Contemporary Jewellery: A Phenomenological Approach to Making Informed By Architecture

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Introduction

This paper discusses aspects of my current PhD research that examines cross-disciplinary concepts between contemporary architectural and jewellery practice.

The project draws on architect Peter Zumthor's work *Therme Vals* as a case study for understanding the significance of sensorial experience on human beings and its relevance to memories. The aim is to propose new methodologies for generating wearables forms.

Relations between Architecture and Contemporary Jewellery

At first, as creative disciplines, contemporary architecture and jewellery seem poles apart. Perhaps the first disparity that comes to mind is the immensity of architecture in contrast with the miniature of jewellery. The distinction is obvious as human scale is used as a measuring tool for the making of most objects. On one hand, the architectural space is designed to shelter the human body and enables specific actions such as working and sleeping to take place within it. On the other hand, in the context of jewellery, the human body is used as a platform to showcase attributes in accordance to social, cultural and historical contexts.

On closer observation, whilst the human body differentiates one practice from the other, it also appears to bring them closer together, for the body does not only reference a physical entity but also relates to the frame of mind. Together architecture and jewellery contribute to the 'Self' and its human characteristics such as emotions and our capacity for memory. It is the emotional significance drawn from the experience of 'Self' that defines our relation to the object, independent from its scale and purpose and whether inhabited or worn.

As a creative discipline, contemporary jewellery is yet to define itself (Lindemann& FHT/Idar Oberstein, 2011, p.13). [1] Despite a rich history and traceable shifts in its development across time, it lacks the depth of enquiry that literature on architecture often discusses in a scholarly manner. Perhaps one of the reasons why jewellery hasn't been part of a more theorized discourse is related to our very individualistic way of relating to the wearable as an artefact. Sentimental value is a common characteristic associated with jewellery.

Often, the piece represents family history or friendship and therefore its meaning sets it apart from more generic emotional states. These may include the emotion one feels when the object acts as a recollection of places and experiences for example.

Precious jewellery aside, contemporary jewellery is primarily used as a device for communicating ideas and, increasingly, the role of wearability is no longer seen as a necessity (Lindemann& FHTrier/IdarOberstein, 2011, p.13). Therefore, this raises questions about how we engage with a piece of jewellery whether worn or unworn. If the relationship between 'Self' - the subject - and the object is based on emotional significance, how does the removal of the human body, a physical entity with sensorial abilities alter this relationship? And, how then does the experience of wearing or not wearing the work affect the memory of our relationship to the work?

My research explores the role of the human body in transitioning our emotional significance toward jewellery as mnemonic symbols. This paper draws on our relationship with the architectural landscapes in an attempt to propose new methodologies for jewellery practice.

Sensorial Experiences

The reference to the role of the human body in relation to the wearable is reminiscent of the way we question our interaction and sense of belonging with the natural and built environments.

In the last fifteen years there has been increasing literature written by architects that emphasize the need for us to reconnect with our senses.

A real architecture experience is not simply a series of retinal images; a building is encountered – it is approached, confronted, encountered, related to one's body, moved about, utilized as a condition for other things... (Holl; Pallasmaa; Pérez-Gómez, 2006, p.35).



Fig.1 Sogn Benedetg chapel, Graubünden, Switzerland

Through various writings, Pallasmaa suggests a need to rethink the value of multi-sensory experiences, arguing that buildings have lost their plasticity with the ever-increasing significance of visual imagery in contemporary western culture (Holl; Pallasmaa; Pérez-Gómez, 2006, p.29).

In our current understanding of architecture, both as architects and as occupants, we tend to close ourselves outside of the world and the phenomenon of architecture itself, and be mere observers. Yet it is the very boundary line between the self and the world that is opened and articulated in an artistic and architectural experience (Pallasmaa, 2009, p.124).

This viewpoint is shared by Peter Zumthor, one the most prominent architects of the 21st century. I first became familiar with Zumthor's work through his writing, describing places, architectural space and materials in very personal and poetic ways. In *Atmospheres*, he questions what inspires us in a place; is it what it looks like, what it sounds like? What dis/connects us to that particular environment? The mundane scene he witnessed while sitting outside in a square is used as an example to note that not one particular aspect of the scene moved him; rather, it was the experience of the place in a given time that triggered an emotional significance that became stored as a detailed memory (Zumthor, 2006a, pp.15-17).

A Phenomenological Approach

The significance of the experience of place and its association with emotion and memory are phenomenological concepts, evident in all Zumthor's works.



Fig.2 Kolumba Museum, Köln, Germany

However, it is not the purpose of this paper to engage in the ongoing debate about phenomenology as a study. Rather, it is to examine the value of a phenomenological approach in architecture and envisage how such methodology might apply within the context of jewellery. Environment-behaviour researcher and professor of Architecture at Kansas State University, USA, David Seamon defines phenomenology as:

...the exploration and description of phenomena, where phenomena refers to things or experiences as human beings experience them...The aim of phenomenology research is not idiosynchratic descriptions of the phenomenon; rather, the aim is to use these descriptions as a groundstone from which to discover underlying commonalities that mark the essential core of the phenomenon (Seamon, 2000, p.3).

'First-person', 'existential' and 'hermeneutic' are three variations of methodological approaches to phenomenology research (Seamon, 2000).

In first-person investigations, the researcher draws from his/her own firsthand experiences to examine the characteristics and qualities of the phenomenon. In existential phenomenological research, the researcher uses either established or their own criteria as means of conducting an empirical study of the phenomenon involving participation of others (Seamon, 2000, p.13). Finally, hermeneutics refer in broader terms to the theory and practice of interpretation (Mugeraurer, 1994, p.4). This approach is used when the creator of a work or environment hasn't articulated a precise or particular meaning, giving the researcher an opportunity for his/her own interpretation.

As noted in Seamon's research, it is not unusual to encounter all three phenomenological approaches in one study. In an attempt to employ a phenomenological approach, I engaged in first-hand phenomenological research when I went on successive field trips to familiarize myself with Zumthor's work.



Fig.3 Front façade of Therme Vals, Vals, Graubünden, Switzerland

I chose Zumthor's work *Therme Vals* as a case study for my research, because as a complex that houses thermal baths, the human body forms an integral part of the function and purpose of the building. It provides a framework for exploring relations between subject, object and architectural space in an experiential level that I later intend to use and transpose in the context of jewellery.

Therme Vals is a monolith structure partially buried underground located in Vals, a small valley of Graubünden in Switzerland. Made primarily of stones from the local quarry, its façade blends with the mountainous surroundings. Inside the space is divided in a very systematic way, referencing cave-like forms, most of which house pools filled with water from the local spring.



Fig.4 Image showing the building protruding out of the ground.

About Place

Therme Vals is very much a tribute to the place in which it was built. This is achieved through the architect's deep knowledge of the site and its resources. In addition, reflections on past memories of many different places, experiences and perceptions have also played an important role in Zumthor's ability to create buildings that become hybrids between the natural and built environments, thus contributing to the development of the architectural landscape.



Fig.5 Distant view of Vals village at the bottom of Valser Valley, Switzerland

According to Noberg-Schulz (1980), a place is much more than a location. Place is defined by its 'character', an attribute generated through human actions and perceptions, where body and mind are related. Mind plays a fundamental role in the character of a place; it refers to what we are familiar with and is strongly linked to our childhood and culture. Therefore, the character of a place is dependent on the linkages we make between the place and our memories (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

In her dissertation *The Role of the Autobiographical Experiences with Emotional Significance of an Architect in Design Conjecturing,* Solovyova discusses interconnections between emotions, memory and place. She argues that one cannot exist without the others. She suggests that autobiographical experiences with emotional significance are what enable architects to design future places. Through an understanding of his/her own sensorial capacities and relations between 'Self' and 'place', the architect uses experience to gather and store data that later can be used as 'fragments' to contribute to new architectural environments (Solovyova, 2008).

In *Therme Vals*, the use of local material and the structure's subterranean connection with the site firmly roots the building in its location. The pools whether inside or outside are designed in such a way that bathers are constantly aware of the immediate surroundings: water, stone, mountains and open space. The experience awakens all senses and thus generates feelings beyond the physical act of bathing.



Fig.6 Image showing the steam generated as a result of contrasting temperatures between air and water



Fig.7 Landscape in the surroundings of Vals

Peripheral vision contributes significantly to the identity of an architectural work. It is as much about the object itself as it is about the object in space.

Unconscious peripheral perception transforms retinal gestalt into spatial and bodily experiences. Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators (Pallasmaa, 2006, p.13).

Therme Vals' surroundings largely contribute to the experience of the baths. Last year, I visited the village of Vals and the baths on three occasions for a few days, each time coinciding with a different season. The aim was to understand what characteristics define a sensate place. Variations in weather, temperature, light, changed the atmosphere and the mood of the place, affecting my experience of the work itself.

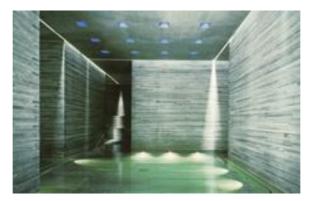


Fig.8 *Therme Vals*; view of the main indoor pool

A cave-like atmosphere is apparent from the moment one enters the building, through the long dark corridor accessible only from underground. Almost immediately, the visitor is transported outside and beyond the physical space, his/ her senses awakened by the lack of natural light, the sound of water echoing in the background and the texture and temperature of stone on the skin. Five fountains, whose spouts protrude out of the concrete wall of the narrow pathway leading to the baths, appear to belong to the fabric of the building. Over the years, the continuous stream of water has transformed the original colour of the concrete wall and stone floor and created a scale-like pattern, reminiscent of the wooden shingle facades featured on local chalets. Around the corner, the space opens up into one large plan, carefully divided by large stone blocks. In the centre, bathers relax in the water. Sounds of water together with the bathers voices are diffused throughout the space. Natural light is filtered through picture windows and narrow openings in the ceiling. From there, traversing the architectural space is only describable through individual sensorial experience. Inside and outside are interconnected, transporting the human body through the architectural landscape, where building and site form one.

Materiality

As a craftsperson and designer of wearables, my experience of several of Zumthor's works has changed my perception of the notion of architectural space and its connection to place and materiality. The attention to details and thoughtful selection of materials portrayed in his buildings evidence a deep understanding of craftsmanship that softens the overall minimalistic aesthetic of his work. Originally trained as a cabinetmaker, the reference to materiality is underpinned by the knowledge of making in a practical sense.



Fig.9 Door handle of the chapel in Sogn Benedetg, Graubünden, Switzerland

At a glance, Zumthor's buildings appear simple in their aesthetic, due to a lack of ornament. It is only when one encounters the work firsthand that the intricacies of the fabric of the architecture become apparent - *particularly when seen from a maker's perspective. Therme Vals* was completed in 1996 and to date it appears timeless. Yet, natural wear and tear is testimony of time passing. The surface of brass handrails tarnishes once in contact with the water, transforming the golden colour into ochre and darker hues; the texture on the rail is built up daily, unconsciously, by the many gold rings adorning the hands that grip it, touch it or slide along it.

On atmosphere, Zumthor states:

...I am convinced that a good building must be capable of absorbing the traces of human life and thus taking on a specific richness... Architecture is exposed to life. If its body is sensitive enough, it can assume a quality that bears witness to the reality of past life (Zumthor, 2006b, pp.24-26).

Jewellery As Archetype



Fig.10 Archetype, ring, Sabine Pagan (2009)

In the same way, wearables are lived experiences; they hold memories and emotions; they change with time; surfaces get worn: they polish on the contact of the skin and dint when touched by stronger materials. But what about the wearable that is yet to be worn, displayed unworn or simply made not to be worn?

In 2009, prior to visiting Zumthor's work, I exhibited a body of jewellery work inspired by architecture. The concept of the exhibition *Archetype* revolved around our perception of space and scale. Displayed on tall plinths, each ring – despite a minimalistic aesthetic – featured subtle details that invited the viewer to look closely inside, outside and around the object, until subconsciously being drawn within the work. The experience was aimed at blurring the lines between the factual relationship of the human scale with the object, and how the mind processes what it sees. Suddenly the object is no longer a ring per se, but rather a spatial structure that could be referenced in a number of ways, similarly to the miniature world described by Bachelard (2005, pp.140-167).



Fig.11&12 In (out) between, ring, Sabine Pagan (2011)

The exhibition provided points of reflection about the direction of my research. Discussion between my supervisor who is a landscape architect and I revealed disparities in our individual analyses of the work. We discussed the minimalistic aesthetic of my pieces and, given my supervisor's viewpoint that architecture is about details, raised questions about the value of revealing or disguising the way the work has been constructed. The conversation led to an experiment, where the ring was lent for a month, during which my supervisor had to document her a/dissociation with the work. New concepts were identified as a result of the experimentation. This led to questions about the significance of the transformation of the work through wearing and about the influence of the work on the mind, questioning whether the memory of the work is dependent on the experience of wearing or being separated from it. Would the outcome of the experimentation have differed, had the ring belonged to the wearer?



Fig.13 Site #3, ring, Sabine Pagan (2009)

Whilst the questions are yet to be answered, the experimentation highlighted the role and significance of the 'experience' of the work through the body and mind and suggested new methodologies for creating new jewellery works. The involvement of another person in the study suggested the potential for a more existential phenomenological approach to the research.

REFLECTIONS

For each field trip to *Theme Vals*, a new methodology was established for documenting the work. Writing was used as the first mechanism to record the encounter with the building and its site and the experience of bathing in that environment at particular times of day or night. The second visit was to depict the experience through drawing, an attempt barely achieved. Finally, the third visit was captured through rudimentary model making.

The task aimed at discovering how the memory of the experience would be decoded depending on the methodology used. Each highlighted particular aspect of the experience. Writing became a descriptive way to recall the overall emotions revealed through the relations between body, stone and water that create a unique atmosphere within an architectural landscape, where the boundaries between inside and outside no longer exist. Drawing was used as a mode for picturing concrete settings whilst model making became a way to de/construct architectural space. Together they suggest a phenomenological approach to 'making' memory of experiences with emotional significance.



Fig.14 Reno, ring, Sabine Pagan (2010)

To date my work has primarily focused on studies of architectural space. My field trips to *Therme Vals* in 2010 have contributed to a shift in concept that will influence future research. The new body of jewellery work will explore the wearing of jewellery over time with the aim to show whether our sensorial and spatial responsiveness to the wearable is altered depending on its role as an un/worn object.

The contribution of external participants in the project of 'experiencing' space, place and the object will be essential to the research and may be presented in a variety of forms, including written, visual and/or performed. Their input will be used in conjunction with the body of jewellery work to suggest new methodologies for practice.

I hope that this paper has contributed to the cross-disciplinary discourse by demonstrating that, despite obvious differences in scale, purpose and function, architecture and contemporary jewellery as creative disciplines share a common aspiration for engaging us as human beings.

Keywords: architecture, contemporary jewellery, phenomenology, place, senses.

Note:

[1] In (2011) *Thinking Jewellery*, Lindemann notes that despite being one of the most ancient disciplines across all cultures, and despite holding the same popularity today, wearable

artefacts have not been subject to being 'theorized'. Rather, it has been included in many monographs and anthropological texts or, occasionally categorized as 'accessories' under Fashion. (p.13)

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