.

Conclusion

This paper advocates the primacy of sensing and emotions in environmental experience. It brings the physical and social environments of the public interior together into one study to define the mechanisms underpinning how the cultivation and enactment of personalisation can contribute to intimacy, the felt dimension of personalisation. It articulates epistemological paradigms grounded in phenomenology and ecology for spatial and social practices to consider how the environment of the public interior is sensed and felt. In the phenomenological sense, lived experiences of personalisation are embodied. Sensing is the

²⁷ T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, *op.cit.*, p.79.

²⁸ J. Hale, *Merleau-Ponty for Architects*, *op.cit.*, p.9.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

³⁰ I. Kuksa, T. Fisher (eds.) *Design for personalisation*, *op.cit.* p.1.

primary means of perception, the wholeness of experience is situational and the sensing body enmeshed in its environment is emotional. In an ecological sense, dynamic flows of individual and collective lived experiences of personalisation fluctuate across space and time while visitors sense and feel the phenomena that are most significant to them. Although discussed separately, phenomenology and ecology are thus presented as one epistemological paradigm, a phenomenological ecology of personalisation as a dimension of intimacy in the public interior.

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