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## **Applying the phenomenological approach to educational place: A case study analysis of a college experience through time**

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### **Abstract**

Applying the phenomenological approach to architecture relies on integrating human experiences and sensory aspects into the designed space, materials, and light to create a place that has a lasting impact on the memory in the human mind. This experience can change if the person experiences the space at a different time. This case study focuses on some students' sensory experiences of the College of Engineering at the University of Bahrain who attended the College during their academic years and then visited it after a long detachment period. This study relies on interviews with the students focusing on their previous and actual college experience to discover the changes in the experience of the same space through different times. The promising results showcase that mental images have changed, and students' attachment has become more substantial due to detachment and time.

**Keywords:** Phenomenology; educational place, Case study; Sensory experience; Analysis

### **Introduction**

Each 8 billion people worldwide experiences spaces and live through them homogeneously. Each space becomes a place when three components are combined to form a memory in the people's minds. The physical setting, the activities that occur in this physical setting and the meaning of those activities in a relationship with the people. (Relph, 1976) . This is further confirmed by Harrison and Dourish when they stated that "Place = space + meaning"(1996). This relationship towards the space manifests in a dynamic and complex relationship. It is constantly getting reshaped due to the situation. (Trigg, 2017). Moreover, our relationship towards the space differs in scale depending on the place attachment level of the person occupying the space. (Shamai, 1991 Aziz Amen & Nia, 2018, Amen & Kuzovic, 2018, Amen & Nia, 2021, Aziz Amen, 2017). Meaning that time situates the relationship people create with the space. The place attachment of a home differs from the place attachment towards a public space. As these elements of space, activities, time, and meaning intertwine, they create a lasting memory of the place that is carried over in people's minds. One crucial place that creates those memories is the education space, as it has a long period of exposure for the students in terms of experience and time.

As a student, the memories formed through time in the collage are some of the strongest and most remembered through sensory experiences. Where the space becomes locations with senses such as smell and taste. Moreover, phenomenological experiences are manifested through smaller snippets in the mind of the students. However, when a group of people who attended College meet up, some memories seem altered, and some details are not remembered. In contrast, other memories can be remembered with every smallest detail. One hypothesis for the cause of this alteration is due to the detachment and not experiencing the place in a phenomenological sense for a longer time. As well as when focusing on the idea of place-making and memories. The field of placemaking studies and memories has attracted several researchers and studies that focused on people's memories and mental images of space. Nevertheless, the focus mainly falls to the public rather than an educational space. Educational spaces can be the third place a person spends most of their time in after their home and workplace. This paper will test this hypothesis by looking into the educational space through a phenomenological sense by exploring the memories of some students from the architecture batch of 2012 in the College of Engineering at the University of Bahrain. Who did not visit the College after graduating in 2017 and 2018.

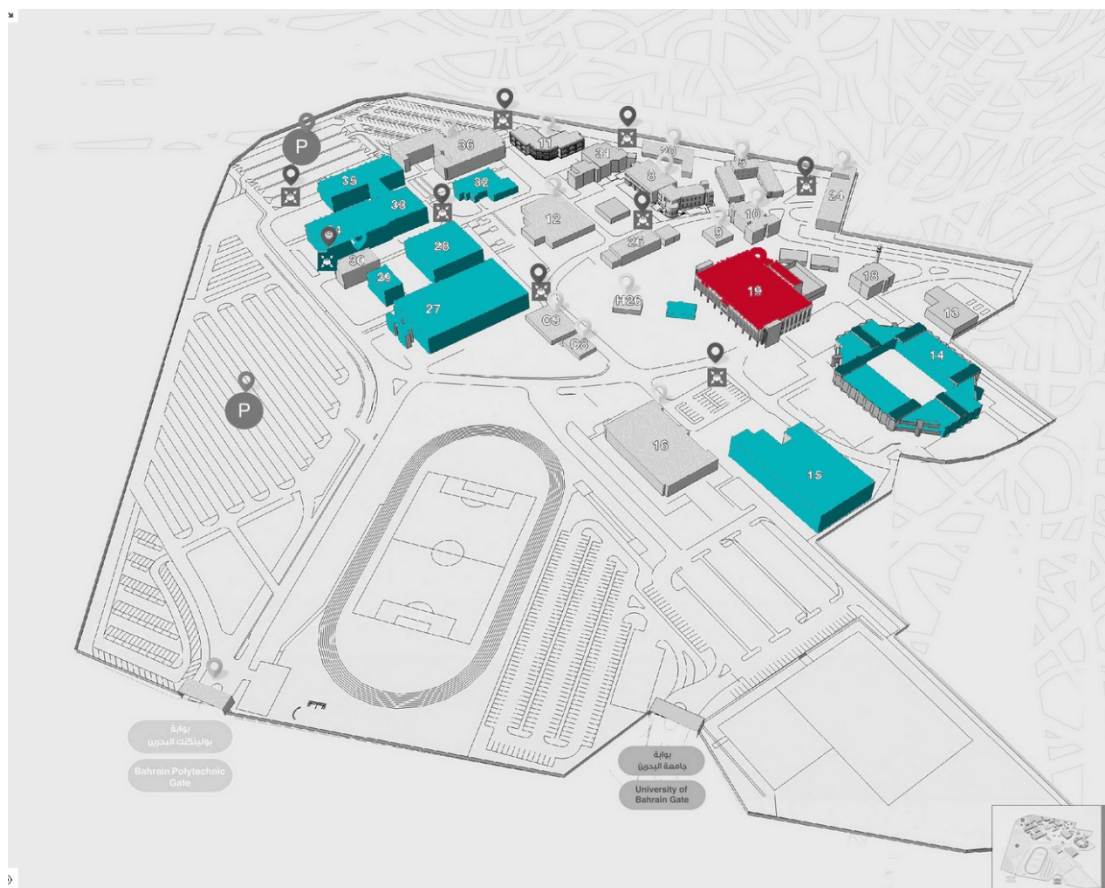
This document is organised into five sections. The first section focuses on establishing the place of study for the readers. The second section establishes the methodology for tackling the paper. The third and fourth sections showcase the results of implementing the methodology and discuss the paper's main contribution. At the same time, the last section covers the concluding thoughts regarding this research.

### Section 1: Establishing the place: College of Engineering at the University of Bahrain

Each place has several criteria that differentiate it from the surrounding places. The physical parameter, activities, and meanings are combined to form a sense of place attachment. As established in the paper, the education space has its meaning and activities; attending classes and learning, socialising and meeting each other, and experiencing college life define them. However, the physical parameter differs from place to place. Each College has classrooms and a lecture hall. However, Not all colleges are constructed to be the same. Thus a more thorough look at the space itself is needed to comprehend the full scope of the study entirely. The space will be described from the first author's perspective in a non-bias way to familiarise the reader with the space.

Most architecture students at the University of Bahrain attend the engineering campus college in Isa town. This campus was the first campus of the University of Bahrain when it was established in 1986 in Isa town. A new modern city that is far away from the capital of Bahrain. Throughout the decades. Despite this, the main university campus was moved further towards Sakhir, located in the middle of the main island of Bahrain, to form a permanent university campus. The engineering college did not move to the new campus, while all other disciplines moved there. As well as the discipline of nursing moved to the Salmanya Hospital in Manama.

The campus of Isa town itself became the shared host for two university campuses at the same time. Both the College of Engineering from the University of Bahrain and Bahrain Polytechnic occupied the same area on the campus of Isa town. This joint campus is split between the two campuses as each has designated buildings, as shown in Figure 2. The grey buildings are the designated buildings for college engineering. The College of Engendering occupies building 13 to 15 parking spaces near the University of Bahrain. As well as the buildings 27 to 29 and those ranging from 31 to 35. The other shared places are the security buildings, mosque and library, and the main hall of 12 is shared between the two campuses. The Department of Architecture and interior design was part of the civil engineering department, then called the Department of civil engineering and Architecture. The civil engineering department occupied building 28 as the department's main office. In 2018 the architecture and interior design department was formed, split and moved to occupy building 33.



**Figure 1.** Diagram of the College, Showcasing the building of the College of Engineering in the University of Bahrain in blue colour (Polytechnic Bahrain website)

Each college building was attended to serve a specific purpose for architecture students. More theoretical general lectures are housed in Building 15, while the more civil-oriented lectures are housed in Building 13 or 14. Physical labs are located in building 27 while building 28 houses more computer-oriented classes. The main jest of the design and architectural courses are occupied in buildings 33, 35 and 27, with occasional classes set in building 15. The multi-purpose halls of Building 32 and Building 15 are used for exams, and the campus of the polytechnic renovated Hall 12 to be their main hall. The library is split into two parts. The College of Engineering controls a part of the ground floor for their main library, while the other side and the two floors are under Bahrain Polytechnic jurisdiction. Nevertheless, the available food hall on the 2nd floor is open for engineering college students. Another important place for the students on campus is the food restaurant Bashayer. Before the first author attended the College, it acted as the campus's main cold store/restaurant. Moreover, several restaurants came and went during that time, but non stayed open for a long time. The location of this restaurant / cold store shifted from being adjacent to Hall 12 to a standalone location next to the library.



**Figure 2.** Building 33 courtyard



**Figure 3.** Building 35 intermediate space

## **Section 2: Methodology of tackling this research**

The research focuses on the spatial experience from a phenomenological standpoint through time in a specific place. As well as understanding the students' memories of the past and present in the place. A qualitative method will be taken in conducting this research. Due to that, the research objects focuses on:

- Understanding the memories of place-making in the mind of students
- Comparing the phenomenological memory of the space in the mind of the student and the actual place at present
- Understating what makes a place become engraved in the mind of the student

To achieve those objectives, using a qualitative method is more beneficial for the research. This is coupled with using a case study method to view the differences between memory and physical space. Moreover, this research will be split into two parts.

The first part implements a focus group method to note the students' memories. The interviewer will state the building names and how the conversation is progressing openly and then ask about the sensory experience of each space the participants of the focus group lists to understand their sensory experience of the space. No pictures are used in this situation as they might distort or evoke the participants' views. All the experiences will be noted and recorded to understand and analyse their experience comprehensively.

The second part will rely on taking the same focus group participants to the College of Engineering and seeing their impressions regarding the place after the long period of detachment. The same questions regarding the sensory experience will be asked after they view the space and more about what they observed in the space. Moreover, pictures were used from the student's social media accounts, and the university accounts to compare the existing conditions of the university and understand the changes that occurred in the place to confirm the observations of the focus group participants of the space and memories.

The focus group comprised three friends who attended simultaneously as the first author. The focus group participants are all from the 2012 batch, which graduated in 2017 and 2018. They have not visited the College since then except for the first author, who visited the College in 2019 and attended the College for his master's studies in 2022 onwards.

### Section 3: conveying the results

In the first focus group, when specific numbers of the building were mentioned, the discussion immediately shifted towards the memories of the College, more specifically, certain situations that occurred in a particular place with a specific group. Such as when someone fell and who was around them or when a doctor ripped off all of the work in a design class. Each conversation started with a situation, which class and who was in the place.

As well as designating each space to follow a particular usage, such as gathering space, jury classes, and event spaces for the Engineering Society on campus or AIAS Society. When asked about the sensory element they remember in each class, smell and temperature were the most in each conversation, followed by sound. The students considered building 33 and 35 their place, the gathering space for the students. At the same time, the other building is isolated from them. Especially building 15, as it was associated with tests and theoretical lectures. They mentioned the stressful nature of the space and what it reminded them of.

Moreover, when asked what they remember about the buildings, several architectural and interior design elements were mentioned instead of the full image of the building itself. Such as the courtyard hall, the breeze blocks and the colourful artwork between the buildings. As well as some other elements like the large dead tree in the courtyard. Wooden chairs and prayer rooms. What was significant was the mention of snippets of the spaces when asked in general. It did not mention the total limit of the place. Only some elements are mentioned, such as those highlighted in Figures 4 and 5. They reflect figures 2 and 3 but with the elements highlighted according to the focus group memories.



**Figure 4.** Building 33 courtyard, the focus group remembers the highlighted elements in the space.



**Figure 5.** Building 35 intermediate space, the highlighted elements are what the focus group remember in the space.

When the same group were taken to the campus after that, the nostalgic vision of the places returned as they rushed their senses and memories. They started pointing out more events in each place and indicating what they remembered in each space. Even one stated. "it has not been five years, and I still feel I am walking around here. I will see one of my friends just finishing his lecture, and we will meet " Moreover when they are taken to each place. One distinct aspect they say when entering and exploring each space is the sensory experiences first, followed by the physical parameters such as the tables, paint and other physical representation of the space itself. Due to one of the design classes, the group remembered the minor details such as the specs of spray paint on the wall and the missing bored from the wall, which was there when they left the university.

One exciting aspect of this tour is that they neglected to mention the significant spaces and changes in the physical environment. Figure 6 was taken in 2014 next to Building 28, while Figure 7 showcases the same picture from the same angle. The painted steel elements did not catch the eyes of the focus group. Moreover, other details, such as the size of the place and the feeling of it, seem to have withered away from the memories of the people in the focus group. They started questioning the tables, chairs and other elements that had not changed.



**Figure 6.** Picture of building 28 taken in 2014. Notice the colour of the steel louvres in the background as well as the planter box colour.



**Figure 7.** picture of building 28 taken in 2023 showcasing the difference in the colour of the louvres in Figure 6

### Section 5: Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

A crucial point that stands out regarding the experience of the place is that the sensory experience overwhelms the visual standpoint of the place. This research indicated that detachment could cause details to fade away. In comparison, others stand out furthermore than others. Those minor details become more engraved in the mind of the users if they are attached to a particular situation that creates an impactful memory that stands the testament of time.

To those students in the focus group, time seemed to stop, and when they revisited the collage, they felt like time resumed and they were waiting for their friends. The most significant aspect that stood out here is the places and memories attached to the specific sense or atmosphere. Cold or hot, which are particular to the sense of smell or taste.

This leads to the understanding that the sensory experience can formulate a sense of attachment to the place. More than the activities and situations. As the sensory experience in the place changes, it immediately triggers the users to notice it. As well as the dulling out of the visual elements fading away. Detachment strengthens the senses, while the visual characteristic becomes duller as time passes. Simply put, Minor details, and senses stand out more than visual changes. Further studies can be conducted regarding the time of detachment and the time spent in the College to understand further how the mental image of the place changes from the student's perspective.

Moreover, the research highlighted the College regarding the physical and sensory experience. Furthermore, how the students perceive it. More importantly, this paper showcases the significance of the sensory experience in forming memories that last, thus it can be the bases for the redesigning and improvement of the college campus design. as the paper highlights the particular senses that overwhelmed the other sensory experiences and stood out in the mind of the students, which can be implemented in the design process of the new college compasses or the redesign process of the campus. To effectively create a phenomenological experience that allows the students to remember the place more sensually.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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