Dwelling In-Between Walls: The Architectural Surround

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Abstract The title of this paper might evoke claustrophobic associations. In other words, architecture in a very immediate sense can affect our behavior and feelings. In more mediated ways, architecture is also capable of influencing humans and putting their environment into perspective. Consider, for example, how a penthouse apartment can literally elevate people’s emotions and unfold a new perspective on city life, which some people are willing to pay millions of dollars to attain. In this paper I will explore how architecture frames human experience from a philosophical point of view. My aim is to offer key elements of a new typology of architecture. For that purpose I am going to reflect and expand on key insights into technology of one of the funding fathers of contemporary philosophy of technology, Don Ihde. Through a life time, Ihde has been probing and investigating the relation between humans and their world as it is mediated through technology. In doing so he has concentrated on examining and understanding the role of scientific instruments. This paper is dedicated to showing how Ihde’s significant postphenomenological concepts not only can be translated to another domain and serve a better understanding of architecture, but also how his work can help us to relate to architecture in multiple constructive ways. The succeeding experimental translations of Ihde’s understanding of technology to architecture are also meant as a guide to design more adequate and fascinating built environments. I will begin with a broad overview of Ihde’s postphenomenological project; subsequently I shall endeavor to translate this work onto architecture through a number of case-studies, some of which are detailed and others less so.

Keywords Architecture · Postphenomenology · Perception · Embodiment · Hermeneutics

0 Introduction: Don Ihde’s Postphenomenological Fourfold

Classic phenomenology as carried out by Edmund Husserl is first and foremost preoccupied with discerning, breaking down and mapping the sub-processes of human cognition (noesis)
in relation to the intended sensory objects (noema). Postphenomenology as it is shaped by Ihde takes another point of departure. It recognizes that technology is capable of shaping our sensory impression, for instance as noticeable through something as ordinary as a pair of glasses. What a near-sighted person sees without his or her eyeglasses is very much different from the same person’s vision through a well adjusted pair of eyeglasses. In this case technology becomes an irreducible part of the experience itself and not just an addition to something already existing. But postphenomenology is not only defined by a shift in focus and interest compared to classic phenomenology; it also manifests a break with one of the fundamental dogmas of phenomenology. In postphenomenology there is no final reduction of the content of sensory impressions; or more precisely, such an endeavor is rendered quite meaningless by postphenomenology. Of particular interest to postphenomenology, is instead the study of how different technologies transform, mutate, extend, reduce, and redirect experience. Postphenomenology does not strive to link experience back to human consciousness in a definite way, but endeavours to understand experience in its many complex embodied and technological shapes. Stated differently, in postphenomenology, it is not of primary importance to discuss which of two technologies mediate experience better in any absolute sense, but rather to show how a specific technology reduces and amplifies different aspects of human experience. It is only from a certain perspective, or for a specific purpose, that one technology can be relatively better than another. In postphenomenology “multi-stability” and “variation” take the place of reduction in classic phenomenology.1

According to Don Ihde’s postphenomenological project, four distinct relations make up our experience of and through technologies. These relations provide a very efficient framework for analyzing and understanding technology. Ihde has derived these four relations by primarily studying human experience as it is mediated by various well-defined instruments such as microscopes, telephones, a dentist probe etc. Yet the explanatory power of these four relations exceeds scientific instruments. My thesis is that they also can be employed to achieve a better understanding of how architecture is experienced from within, respectively how architecture shapes experience and in this sense also helps defining a postphenomenological typology of architecture.

The four different relations Ihde describes and uses in his examination of technology are the embodiment relation, the hermeneutic relation, the alterity relation and the background relation.2 In one context Ihde illustrates the embodiment relation to technology in terms of how the world is experienced through a pair of glasses.3 In this case the technological artifact is fully transparent and becomes a seemingly natural part of the bearer’s experience of the world. At one point, Ihde also extends his description of the embodiment relation to encompass more complex technologies. This leap in complexity may help us achieving an initial idea of how Ihde’s concept of the embodiment relation may later be translated into architecture. In the following passage Ihde describes the experience of a competent car driver when parking the car as an instance of the embodiment relation:

For example, even driving an automobile includes relations of this type. The expert driver when parallel parking needs very little by way of visual clues to back himself into the small place—he ‘feels’ the very extension of himself through the car as the car becomes a symbiotic extension of his own embodiedness.4

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1 See Ihde (2009, 13ff).
2 For a comprehensive overview of these relations, see: Ihde (1990, p. 72ff).
3 “[Embodiment relations] directly engage our perceptual abilities—optically our vision is mediated by eyeglasses or contact lenses…” Ihde (2009, p. 42).
4 Ihde (1979, p. 8).