

The Phenomenon of Place  
*Christian Norberg-Schulz*

Christian Norberg-Schulz, a Norwegian architectural theorist, is closely associated with the espousal of a phenomenology of architecture. From his early writings in the 1960s to the more recent *Architecture: Meaning and Place* (1988), he develops a textual and pictorial interpretation of the ideas of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), based primarily on Heidegger's essay "Building Dwelling Thinking." *Intentions in Architecture* (1963) uses linguistics, perceptual (Gestalt) psychology, and phenomenology to construct a comprehensive theory of architecture. It appeared just before Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, another important postmodern text. An increasingly clear interest in phenomenology is evident in Norberg-Schulz's later books.

Initially defined by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) as a systematic investigation of consciousness and its objects,<sup>1</sup> Norberg-Schulz refers to phenomenology as a "method" that urges a "return to things," as opposed to abstractions and mental constructions." At the time this essay was published, few efforts had been made to study the environment phenomenologically. He identifies phenomenology's potential in architecture as the ability to make the environment meaningful through the creation of specific places. He reintroduces the ancient Roman idea of the *genius loci*, the spirit of a particular place, (creating a link to the sacred), which provides an "other" or opposite that humanity must confront in order to dwell. He interprets dwelling as being at peace in a protected place. Thus, enclosure, the act of marking or differentiating a *place* within *space* becomes the archetypal act of building and the true origin of architecture. Norberg-Schulz emphasizes the importance of basic architectural elements like wall, floor, or ceiling, experienced as horizon, boundary, and frame for nature. Architecture clarifies the location of human existence, which as Heidegger describes it, is between the sky and the earth, in front of the divinities. Phenomenologists such as

Vittorio Gregotti also argue the need for the site to intensify, condense, and make precise the structure of nature and man's understanding of it. (ch. 7) The celebration of the particular qualities of place is also fundamental to Kenneth Frampton's *Critical Regionalism*. (ch. 11)

In addition to a focus on site, phenomenology engages tectonics because, as Norberg-Schulz says, "the detail explains the environment and makes its character manifest." (ch. 10–12) Because of its embrace of site and tectonics, phenomenology has proven an extremely influential school of thought for contemporary designers such as Tadao Ando, Steven Holl, Clark and Menefee, and Peter Waldman. It has led to a renewed interest in the sensuous qualities of materials, light, and color, and in the symbolic, tactile significance of the joint. These aspects contribute to the poetic quality that Heidegger says is essential to dwelling.

Norberg-Schulz is led by his admiration for Robert Venturi into misreading him as a phenomenologist because of the latter's interest in "the wall between the inside and the outside." Certainly there is little doubt after *Learning from Las Vegas* that Venturi and his collaborators are more interested in surface ("decorated shed") than in spatial concerns like bounded places.

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, rev. 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), 157.