

Why has Phenomenology become such an Influential Philosophy in Contemporary Architectural Education and Discourse?

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Research Question

This research asks why phenomenology continues to hold a prominent position within architectural education and discourse, even though it has been subject to sustained critique within architectural theory for several decades (Griffiths, 2012). Rather than treating phenomenology as a neutral or self-evident framework for understanding architecture, this study approaches it as a form of discourse that shapes how architectural experience, value, and judgement are discussed and taught.

The starting point for this question was an engagement with Sean Griffiths' (2012) critique of architectural phenomenology during earlier studies, which presented phenomenology not as a neutral or universally accepted position, but as a contested one within the discipline. Encountering this debate for the first time drew attention to the fact that phenomenology is both widely used and actively challenged, and it was this tension that prompted the central research question.

By examining how phenomenology is framed, circulated, and reinterpreted through key texts and debates, the research seeks to understand not only what phenomenology claims, but how and why it continues to remain persuasive within architectural culture today.

Aim of the Research

The aim of this research is to develop a critical understanding of phenomenology's continued prominence in architectural education and discourse. Rather than evaluating phenomenology in terms of whether it is right or wrong, the study aims to understand how it operates in practice, including how it is framed in influential texts, how it is introduced to students and practitioners and how it is adapted to suit different ways of thinking about, teaching, and discussing architecture. Through comparative reading and discourse analysis and supported by a small, focused interview as a supplementary perspective, the research aims to explore the conditions that allow phenomenology to persist, evolve, and retain authority within architectural thinking.

Strategy for Conducting the Research

This research follows a qualitative and interpretive strategy centred on the close reading and comparison of architectural texts. The focus of the project is not on evaluating buildings or design outcomes, but on examining how phenomenology operates within architectural education and discourse through language, framing, and argument. The overall strategy is to use selected texts as case studies to explore how ideas about architectural experience are constructed, circulated, and given authority, and to situate these readings within a wider critical context. This allows the project to move between detailed analysis of specific texts and broader debates within architectural theory and education.

The study begins with close, comparative reading of two well known texts: Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) and Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1962). These texts are used as an initial point of entry, or pilot study, because they represent markedly different ways of discussing architectural experience, while both remaining influential within architectural education and discourse.

Their contrast provides a means of exploring how phenomenological ideas can be framed either as a directed, normative argument about what architecture should be, or as a more open, descriptive account of how architecture is encountered and understood.

Building on this initial comparison, the research strategy involves situating these readings within a wider critical and theoretical context by engaging with secondary literature. This includes critiques of architectural phenomenology and discussions of its role within architectural theory and education (Griffiths, 2012), as well as selected philosophical sources that inform architectural uses of phenomenology. This broader engagement allows the project to move beyond the two core texts and to consider how phenomenology has been defended, challenged, and reinterpreted over time.

In addition to careful reading of key texts, the strategy includes a small, focused interview with Sean Griffiths as a supplementary source. Griffiths is an architectural practitioner and writer who has published a critical response to architectural phenomenology, particularly in relation to its ideological and cultural assumptions (Griffiths, 2012). Engagement with his writing during earlier studies formed an initial point of entry into the debate surrounding phenomenology and helped to reveal it as a contested position rather than a neutral framework. The interview is not intended to function as empirical proof or as an authoritative judgement, but as one situated perspective within an ongoing discussion. It is used to add depth and context to the analysis of how phenomenology is received, contested, and sustained within contemporary architectural culture.

Overall, this strategy is designed to support an exploratory and critical investigation into why phenomenology remains influential, rather than to produce a definitive evaluation of its theoretical validity. By combining comparative reading of texts, critical engagement with existing literature and a single, focused interview as a small piece of primary material, the research aims to develop a clear approach to understanding how phenomenology continues to operate within architectural education today.

Methodology

The methodology for this research is qualitative and interpretive, and focuses on how architectural ideas are shaped and communicated through writing and debate. The study works through close and comparative reading of texts in order to examine how phenomenology is framed, argued for, and made persuasive. This involves paying attention not only to the content of these texts, but also to their tone, structure, use of examples, and the kinds of values and assumptions they promote. In practice, this means comparing how each text constructs authority, how it positions the reader, how it frames architectural experience, and how it links experience to broader cultural or ethical claims. The methodology is therefore concerned with understanding how phenomenology functions within architectural discourse and education, rather than with assessing its theoretical correctness.

In the first instance, this focuses on Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) and Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1962), which are treated as a pilot study and as representative

examples of different ways in which architectural experience is discussed. These texts are analysed in terms of their tone, argument structure, use of examples and underlying messages about experience, value, and the role of the architect. Rather than extracting factual information, the analysis focuses on how language, framing, and narrative are used to construct authority and to position phenomenological ideas within architectural thinking.

This analysis is supported by engagement with secondary literature, including critiques of architectural phenomenology (Griffiths, 2012) and broader discussions within architectural theory and education. These sources help place the initial readings in a wider context and test early observations against broader debates, rather than treating the first texts as if they stand alone.

In addition to textual analysis, the methodology includes a small, tightly framed interview with Sean Griffiths. This material will be treated in the same way as the written texts and used to bring one perspective into the analysis of how phenomenology is discussed and contested within contemporary architectural discourse.

This approach is suited to the research question because it focuses on how ideas are framed and argued in influential texts, rather than on evaluating buildings or design outcomes, and it allows differences in tone, authority, and use of experience to be examined through comparison.

This work begins with Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) and Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1962) and will extend to critical and philosophical writing identified through the literature review, with the aim of understanding how phenomenology is framed, argued for and sustained within architectural education and discourse.

Literature Search / Review

Within architectural education, phenomenology often appears as a familiar and almost assumed way of talking about buildings, experience, atmosphere, and the senses (Griffiths, 2012). This can be seen in the continued prominence of texts such as Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) and Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1962), both of which remain in print and continue to appear in teaching contexts and architectural writing on experience, including within this programme and its reading lists. The widespread use of phenomenological ideas in this way is also reflected in critical responses such as Sean Griffiths' discussion of phenomenology as a dominant and largely unexamined mode of thinking within the discipline (Griffiths, 2012). Phenomenological ideas also appear more broadly in studio culture and theoretical discussion, often treated as a natural or intuitive way of understanding architecture rather than as a clearly defined theoretical position.

Phenomenological approaches in architecture have also been questioned within architectural theory, most clearly in critiques such as Sean Griffiths' writing on architectural phenomenology (Griffiths, 2012), as well as in wider philosophical debates around phenomenology itself. Critics such as Griffiths argue that architectural phenomenology can present particular values and assumptions while claiming

neutrality or universality. These critiques raise concerns about who is included or excluded by certain accounts of “experience”, and about the kinds of priorities that are reinforced when experience is framed in particular ways. Seeing phenomenology as both widely used and openly contested helps to show why it is important to study not just what it says, but how it functions within architectural education and discourse.

This research draws on three overlapping bodies of literature: architectural texts that employ or promote phenomenological approaches, critical responses to architectural phenomenology, and philosophical writing that informs architectural uses of phenomenology. The initial phase of the literature review has centred on two core architectural texts: Pallasmaa’s *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) and Rasmussen’s *Experiencing Architecture* (1962). These were selected because they are well-established reference points in discussions of architectural experience, while also differing significantly in tone, purpose, and style of argument. Rasmussen’s book can be read as a broad and accessible introduction to architecture through lived experience, using historical examples and everyday situations to describe how space is perceived and used (Rasmussen, 1962). Pallasmaa’s text, by contrast, adopts a more polemical position, framing contemporary culture as overly visual and arguing for a corrective, embodied approach to architecture grounded in the senses (Pallasmaa, 2005). Reading these texts together has helped to show how phenomenological ideas can be framed either in an open and descriptive way or in a more directive and normative way, depending on the author’s aims.

Alongside these architectural texts, the literature review engages with critical writing that questions the assumptions and implications of architectural phenomenology (Griffiths, 2012). Sean Griffiths’ critique is particularly important here, as it challenges the way phenomenology is often presented as neutral, universal, or self-evident within architectural discourse. His work provides a key reference point for understanding how phenomenological approaches can become dominant within architectural culture while avoiding sustained critical examination. This critical perspective sits alongside, and challenges, the more positive uses of phenomenology found in authors like Pallasmaa (2005) and Rasmussen (1962).

Alternative architectural approaches challenge the restrained aesthetic often associated with phenomenological discourse. This contrast can be seen in projects such as *A House for Essex* (Figure 1), designed by FAT Architecture, the practice associated with Griffiths.



Figure 1: A House for Essex. (Photo credit: Jack Hobhouse)

The research also situates architectural phenomenology within its wider philosophical context. Phenomenology is commonly associated with figures such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose work on perception, embodiment, and experience has been widely drawn upon within architectural theory (Crowell, 2013). The existence of sustained philosophical debate around phenomenology is illustrated by works such as Steven Crowell's *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Crowell, 2013), which examines differing interpretations and tensions within the phenomenological tradition. Texts such as this indicate that phenomenology is not a single, unified position, but a field shaped by ongoing disagreements about meaning, subjectivity, and interpretation. This broader philosophical context provides an important framework for the next stage of the research, helping to situate architectural uses of phenomenology within a longer and more complex intellectual history.

More specifically, architectural writing has frequently drawn on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work on embodiment and perception. This can be seen in papers such as Ryan Beitz's *Merleau-Ponty and the Constitution of the Body in Architectural Phenomenology* (Beitz, 2018) and *Depth and Embodiment: Being Present in Architectural Space as an Experience of Meaning* (Canetti Yaffe and Langenthal, 2025),

which connect Merleau-Ponty's philosophical ideas to architectural theory and practice. These texts have been identified as part of the literature the research will engage with in order to better understand how Merleau-Ponty's ideas are taken up, interpreted, and adapted within architectural discourse. Their inclusion helps to demonstrate that architectural phenomenology is not only widely used, but also the subject of ongoing theoretical discussion and debate, particularly around questions of embodiment, perception, and meaning.

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of perception is often illustrated through Cézanne's paintings, which attempt to capture the way the world is experienced through embodied vision (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Paul Cézanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, c.1892–1895. Oil on canvas. (Photo credit: The Barnes Foundation)

The literature search therefore focuses on texts that are already established within architectural education and discourse, represent different positions within the debate, or directly engage in critique, rather than attempting to cover the field exhaustively. Phenomenological ideas also appear more broadly in studio culture and theoretical discussion; something that this research will investigate further through analysis of programme reading lists, module descriptors, and teaching contexts. If clear evidence of this usage proves limited, this absence will itself form a significant part of the research, suggesting a gap between the perceived influence of phenomenology and its documented role within architectural education.

Together, this body of literature positions the project within an existing and active field of debate, and provides the foundation for examining not only what phenomenology claims about architecture, but how it is framed, taught, and sustained within contemporary architectural education and discourse.

Pilot Study

The pilot study for this research consists of a comparative engagement with two key texts: Juhani Pallasmaa's *The Eyes of the Skin* (2005) and Steen Eiler Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture* (1962). Together, they provided an initial testing ground for both the research question and the proposed methodology.

The starting point for this pilot study was my observation, formed through earlier study and reading, that phenomenology appears frequently within architectural education, often introduced as a way of understanding architecture through experience, the body, and the senses. It is commonly presented as intuitive or self-evident, forming part of the background language through which architecture is discussed and evaluated in studios and theoretical contexts as suggested by its presence in core texts, reading lists, and critical debates such as those raised by Griffiths (2012). At the same time, phenomenological approaches have been subject to critique within architectural theory, particularly in work such as Sean Griffiths' writing, which questions the assumptions and values that can be built into phenomenological accounts of architecture. This contrast between widespread use and documented criticism raised an initial question: why does phenomenology continue to hold such influence within architectural education and discourse? The pilot study was therefore designed to explore whether this influence stems from the strength of a single theoretical position, or whether it is connected to how phenomenology is framed, taught, and adapted within architectural culture.

Through reading and comparison, the pilot study examined how each text frames architectural experience and how phenomenological ideas are positioned within their respective arguments. *The Eyes of the Skin* (Pallasmaa, 2005) was found to present a highly directed and normative position. The book is written in a persuasive and critical tone, framing contemporary architecture and visual culture as overly ocular-centric, superficial, and disconnected from deeper forms of human experience. Pallasmaa draws on themes of sensory perception, atmosphere, materiality, memory, and embodiment to argue for a more grounded and ethically informed approach to architecture. Many of the examples and references used in the text appear carefully selected to reinforce this critique, giving the argument a strong sense of moral and cultural urgency. In this way, phenomenology is presented as a response to what the author sees as a wider cultural and architectural problem, shaping how architecture should be understood and approached.

Buildings such as Tadao Ando's Church of the Light are frequently discussed in relation to sensory and atmospheric architectural experience (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Church of the Light. (Photo credit: Nobuyoshi Araki)

In contrast, *Experiencing Architecture* (Rasmussen, 1962) adopts a markedly different tone and intention. Rather than advancing a specific theoretical or ethical argument, the book reads more like a guided exploration through architectural history and everyday experience. Rasmussen uses stories, historical examples, and familiar situations to illustrate how architecture is perceived through movement, use, rhythm, light, material, and sound. The text does not explicitly present itself as a work of phenomenological theory, nor does it seek to persuade the reader toward a particular ideological position. Instead, it offers an open and descriptive account of how architectural experience unfolds in practice, often focusing on how spaces are learned and understood through repeated use and bodily engagement. Despite this, many ideas commonly associated with phenomenology are clearly present,

suggesting that phenomenological thinking can operate discreetly within architectural discourse without necessarily being named as such.

Rasmussen emphasises how architecture is understood through use and everyday movement, something clearly visible in civic spaces such as Piazza del Campo (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Piazza del Campo, Siena. (Photo credit: Italy Magazine)

Comparing these two texts highlighted that phenomenology does not function as a single, fixed framework within architectural discourse. Although both books focus on experience, they do so in fundamentally different ways. *The Eyes of the Skin* (Pallasmaa, 2005) uses experience to support a strong, directive argument about what architecture should be, often framing phenomenology as an ethical or cultural necessity. *Experiencing Architecture* (Rasmussen, 1962), on the other hand, presents experience as something that unfolds naturally through history, use, and perception, without pushing a clear theoretical agenda. Although the two books approach experience in very different ways, they both end up strengthening the place of phenomenological thinking in architectural education and discourse. One does this by pushing a strong critical and ethical argument, while the other does it by making these ideas feel familiar, accessible, and easy to relate to.

This comparison led to several early observations that helped to refine the research focus. One is that phenomenology appears to be flexible enough to support both normative and exploratory approaches, depending on how it is framed by the author or educator using it. In Rasmussen's text (Rasmussen, 1962), phenomenological ideas are presented in an open and descriptive way, leaving space for interpretation. In Pallasmaa's work (Pallasmaa, 2005), similar ideas are used more deliberately, making clear judgements about contemporary architecture and the values it should uphold. This suggests that

phenomenology can be shaped to suit different narratives, teaching styles, and intellectual positions, rather than operating as a single, stable theoretical position.

The pilot study therefore confirmed the usefulness of a discourse-based, comparative approach. It demonstrated that language, tone, narrative structure, and the selection of examples play a significant role in shaping how phenomenology is understood, taught, and given power within architectural discourse. Rather than operating solely as a coherent philosophical system, phenomenology appears, at least in these texts, to function as a flexible mode of discourse that can be adapted, reinterpreted, and redeployed in different contexts.

The pilot phase also informed the development of an internal interim presentation to other architectural students, which served as a further test of the clarity and coherence of the research question and overall direction. Presenting this material in a condensed and critical format helped to clarify the central focus of the project and confirmed that the comparative analysis of these two texts provides a productive starting point for the wider study. Feedback from this presentation suggested that the project has a clear focus and that the existing material is sufficient to support the current stage of the written submission, while also indicating areas for further reading and critical development in the next phase of the research.

Overall, the pilot study has validated both the research question and the chosen methodology. It has shown that comparative analysis of architectural texts is an effective way to investigate how phenomenology functions within architectural education and discourse and it has provided a strong foundation for expanding the study to include additional critical literature and a small, focused interview as the research progresses.

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