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Notes on Early Architectural Phenomenology of Christian Norberg-Schulz¹

Despite all its success, the situation of post-war modern architecture has developed quickly into a crisis: it could not create a warm and satisfying environment for human life. Architects had many tasks, constructed overwhelmingly in modern style, but in many cases the results were not satisfactory. Soon it became clear that the very creation of the human environment is a problem. The post-war urban reconstruction and the emergence of new residential units brought dissatisfaction. In this sense, phenomenology in architecture — and in theory of architecture in particular — is a reaction to late post-WWII modernism and fatal crisis of modernism as such. The history of post-war development is well known: in retrospect we see several reactions to the situation of crisis. What could be named as mainstream answer was postmodernism in architecture and its European counterpart, neorationalism.

As an attempt to answer to the situation it is possible to name Norberg-Schulz's effort. This could be seen from his first book, *Intentions in Architecture* (1965), where we find him stating: "The present situation of architecture is confused and puzzling" [1, p. 13]. At the beginning, there was structuralism and semiotics in this book and the author did not speak much about space. Later it came to be fundamental for the whole phenomenological theory. Very soon Norberg-Schulz shifted his interest towards phenomenology, Heidegger and the idea of space. His first book on this theme was *Existence, Space and Architecture* [2], and he went on developing phenomenology in architecture for his whole life. The fullest expression his theory finds in *Genius Loci* [3] and *The Concept of Dwelling* [4].

The presented idea was clear and simple: architecture is the concretisation of the existential space of human beings, of our existential space. By doing this, Norberg-Schulz proposed simultaneously a new basis for modern architecture and a perfect criterion for judging architecture, for architectural criticism. Architecture can be considered good, when it expresses existential space. No longer was architecture seen as a *will of epoch* expressed in space, but rather an embodiment of our existential space.

"Man's interest in space has existential roots. It stems from a need to grasp vital relations in his environment, to bring meaning and order into a world of events and actions" [2, p. 9]. Modernism of the early 20th century conformed to the modern world trying to shape the architec-

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ture and human environment for a new era (and with abundant “messianic” promises for the future; see Italian futurism, Russian constructivism, German Bauhaus etc.). Norberg-Schulz started from the other end. He turned his attention to how a man perceives architecture, how a man relates to it and how architecture shapes the world for him. Norberg-Schulz didn’t want to establish architecture on the pulse of time, but on the seemingly natural human world. Taking into account that the architectural space was a specific man-made manifestation of existential space, architecture fell into a wider context than it has been customary thitherto.

Norberg-Schulz distinguished several spaces or several components of space. Among them, there is an existential space, for which Norberg-Schulz provides definition: “We have defined existential space as a relative stable system of perceptual schemata, or ‘image’ of the environment” [2, p. 17]. Alternatively, in a different place he said: “Together these make up man’s ‘image’ of his environment, that is, a stable system of three-dimensional relations between meaningful objects. We will, therefore, unify the schemata in the concept *existential space*” [2, p. 11]. The existential space is not purely individual but it has a centre in every person.

Due to our interest, I would like to focus on one aspect of existential space only. Norberg-Schulz claimed that existential space is a stable image of the environment. We can see it from examples he provided in the book: from pyramid to baroque churches, from ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome to premodern Europe. It demonstrates the stability of existential space in its particular manifestation, i.e. in architectural space. Let’s look at a particular example: the stepped pyramid at Saqqara which serves as an example of absolute presence that can identify the centre of the place: “In the Egyptian pyramid we find the strongest expression of absolute existence; it is not a place for human activities in the normal sense of the word, but the goal for the path of life. Tombs, in fact, generally have a centralized form. The ability of a mass to serve as a ‘centre’ could be described by the term ‘concentration.’” [2, p. 40].

There are other examples always accompanied by illustrations that come chronologically: Acropolis of Athens, a medieval town, etc. After these photographs follows a picture of a large altar stone in the church of St. Halvard, Oslo (according to the picture information, the photo was taken in 1966), around which a group of priests is gathered. The picture illustrates the above mentioned principle that a large mass of matter, a stone altar table for instance, can become the “centre” of a place. People who gathered around the altar stone relate to the centre in the same way as the ancient Egyptians related to their “expression of absolute presence” in the pyramid. It is beyond doubt that Norberg-Schulz did not indicate any paganism in Christianity, or Christian foreshadows in the Egyptian culture. Existential space — our relationship with environment — constitutes a completely different level than religious questions. It indicates here the fact that the large mass of matter may serve as a “centre” of the object to which people relate, regardless of time, space or whether they are Christian, Buddhist, atheists, etc.

It is important to mention briefly the choice of the examples. Most of them come from the Mediterranean region: Italy, Greece, Egypt, and France. His interest begins with prehistoric creations, though he is focused more on classical tradition, and ends with Baroque. Other examples, either positive or negative, come no sooner than from the modernism of the 20th century. It is interesting that in his first book on the existential role of architecture, *Existence, Space and Architecture*, Norberg-Schulz left without attention the period between the late Baroque and modernism of the 1920s and 1930s (between the late Baroque masters Bernard

A. Vittone and Balthasar Neumann from the middle of the 18th century and the early 20th century modernism he provides one single example, the image of the Paris Champs Elysées with the *Arc de Triomphe*). It is particularly telling that Norberg-Schulz gives almost no examples from his time. In my opinion, it could result in an underestimation of modern experience.

Norberg-Schulz's argumentation connects the text describing the historical examples with carefully chosen pictures, to justify his fundamental message: there is an archetypal human experience with architecture. An experience that Norberg-Schulz sees as relatively stable — valid at least since the first pyramid up to the 20th century. In other words, regardless of the change in styles and construction techniques, the significance of human relation to the environment is still the same. Norberg-Schulz asserted a “Lifeworld” (“Lebenswelt”) of the human relationship to the world which in modern times, and specifically by architectural modernism, was diminished. The “Lifeworld” is constant in the course of time; the modern era just covered it, made it invisible (although it is explicitly apparent only after its “discovery” by Norberg-Schulz). Norberg-Schulz's efforts then can be understood as an attempt to bring the attention back to this world so the human ties with the outside world can work again. He is apparently convinced that the modern age does not allow a person to create relationships that he had discovered in the examples of pre-modern times.

I believe that here we can see the limit of Norberg-Schulz's theory. The Modern age transformation of the world and of human life, from the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and the changes brought by industrialization had its impact on the whole continents. The emergence of nationalism and nation-states, as well as the formation of cities, suburbs, and other important modern experiences such as uprooting but also promises of emancipation, so typical of modernity, the information revolution and globalization; nothing of the kind has changed the experience of a man with his environment. The experience of the last three hundred years had to transform the way human beings experience the world. The theory put forward for the first time in the book *Existence, Space and Architecture* does not reflect it.

My first aim was — working from the point of view of a theoretician of architecture — to show the basis of Christian Norberg-Schulz's theory and some problems that can be seen in it. Norberg-Schulz, one of world leading theoretician of his days (although today his theories seem to be mostly abandoned), proposes in his theories the new basis for modern architecture. Along with several others thinkers, he stood by gradual transition from (late) modern architecture to the architecture of our time. He tried to pave the way for new architecture that should be based on different principles than modern architecture hitherto. Norberg-Schulz presupposed the “Lifeworld”, whose existence he substantiated with the historical examples and ascribed as permanent.

Nevertheless, it seems that Norberg-Schulz's theory contains many problematic aspects; mainly it concerns his understanding of the modernity. As his theory influences new architects even today, it is important to fully understand it. The key question left for debate is whether the modernity was a break from tradition (as modernists believed) or some form of continuity (as proposed by Norberg-Schulz) and if it's possible to ground contemporary architecture on the same basis as before in modern time?

Title. Notes on Early Architectural Phenomenology of Christian Norberg-Schulz.

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Abstract. Phenomenology in architecture — and in theory of architecture in particular — is a result of reaction to late modernism. Christian Norberg-Schulz, an architect and one of world leading theoretician of his days, proposed in his theories a new basis for architecture. At the beginning, there was structuralism and semiotics in his first book, *Intentions in Architecture*, but very soon he shifted his interest to phenomenology (and Heidegger) and started to build his phenomenological theory. His first book on the theme was *Existence, Space and Architecture*; and since then he went on developing phenomenology in architecture for his whole life.

The aim of the article is — working from the point of view of a theoretician of architecture much informed in philosophy — to show the basis of his theory and the problems found within it. The text is derived predominantly from the book *Existence, Space and Architecture*, but takes into consideration his other theoretical works. The author pays special attention to the role of modernity in Norberg-Schulz's theory. This is paradoxical, since his aim was to provide new basis for modern and contemporary architecture, but this basis was constructed on hypothetical pre-modern experience of architecture. The key question of the article is whether modernity was a break from the tradition (as modernists believed) or some form of continuity (as proposed by Norberg-Schulz) and if it's possible to ground contemporary architecture on the same basis as before modern times. Norberg-Schulz's attitude towards modernity shows limits of his theory and makes him a problematic source of ongoing phenomenological project in architecture. As his theory influences new architecture even today, it is important to understand it well.

Keywords: phenomenology; architecture; theory; Norberg-Schulz; modernity.

Название статьи. Начала феноменологической теории архитектуры Кристиана Норберг-Шульца.

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Аннотация. Феноменология в архитектуре — и особенно в теории архитектуры — результат реакции на поздний модернизм после Второй мировой войны и фатальный кризис модернизма. Кристиан Норберг-Шульц, один из ведущих теоретиков своего времени, выдвинул в своих работах новые основания понимания архитектуры. Вначале, в его первом труде «Намерения в архитектуре», это были структурализм и семиотика, но очень скоро его интересы сместились в сторону феноменологии (и Хайдеггера), и он стал выстраивать собственную феноменологическую теорию. Его первой книгой в этом ключе стала «Экзистенция, пространство и архитектура», и с тех пор он всю жизнь занимался феноменологией архитектуры.

Главная задача статьи — показать основания архитектурной теории Норберг-Шульца как автора, весьма сведущего в философии, и ее проблемы. Статья основана главным образом на материале книги «Экзистенция, пространство и архитектура», но в широком контексте его прочих теоретических работ. В центре внимания — влияние на теорию Норберг-Шульца Нового времени (*modernity*). Парадоксально, что хотя его целью было создать новые основания для современной архитектуры, эти основания были построены на гипотетическом премодернистском опыте архитектуры. Ключевой вопрос: было ли Новое время разрывом с традицией (как считают модернисты) или формой ее продолжения (как полагает Норберг-Шульц) и возможно ли полагать основания современной архитектуры на том же фундаменте, что и в период до Нового времени? Отношение Норберг-Шульца к архитектуре Нового времени демонстрирует ограниченность его теории и делает его работы проблематичным источником с точки зрения современного феноменологического проекта в архитектуре. Но поскольку его труды и сегодня продолжают оказывать влияние на развитие архитектуры, они должны стать предметом углубленного анализа.

Ключевые слова: феноменология; архитектура; теория; Норберг-Шульц; Новое время.

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