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Atmosphere and heritage

Documenting the architectural heritage

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Abstract. *Often, when we choose buildings to be categorized as heritage, it is the building as a whole that calls for protection and not only some specific detail that is worth preserving. In this case, the values of the building not only relate to the tangible, physical material but also to the in-between of the materials. This is what we identify as atmosphere, an enveloping phenomenon that surrounds and affects our sensuous system and well-being when we approach, enter, stay or move in a building. When we leave the building again we carry this atmospheric multi-sensory experience with us without adequate methods to describe and document it. In this paper I will introduce both new and traditional approaches to document the architectural heritage with the final conclusion to describe both tangible and intangible values, it requires an objective and geometrical approach as well as a subjective and phenomenological approach.*

Keywords: *architectural heritage, documentation, atmosphere, experience, dissemination, geometrical and phenomenological analysis*

Documenting the architectural heritage from a phenomenological approach

In a small house in the middle of the city of Aarhus, time seems to stand still. The house is between users and stands empty and rather deserted which is not a representative situation for this house. Since its construction in 1883 the house has been sheltering different types of functions, primarily a child asylum. As it stands in the street today, it looks rather misplaced. None of the buildings next to it are from the same time as this house. They are all younger and taller compared to the small house. The street is narrow and only a few hundred meters from the Town Hall. All day long there is a heavy traffic from buses and taxis in the street that runs only half a meter from the house. Inside the house there is an unnatural silence. You can hear the muted traffic from the outside but there is no sound coming from the house itself. It is empty and turned off. No electricity, no heating, no furniture and no people. Being in this house, feels like entering another time.



Figure 1. The house seen from different angles.

Sensing objects and their relations to each other

When entering the house you sense that this place is uninhabited. The empty rooms, the smell of dust, the coolness stored in the brick stones after a winter without heating, the daylight that gushes into the rooms through the dirty windows and the feeling of being in a place where history has left its marks is some of the first impressions you get when entering the house today. The house has many qualities like for instance a comfortable human scale in all rooms; large windows with single-layer glass that leave the sunlight unfiltered, and details in the building material that reveals that someone cared for this building when constructing it. When walking around in this building, I sense the objects that together make this building to what it is. I sense the comfortable proportions, the heights of the ceilings and the different size of the rooms. I sense the structures and the clearly hierarchy of the rooms, the natural materials, the light that fills the rooms, the colours on the walls, the smell of old house, the sounds and the temperature. I sense these phenomena both apart and together dependent on my focus. When focusing on one thing e.g. smell, sound or colour the sensing of other things become unfocused in this moment.

All together these phenomena *are* the house in its very own houseness¹. No other house looks precisely like this, smells like this or give you the same feelings like this. It is as it is because of the present objects that altogether form the house but also because of what has happened in this house through time. This means that the house is like this because of the objects in the house and their constellations with each other. And when time becomes an active part of these constellations, it creates a new dimension in the experience of the house.

Relations between the objects, relations to each other and me

To move around in this house leaves me with a feeling of caring. I feel taking cared of when being in this building despite of the cool temperature, the smell of dust and the missing furniture. Everything in the building is related to the human scale and this makes me feel comfortable. The proportions in the rooms are nicely considered, most of the materials are naturally and the design is carefully adapted to the human body. I have the feeling that the house wants me to feel good, just like a good host. But why do I feel this? And what is it this building contains and do when it can make me feel this way? Why is this building different from the building next door or than any other building?

Over time I have visited this building many times and it is remarkable that I remember all my visits in the building as like the sun is always shining. Of course it is not, however it is situated in Denmark. An explanation could be, as mentioned above, that the daylight is of such a good quality in the building thanks to the large windows with single layer glass and huge window sills. The large windows are in every room in the ground floor with five of them placed in the main hall leaving the hall light and welcoming.



Figure 2. Windows and daylight in the building

1. Like the German philosopher Gernot Böhme's example of the blue cup that radiates its blueness out to the surroundings, while colouring the environment (Böhme 1993, p. 121).



Figure 3. The tunnel with the staircase and the large sand blasted window in the background

The stairs in the building are not just an access road from ground floor to first floor. The largest window in the house is placed by the stairs giving you an experience every time you walk here. It is not the view outside calling for attention, there is nothing to see outside the window except an unpaved backyard and a whitewashed brick wall. The constructing architect did not want people to stop on the stairs to look out of the window and chose to sandblast the panes so you cannot look out and furthermore the light that comes in is soft and nice for a stair walk. When reaching the top of the stairs you get a quite different feeling than you get in the ground floor. On the first floor there are sloping walls, small windows and low ceilings. Compared to the ground floor this is like being in a cave. When walking from the stairs and into the rest of first floor you have to enter a “tunnel” where you have to bow your head when entering. The building makes me pay attention to my body in different ways e.g. by inviting me to turn my body against the light that comes into the house in many different ways and then by forcing me to bow my head to enter the first floor. This makes me aware and responsive to the building and what it does to me.



Figure 4. Visible signs of age in the building that gives an extra dimension to the experience of the house

Besides all the qualities the building contains, there are also objects that make me want to make changes in the building. Today the building has a sort of institutionalized touch, which does not dominate but blurs the originally expression. During the years the house has been used by many people and to make the house more resistant there has been installed linoleum floorings on top of the wooden floors, plastic paint instead of distemper and strip light instead of lamps that supports the architecture of the house. These additions to the building make me want to “peel” the building and see the true surfaces behind. Where the surfaces are covered with linoleum and plastic paint, the natural patina of the building is hidden which do not only hide the buildings materials but also the attrition of the surfaces. When

hiding the attrition, the feeling of time is covered and concealed which weakens the authenticity of the building. Fortunately there are still many signs of age and history which impact my experience of the house.

Documenting the architectural heritage from a geometrical and scientific approach

Traditionally, when documenting objects belonging to the architectural heritage in Denmark, the documentation typically consists of 1) measurement drawings (could be both hand measurements and photogrammetrical computer measurements), 2) photo documentation 3) written descriptions of the building's appearance as objective as possible and 4) archive studies of the building's history from provenance till now. What these methods have in common is that they try to identify and pinpoint the tangible values in the architectural heritage. Drawings, photos and words supplement each other and generally the outcome is a professional high quality product that is very useful and necessary for the future work in the building, like for instance conservation, restoration, transformation or additions in the building. The measurement, here exemplified by a sectional drawing of the house, gives you a lot of the basic information you need to know, when getting to know a building. Proportions, structures, designs and overview are just some of the values captured in a measurement drawing like this.



Figure 5. Sectional drawing in the house gives you, together with plans, facades and detail drawings a necessary knowledge about the buildings proportions, structures and designs. Photos and oral descriptions support the drawings and avoid drowning the drawing in information

Photos and oral descriptions are used to capture what cannot be drawn with a pencil, like colors, light and details. They save the drawing from drowning in all the information that would produce too many lines in a drawing, like details in a small scale. The archive studies help the restoration architect to put together the history of the building which can be used in future work.

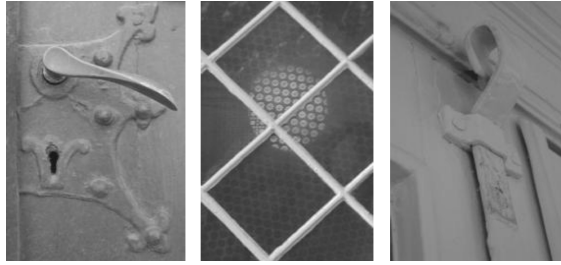


Figure 6. Details from the photo documentation that did not fit into the measurement drawings but still give valuable information about the building

Documenting architectural heritage in the future

In 2008 the building was pointed out to be protected by the state. The leading values of the building were identified from the traditional documentation made just before the protecting. That means that the official most important values of the building today are the facades, the windows, the gables and the hall inside because these elements were dominating in the traditional documentation. These elements are important to protect as they are, in relation to keep the building as an authentic remnant from the historicism in Aarhus, but they are certainly not the only things. If we only protect what we are able to draw or take photos of, there will be ongoing lacks in our architectural documentations in the future which will lead to protections selected on insufficient foundations.

My point in this paper and in my PhD dissertation as well, is that the traditional documentation methods are not enough to record all the values in the architectural heritage. It is not a critique of the traditionally methods; they are still indispensable in the field of documentation and it is impossible to imagine architectural documentations without drawings, at least if it is done in the context of a following restoration work on the building. The future documentation methods should not be a choice between on one hand the traditional, geometrical and objective methods and on the other hand the phenomenological and subjective methods. Instead they should supplement each other and thereby help us to gain multifarious documentations that teach us about the building and about how it feels to be a human in the building from a least one point of view.

A traditional documentation helps us to point out what kind of building we are working with and what kind of objects is present in the building, how big these object are and where they are placed compared to each other. But what the traditional documentation does not express is what these objects do to each other and what they do to us. To give the human body and the subjective mind a role in future documentations seems natural to me. Historical architecture is drawn, built, used and documented by people, why do everything we can to avoid being mentioned in the documentation and thereby the history of the buildings life? If we want to get to know and hand over the full story of the building, we have to embrace other approaches to the documentation than only the geometrically and objective one. It is not the story of the people who build, used or lived in the building we need (historians will take care of this part), but the story of what this building does to us and how it affects us that in the future could improve the documentations of the architectural heritage. The atmosphere of a building is an important part and a great value of the building. To know a building you must feel the building and as Böhme says “One can only determine the character of an atmosphere by exposing oneself to it. It cannot be determined from the point of view of a neutral observer, but only in emotional affectation” (Böhme, 2001, p. 52). I believe that all restoration architects feel, sense and experience both the tangible and the intangible values when working in a building. I hear that when talking to colleagues. The problem is

that when leaving a building having done a traditional documentation on it, a lot of values are not represented in this documentation. There is a gap between the experience of the architectural heritage and the documentation of the architectural heritage. We do not value the experience we get in the building as a quality that deserves to appear in the documentation. And if we did, our present methods would have difficulties accommodating the intangible values.

In the small house in Aarhus, as in many other historic buildings, the feeling of time is important. This did not appear in the traditional documentation made in 2008. Neither does it appear in the papers made regarding the protection from the same year. But what kind of stories will these information tell the future about the building when the building and the people who knew it, are gone? It will tell how important the gables and the window were, but not how it felt like being inside the building and how comfortable it was to use the stairs, and it certainly would not tell how nice and caring a host this building was for people visiting and using it. The feeling of the house being a good host occurred while I was sitting on the cold floor inside the house. The house accepts and welcomes you like a good host would. It invites you to be in the house and to be you in the house without changing or straining yourself to fit into the surroundings.

When I documented the house traditionally in 2008 I focused on other things than recently when I carried out my experiment by doing a phenomenological analysis in the house. And of course there are different outcomes of two such different approaches to analyzing and documenting a house. Every method has qualities and helps us point out and document the values of the building. Together they tell us a much more multifarious and interesting history than they would do alone.

As a final comment on my work with this house, I would say that there are difficulties doing phenomenological analysis in a field where objectivity always has been one of the main goals. But if we want to be able to document the diversity of the building, we have to think differently and embrace new approaches and methods without renouncing our traditional methods. I believe that the field of architectural heritage documentation can tolerate subjective kind of supplements as long as the traditional documentation is a strong and solid foundation to build it on.

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Photos and drawings in the paper are taken and drawn by the author

Author

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