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# Phenomenology and the study of nature places: A schoolyard place study

Eva-Maria Simms

*Was ist das Schwerste von allem? Was dir das Leichteste dünket:  
Mit den Augen zu sehn, was vor den Augen dir lieget.  
Goethe, Xenien aus dem Nachlass, WA V,1,275*

*Nie hätte das Auge die Sonne gesehen, wäre es nicht selbst  
sonnenhafter Natur. Plotin, Enneaden I,6,9*

*Phenomenology is accessible only by way of the phenomenological  
method. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 23*

The psychology of place begins with an understanding that places are more than mathematical coordinates or Cartesian *res extensa*. Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the experience of space shows that the body opens onto a world composed of significations, and that lived space is more primary and foundational than the conceptual space of geometry. The phenomenology of place aims for this lived, pre-logical, wild dimension of spatial experience. The following essay will give a brief philosophical introduction into the relationship between consciousness, nature, and place, lay out the basic structure of the Husserlian phenomenological method as a tool for reading places, compare it to Goethean phenomenology, and demonstrate the stepwise application of phenomenology to the study of nature places in an elementary school yard.

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## 1 Nature, place, and human consciousness

The mythic spaces of indigenous peoples, the distorted spaces of schizophrenic hallucinations as well as the animistic and participatory spaces of early childhood, testify to the great variance that lived spaces can assume, but, according to Merleau-Ponty (2009), they also point to an opaqueness and openness at the heart of spatial experience, which de-literalizes the solid reality that mathematical space proposes. Spaces and things have a physiognomy, i.e. they invite a meaningful interaction between perceptual consciousness and the perceived world. They are

neutral only when seen from a reflective, distant, “high-altitude thinking” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 93). Lived space is shot through with meaning – some meaning individual and personal to the particular perceiver, but some general and pre-personal, because the structures of perception are part of the human biological and cultural heritage. As a human being, I have a “connaturality” with certain aspects of being and they are meaningful to me “without having given them that meaning myself through a constitutive operation” (Merleau-Ponty 2009, p. 200). As embodied beings, we are part of a pact between the body and space, that is much older than our individual lives:

“Space, as well as perception as a whole, are marks, inscribed in the very heart of the subject, of the fact of his birth, of the perpetual contribution offered by his corporeality, and of a communication with the world more ancient than the one by way of thought. That is why space and perception engorge consciousness and are opaque to reflection.” (Merleau-Ponty 2009, p. 234)

The “communication with the world more ancient than the one by way of thought” is the dimension of existence that ties us also into the world of nature. Nature is not something outside of ourselves that we gaze at with a romantic heart or a post-modern suspicious eye, but we are of it and in it and it forms a pre-personal engagement and zone of activity within and through us that is irreducible and alien. Merleau-Ponty calls the body the “captive or natural spirit” which has a “blind adhesion to the world” and is always “siding with being” (2009, p. 234). ‘Nature’, in other words, *is* the pre-epistemological and anonymous communication that human consciousness finds itself always already engaged in.

“The natural world is the horizon of all horizons, the style of all styles, and it guarantees to my experiences, beneath all the ruptures in my personal and historical life, a given, rather than a willed, unity. The correlate, in me, of the natural world is the given, general, and pre-personal existence of my sensory functions, which is precisely what we have found to be the definition of the body.” (Merleau-Ponty 2009, p. 302)

Merleau-Ponty’s whole *œuvre* aims to elucidate this adherence between body and world, the possibility of the birth of the *cogito* out of it, and the rupture that language and culture introduce into nature. In his late work, he calls the pre-personal, anonymous, given unity “the flesh” (*le char*), and its activity “the chiasm”. It is suffused with a “latent intentionality, which is the intentionality within being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 244); the debate between the different orientations in phenomenology has been how much of this latent intentionality is accessible to re-

flexive consciousness and the phenomenological method. I side with Merleau-Ponty in thinking that the complete transcendental reduction is impossible, and that, because of our entanglement with nature, we will ultimately always have only a lacunary knowledge of ourselves and the world. That said, the phenomenological method is still the most systematic way to widen our understanding of the latent structures of the world through the gateway of human experience.

The exploration of human experience has been the goal of the phenomenological method since its inception. However, we have to keep in mind that the world of experience is not the epistemological, clear world of rational thinking, but the messy, entangled, qualitative world of significations that are complex and hidden and have a pre-personal, latent, general structure. A non-epistemological undercurrent runs through human experience, which is difficult to unearth and raise to reflection. The working of this undercurrent *is not the working of representations*. “The unity of experience is not guaranteed by a universal thinker that would spread out at my feet all the contents of experience and would thereby assure me of every possible science of experienced things and all power over them” (Merleau-Ponty 2009, p. 270). It is, however, guaranteed by the body’s attachment to the world of nature. Phenomenology (like psychoanalysis), as Merleau-Ponty suggested in the *Hesnard Preface* (1982/83, p. 71), aims for a “latency” that inheres in all acts of consciousness. Within the visible itself “the imminent, the latent, the hidden” are present (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 254), and perceptual experience itself is “full of possibilities that could have been radiations of this unique world that ‘there is’” (1968, p. 41). The term *latent* describes the dimensions and profiles of experience that are evoked by every experience and encompass more than what everyday consciousness is aware of. Phenomenology as a method aims for this undercurrent latency, and the step-wise process of the phenomenological reduction is the *via regia* that allows consciousness to disentangle and distance itself from the world of perception (as much as that is possible) in order to recognize its details and evocations and lift them out of silence into language and thought.

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## 2 The phenomenological method

The phenomenological method has as its goal *the transformation of consciousness*, so that the fullness of the world, as it manifests itself in a particular phenomenon, can become visible. In the following, I will describe the basic principles of the phenomenological reduction as developed by Husserl, and then describe the process of Goethean phenomenological observation and its practical application in a place study.

The qualitative, phenomenological methods of Goethe and Husserl have the same originating impulse: the prejudices of observing consciousness must be set aside in order to allow for exact observation of phenomena. Everyday consciousness glides over the phenomena of the perceived world and takes them for granted; phenomenological observation opens up the implicit and concealed dimensions of the experienced world. Both Goethe and Husserl developed very similar descriptive methods of directing and sharpening attention by slowing down the stream of consciousness, which allows the researcher to step out of the “natural attitude”, i.e. out of our habitual manner of taking the appearances of things for granted. In a seminal article on Goethe and phenomenology, Fritz Heinemann (1934, p. 80) honored the many parallels between Goethe’s and Husserl’s phenomenological methods, but he also pointed out some fundamental differences: Goethe’s phenomenology remains at the level of phenomena and does not aim for absolute consciousness and the full transcendental reduction, where the whole world is abolished – Husserl, for example, speaks of “absolute consciousness as a residue of world destruction” (Husserl 1985, p. 186); Goethe’s method also does not advocate the eidetic and transcendental reduction in order to see the fundamental, pure essence of a phenomenon – Goethe thought it was nonsense to look for the ‘essence of light’ and he is more interested in the *deeds and activities* of light, where ideas are active in the physical world. These two divergences align Goethe with existential phenomenologists who were critical of the aim of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology. Goethe’s phenomenology is often described as a phenomenology of nature, while Husserl speaks of his own phenomenology as a phenomenology of consciousness. Both methods, however, follow similar procedures and achieve similar results with respect to widening perception and understanding. In the following, I will briefly lay out the central steps of the Husserlian phenomenological method.

Husserl described the process through which the researcher transcends the superficial, objective, taken-for-granted, habitual world as an “*Innenbetrachtung*” (1954, p. 116), i.e. an interior contemplation. In this contemplative practice, observation is intensified and deepened, so that the structures of the world can become apparent as they manifest in a particular phenomenon. Here are the hermeneutic rules that describe the steps of the Husserlian phenomenological reduction as laid out by Don Ihde (1979):

1. “*Attend to the phenomena of experience as they appear*” (p. 34). The first step of the *époche* is to step back from our habitual ways of experiencing and conceptualizing and to let the phenomenon itself teach us.
2. “*Describe, don’t explain*” (p. 34). Through description the fullness of a phenomenon and the complex relationships of things to other things and to human

consciousness become apparent. Explanatory and causal thinking is set aside in order to intensify and focus on perception.

3. **“Horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena”** (p. 36). Set aside your belief in reality and do not assume that there is an essential hierarchy of realities. What is real appears when enough proof has been collected. This rule has the effect that more phenomena out of the realm of experience are taken into account, and that metaphysical and normative concepts are set aside.
4. **“Seek out structural or invariant features of the phenomena”** (p. 39). In the search for the invariant structures the phenomenologist observes and notes repeating forms or *gestalts*.
5. **“Variational Method”** (p. 40). In the eidetic variation the researcher imagines the observations and varies them in her/his mind in order to discover their boundaries (or where they shift into a different phenomenon).
6. **The “transcendental” move** (here I deviate from Ihde’s description). In the transcendental reduction the whole world is finally excluded from consciousness in order to achieve a pure vision of essences. Merleau-Ponty and other existential phenomenologists have turned away from this step of Husserl’s method because it presupposes a pure, bodiless consciousness and a realm of ideas that are not situated in the existing world.

The results of the phenomenological reduction and the change in consciousness it produces can be summarized in the following way: with the bracketing of the natural attitude the phenomenological attitude becomes possible and the familiarity of things is interrupted. Phenomenological vision looks for *possibilities* and the unfamiliar that surrounds the familiar things of the world. Through the interruption of the familiar, an intensified, eidetic view of things becomes possible and a new and deeper familiarity announces itself and new discoveries can be made. It appears now that the earlier habitual view of things was insufficient in grasping the *Fülle* or fullness of phenomena, the *plenum*. Husserl described his experience after achieving the phenomenological reduction as the appearance of the world as “*strömende Jeweiligkeit*”, a “streaming presence”, in which each phenomenon has its own invariant style through which it rests “in the flow of total experience” (Husserl 1954, p. 147). This infinite whole within which phenomena are stylistic variations has been called: “the world” (Held 2002) by philosophers since antiquity.

Let us pause here and recollect what the phenomenological method actually achieves: it guides human consciousness through a gradual process, the reduction, where ordinary judgment and valuation are reduced in order to let the complexity and interrelatedness of worldly phenomena appear. In this stream of “*Jeweiligkeit*” the individual phenomenon appears as a certain style of presence in the larger fab-

ric of the world, like a musical motif that is repeated and varied in the streaming of a fugue. However, while Husserl's phenomenology remained focused on the structures of human consciousness as the constituting agent for the appearance of the world, the existential turn in the phenomenological movement through Heidegger (1962) and Merleau-Ponty (2009, 1968) called for an investigation of the total field of being, into which human subjectivity is inserted. If the perceiving body ultimately has a chiasmic bond with nature, it will retain an opacity and non-self-transparency because its foundation rests not in itself, but human consciousness will also have a deep familiarity with nature because it is of it and in it. Nature may ultimately remain veiled and we cannot *see* her face clearly, as Hadot (2006) told us, but she stands behind us and instructs us how to integrate our being into the web of other beings – if we learn to listen. And that brings us to Goethean science, which presupposes an ultimate affinity between human existence (especially perception and thinking) and nature: “Wär nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, die Sonne könnt es nie erblicken” (Goethe 1827, p. 291).

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### **3 Goethe's phenomenological method and its application to a schoolyard place study**

In 2014, the Waldorf School of Pittsburgh invited my research group, Duquesne University's PlaceLab, to facilitate a study of the school grounds in order to develop a plan for enhancing the green spaces surrounding the historic school building, which sits on a city block in the Bloomfield area of Pittsburgh. While much work had been done on the building since the Waldorf School bought it in 2003, the school community decided that, after ten years, it was time to give attention and thought to developing the natural places that the children live with for extended periods every day.

Together with my graduate students I designed a two-track place-study process in order to gather information about children's and adults' experiences of the school's green spaces. A group of adult 'stakeholders', selected by the school, participated in a workshop process, the *Goethean Place Study*, which we designed as a guided phenomenological process in order to observe, assess, and imagine the potential of the schoolyard. To access the children's experiences of the grounds in age appropriate ways, all the families in the school were invited to participate in the *Child Map Project*: the eighth grade class created a detailed 4'x3' map of the school grounds, which was displayed in the foyer of the school; children from the nursery to grade 4 took their parents on a tour of the schoolyard and showed them the places they liked and/or disliked; the parents recorded the children's narratives



(or pictures) on a sheet of paper and together they placed color-coded pins onto the child map, indicating the places the children liked and disliked; the students in grades 5–8 went on a tour of the grounds with their teachers and filled out their own sheets and placed their pins on the map. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Child Map Project further, but the findings about what the children liked and disliked about the school's surrounding spaces were taken into account in the adult Goethean Place Study and were included in the final recommendations to the school administration.

The development of a consistent and effective phenomenological place and nature study process is hampered by the fact that Goethe (like Husserl) never gave a systematic presentation of his phenomenological research practices, but showed them indirectly through application in his color and plant studies and gave many indications in various essays, letters, and aphorisms. In order to create a phenomenological process that could be followed by adults without specialized training in philosophy or science, I compiled and summarized Goethe's writings (Goethe 1982) and the works of Bortoft (1996), Hoffmann (1998), and Brook (1998). In our place study design we laid out the following process for the participants, over a series of three workshops, in order to guide them towards a perception of the whole and the style of the landscape: *Apercu* or *first encounter*, *exact sensory perception*, *exact sensory imagination*, *beholding and inspiration*, and *contemplative judgment and appearance of the pure phenomenon*. In the following, I will summarize the Goethean process and show how we applied it in praxis.

### **Step 1 (Preparation) – Apercu or First Encounter**

The Goethean researcher attends to her/his impressions of the thing under investigation, and particularly the first impression is consciously noted. The first, mostly global and unarticulated perception of things can be developed and clarified during the later research process. It is often a guidepost for structuring the research field and it reflects the intuitive direction of the researcher's interests and questions. In this preparatory phase we are still in the realm of everyday experiences, before our perception is phenomenologically deepened. The psychological attitudes this step fosters are *patience*, *childlike receptivity*, and *attention to one's own perceptual and emotional responses* to the landscape.

We provided participants with notebooks and drawing/writing materials and sent them out to explore the grounds. They were instructed to notice their *first impressions* (Apercu), which are global and undifferentiated personal perceptions, often tinged with like and dislike, which provide an individual guidepost and a way into the phenomenon for different individuals.

**First Impression (15 min):** Approach the school in your normal way, walk around the property, and note your first impressions in the journal. This reveals something about the essence of place before we get confused by details.

Based on their first impressions, the participants chose to explore one aspect of the place more deeply.

### **Step 2 – Exact sensory perception**

In *exact sensory perception* the place is attentively observed and carefully described. Things have to be looked at clearly and without prejudice, and the facts have to speak for themselves. In this descriptive part of phenomenology, writing, drawing, and narrating one's observations helps sustain the process of gathering deeper and more detailed observations and to maintain attention and remain mindful of the perceived world. All senses are involved and contribute to a fuller experience of the phenomenon. The psychological result of this phase is a *sharper and more directed attentiveness* and an *interruption of automatic intellectual prejudices*. Here are the instructions given to the participants:

**Deepened Perception and Description (25 min):** Follow your first impression and explore an element of the place that stood out to you either positively or negatively. This can be anything from the quality of the place as a whole, a specific location that speaks to you, to a question or problem the place poses for you. Try to attend to all the features of the place through your senses:

- What do you see, hear, smell, touch?
- What kind of movement of your body is made possible by the place?
- What do you notice about the structure of the place?
- How does it shape your perception and attention?
- How do you feel? What mood do you encounter?

Use your journal to describe and explore your experience of the place. You can use drawings and even photographs to clarify and illustrate your perceptions.

At the end of the observation process the group came back to the auditorium and participants were paired in small groups (2–3) in order to talk about their observations and experiences. Participants were asked to mark on a 4'x3' ordinance map of the Waldorf School property (matching the size of the Child Map) where their observation had taken place. The workshop concluded with a presentation of historical maps and photographs to create a larger image of how the place fits into the natural landscape of the Pittsburgh region.

### Step 3 – Exact sensory imagination

The next step exercises the *exact sensory imagination*. The observed details, forms, impressions, and finally the relationships with the larger place context are varied in the imagination. The exact sensory imagination can bring the images of perception into relation with each other and move them around. The whole lifecycle of a plant, for example, can never be seen at the same time, but the exact sensory imagination can create a sequence and picture the complete metamorphosis of a buttercup from seed to blossom. In this way, the human mind can perceive the metamorphosis of forms in the stream of time. Goethe also used this step to explore the boundaries of a metamorphosing form, for example, by considering the abnormal development of plant forms and their implications. The psychological result of this phase is a *restructuring of consciousness into an organ of perception for the whole of the spatio-temporal existence of the phenomenon*.

The imaginative variations of the participants' detailed sensory impressions and observations were done at home through a set of meditative exercises. Here are the instructions:

***Imagination.** Over the next few weeks you are asked to meditate on and explore the features of the place you perceived and notice changes in your awareness. We call this process meditative because it asks you to use your imagination and intuition to explore the place.*

*For a few evenings, picture “your” place in your imagination:*

- *(Earth) Meditate on the physical place – let it go*
- *(Water) Meditate on the place in movement (its gestures) – let it go*
- *(Air) Meditate on the first impression or mood of the place – let it go*
- *(Fire) Meditate on the possibilities of transformation – let it go*

*Keep noting in your journal:*

- *What forms and phenomena have appeared through the observational process above?*
- *Are there guiding principles that apply to the place as a whole?*
- *How does your place section/feature fit into the whole?*
- *How does it change and stream in time?*
- *How does it connect with other places and events?*
- *Can you imagine it change through an enhancement?*

#### Step 4 – Beholding and Inspiration

In this step, the phenomenon is deepened and intensified as a qualitative scientific phenomenon through a process of inquiry and deepened interpretation of the meaning of the observations. The researcher lets the phenomena themselves speak by noting and interrogating the meaning and significance of *their* gestures or physiognomies: what kind of intentionality does this life form express? The psychological result of this step is an *opening and quieting of consciousness* so that the *otherness and intentionality of the phenomenon* can appear. At the end of the ‘meditative’ process the participants were asked to create a symbol or ‘mandala’ and a sentence that summarized and expressed their sense of what the place communicated to them. This artistic exercise allowed them to symbolize elements of place that were difficult to put into words. Here are the instructions given to the participants:

***Inspiration:** At the end of the meditative process we ask you to think the place from the perspective of the place itself and see its potential.*

- *Please use the included piece of paper, which is in the shape of a circle, to create a symbol of the spirit of the place. Choose any artistic media or materials you feel drawn to – pencil, crayons, pastels, paint, watercolors, collage. Evoke the intuitive quality and identity of the place in your mind and create an image in the circle (it can be a symbolic picture, a flowing gesture, colors, etc.) that symbolizes the spirit of the place for you. Please bring your circle and pin it to the Adult Place Map.*
- *Can you put into a sentence what the place is saying?*

The group convened for the second workshop, which gave each participant the opportunity to report their observations, imaginations, and inspirations and place their mandalas and sentences on the adult place map. The workshop brought together all participants’ individual research observations and allowed them to be woven together into a picture of the whole place.

After the second workshop, the PlaceLab team analyzed the rich data generated by the adult participants with respect to the various places they had meditated upon and the themes, ideas, and preliminary suggestions that emerged from the whole. The data was collapsed across participants in over-arching themes, which were organized by place. In order to provide an example of the outcomes of this process, here are given the themes and places developed by the participants, which include the sentences about what the place is saying.

- Grades Play Yard: ‘Open to Imagination and Definition’
  - The adult participants who focused on this area noticed that it was characterized by a sense of openness, especially upward, toward the sky. One participant remarked that the openness of the space rendered it “undefined”, perhaps making it an invitation of sorts for the children to define it themselves.
- The Courtyard With the Water Pump and Entrance to the Auditorium/Back of School: ‘Hear me out!’
  - Only one adult participant meditated on this place and the emerging theme was one of sound and being heard, given that this otherwise dark and uninviting corner tends to amplify the sound of the wind and of the children at play. A suggestion was made to give the accessibility ramp a sculptural form and to add a sculpture to this courtyard that could capture the wind and sing.
- The Secret Garden: ‘Welcome, Be Yourself and Make Yourself at Home!’
  - Overall, adult participants tended to view the Secret Garden as a space of welcoming, wholeness, and intimacy. In the words of one participant, it affords “a place where I can be me”. However, one participant did report feeling frustrated and disregarded when attempting to get to the Secret Garden and expressed the need to be better guided there.
- The “Parking Lot”, Pergola, Morning Garden and Least Favorite Play Yard: ‘Let Me Breathe!’
  - The adult participants who focused on these areas mostly perceived them to be characterized by hardness, compactness, and rigidity. The image of children “hacking” at the hard compacted ground led to a distinction between merely being *on* the earth vs. actually being *in* it. There was a shared sense that what this overall area is asking for is: “let me *breathe*”. In keeping with this, one participant reported that the children often felt *inspired* by the puddles in the parking lot, only to be *restrained* in their élan by teachers who feel the area to be unsafe. In sum, participants found that this place needed to breathe and to offer some containment or soft holding for the children, allowing them to breathe more freely in turn.
- Fences and Boundaries: ‘Soft Cues for Witnessing’
  - Although not a specific place on the grounds, fences and boundaries were meditated upon by the adult participants, and the consensus was that some of these fences are foreboding and of the ‘keep out!’ sort. Participants expressed the need to change these into soft, porous boundaries that invite looking in and witnessing. A distinction was made between administrative and organic boundaries, with participants clearly favoring the latter.

- The whole: ‘Create connections’
  - The participants agreed that the different areas of the school grounds were fragmented and disconnected, and that attention to visual connections between different areas (as in Japanese garden designs) as well as guiding paths and plantings could accomplish this and create a sense of the whole and give flow to the landscape.

### **Step 5 – Contemplative judgment and pure phenomenon:**

During this step the researcher intensifies and deepens perception of the phenomenon through an intuitive process, until the idea that manifests itself in the material phenomenon becomes apparent. Goethe called this the *Urphänomen*, the archetypal phenomenon, which appears as a creative potential that realizes itself through appearances. It is a type, idea, or essence, which appears to the human mind, and in thinking contemplation the phenomenon comes into itself: the Greek word *phainomenon* names the root meaning of phenomenon as that which shows itself out of itself. Goethe was convinced that idea and physical manifestation were intimately connected, and that ideas inhabit the world of appearances. In this sense he was neither a Platonist, nor, like his friend Schiller, a follower of Kant. The psychological result of this phase is that *consciousness is de-centered* and experiences the deeper connection and *oneness between subject and object*.

During the last workshop, my research group reviewed the place-themes from the previous workshop with the participants and gave them a presentation of the children’s impression of the schoolyard from the *Child Map Study*. Then, the participants were divided into groups and went outside for the final encounter with the places that needed the most attention with the following instructions.

*Please go to this place, walk around together for a while, and find a place to sit and talk. Have a conversation about the following list of considerations and keep notes of your conversation on this sheet:*

1. *What did the place say to the participants?*
2. *What should it say? (this is an exercise that tries to listen to what the place itself suggest for future development)*
3. *What changes are possible and appropriate in order to enhance this section of the grounds?*

*The questions below do not have to follow an exact sequence (sometimes an idea is pretty clear, sometimes a gesture comes first). Try to stay open to the flow of the conversation and don’t get lost in planning details:*

- a) *Which ideas want to live here? What is needed to enhance and balance the fire element?*
- b) *What moods and activities are appropriate here? What is needed to enhance and balance the air element?*
- c) *What kind of spatial enclosures, relationships, and gestures can achieve this? What is needed to enhance and balance the water element?*
- d) *What material changes would achieve this? What is needed to enhance and balance the earth element?*

*Please keep notes of your conversation on this sheet and report back to the group at large at 7:30 pm.*

This final process step, adapted from architect Christopher Day's community process model for developing ecologically sensitive buildings (Day 2002), recapitulates the process of the Goethean method, and it presupposes that the participants, through the Goethean process, have been attuned to the gestalt of the landscape and intuitively understand its potential because they have moved from observation of details to imagination of forms, to intuition of wholes, to inspiration by the ideas that live in places and in nature. Now the process is reversed and we move from the inspiration by the landscape's essential idea "downward": we try to articulate the essential ideas (fire) that try to come through in a place (its potential), the moods and activities that support these ideas (air), the gestures (through enclosures and spatial relationships, flow) that make them visible (water), and finally the physical structures and materials that can be built in alignment with the gestures, moods, and ideas of a particular place (earth). The enhancement of a place is achieved when this alignment of idea, mood, gesture, and material structure is actualized. Here is an illustration of the suggestions from the group that "read" the front of the building after step five:

**Group 3: Front Yard and Fence/Surroundings**

1. *Participants in group 3 paid close attention to the current fencing arrangements, which they felt closed things in, thus running counter to their wish that fences would "showcase what we do". They suggested that a vine fence with non-invasive plants might be more inviting;*
2. *The parking lot should be moved to the front play yard, given that it is quite muddy and not currently being used very much. A parking lot in this area should be well designed with trees and plantings.*
3. *An activity space should be created (e.g., outdoor classroom, kindergarten puppet stage, or outdoor sitting arrangement) near the wishing tree, where Waldorf activities can be showcased to the neighborhood. A flowerbed could be repurposed.*

4. *All passageways should be identified with portals or archways in fenced areas, giving children the solemn pleasure of entering or exiting a space.*
5. *The small courtyard next to the exit from the chapel/8th grade classroom should be re-structured with benches and plantings to become a gathering place for the eighth graders. The old wooden access ramp to the chapel should be removed, and the angular building should be softened with artwork and greenery;*
6. *The yellow house playground is too big and needs to be crafted into a space for “smaller activities,” perhaps with groves, bushes and pathways. The children love the boat, and some suggestions for enhancement would be a bridge over a dry (planted) moat, “hills,” and plantings such as bushes and grasses which give children a sense of secret spaces but are still visible for the teachers.*
7. *The sunny area between the chapel and the yellow house is large enough for the third grade farming and building activities because it captures the sunlight and leads to the chicken coop naturally. The third graders can be involved in helping build things for the younger kids (e.g., bridges, moats).*

After each group reported on their respective areas, a general discussion about the “next steps” took place. The group suggested that an evaluation of the concrete steps of moving the parking lot to the front of the building is the first step of the grounds’ plan, and if feasible, will lead to major changes in the layout of the grounds. Many other alterations can be done in smaller increments over the years.

My research team wrote a formal report documenting the process and results of the Goethean Place Study with concrete suggestions for the transformation of the schoolyard to the school administration. Since then, a lot of work has been done to transform the landscape structure of the back of the building, where the children spend most of their time (but alas, the parking lot is still dominating the flow of activities around the building).

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## 4 Conclusion

Phenomenology is not only a philosophical discipline, but also an observational and meditative practice that alters consciousness and leads to a deepened perception and communication with phenomena, in this case a natural place. We were able to teach ordinary people the phenomenological attitude and helped them uncover the intentional structures active in an urban green space. Together we envisioned holistic, pedagogically sensitive nature spaces, developed a model for working with nature in an ethical way, deepened the psychological connection between



people and place, and made practical suggestions for bringing out and enhancing nature and the *genius loci* of a city schoolyard.

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