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*Essays: (Re)Connecting Academia*

**Raissa de Albuquerque Gameleira**

**César Renato Canova**

The Pragmatism of Multiple Case Studies:  
a Phenomenological View of Architectural Research

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# The Pragmatism of Multiple Case Studies: a Phenomenological View of Architectural Research

**Raissa de Albuquerque Gameleira**

*Universidade de Lisboa*

**César Renato Canova**

*Universidade Federal da Paraíba*

No system of representation, no meta-language, however, is totally independent of the facts which constitute the objective world (Colquhoun, 1969, p. 72).

Research in Architecture often deals with an ideological comprehension of reality through which architects expect to transform society via design. However, there is a difference between (a) altering a given social formation and (b) participating in such transformation (Amaral, 2003). By revisiting the development of our PhD research – focused on the Theory and Practice of Architectural Design – we sustain an argument for the second approach.

As architects, our capabilities lie on perception and imagination (Silva, 1998; Arnheim, 2004; Canova, 2020), which may be understood as signifying processes (Broadbent, 1977; Barthes, 1993). Since these processes can be related to Peirce's understanding of phenomenology (Salatiel, 2006; Santos, 2006; Sonesson, 2017), it might also be linked to his take on Realism and Pragmatism. In this philosophical context, a broader perception of reality might lead to less fallible results, for research or design processes would also encompass environmental meanings (Rapoport, 1990; Krampen,

1991) gathered from other users of the built environment within “multiple case-studies” (Creswell, 2003; Groat and Wang, 2013; Maarouf, 2019).

The contexts of our analysis are limited to two cities in two different countries (Brazil and Portugal). Within the scientific method developed, the participation of the analysed communities has become fundamental, whether by giving a plural context for problem-statement and hypothetical speculation (i.e., for *abduction*), by building qualitative case studies from their perception (i.e., in *deduction*), or by validating the relevance of the results (i.e., in *induction*). Having spent some time in both locations, our “sensitive observation” (Rapoport, 1990, p. 150) also helped to construct our own perception of the cultural settings.

Thus, our methodological approach included questionnaires and interviews (both exploratory and structured), which made possible a constant review of the initial research claims and suggested emergent topics (Elali, 1997). By validating the researchers’ propositions with the experiences of actual users, the qualitative data collected within these methods helped to sustain a coherent comparison between spatial configuration, functional aspects and environmental meanings of the cases studied, allowing a more complete understanding of the phenomena.

We then conclude that this understanding would not be reached solely by the researchers’ own efforts. As the research continued their connection to the analysed contexts and their inhabitants, the constant exchange between theory and practice benefited all sorts of participants. For example, during the gathering of the qualitative data, the interviewees had the chance to access their own case studies and look at their experiences through a new lens, leading to insights about their experiences that probably would not have happened otherwise. Indirectly, our research will also benefit future users of these places. Nevertheless, we, as researchers, are the ones who instigate such transformation, but not the ones who actively transform the perceived reality. Therefore, by staying connected with the

contextualised realities, the researchers may also be considered participants of their own research.

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