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ATMOSPHERE IN ARCHITECTURE

By Federico De Matteis

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It. *Atmosfera in architettura*; Fr. *Atmosphère dans l'Architecture*; Germ. *Atmosphäre in der Architektur*; Span. *Atmósfera en l'arquitectura*. In recent years, the notion of atmosphere has been widely adopted and debated in the fields of architecture and urban design, both as a means to understand the affective dimension of lived space and as a tool for its projected transformation. By connecting to a previous strain of phenomenological thinking in architecture, "atmosphere" has been considered a fundamental category to describe the sensuous and intuitive character of lived space surpassing the technical apparatus and programmatic approach of contemporary design and building practices (Havik et al. 2013). The scientific community's deep interest in the topic has produced a wealth of scholarly research (e.g. Tidwell 2014), symposia, thematic journal issues (e.g. Havik et al. 2013; Bressani, Sprecher 2019; Buggert et al. 2019) and innovative pedagogic approaches for architectural education.

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

In architectural thought, the idea that buildings can elicit an affective response from their users has periodically emerged since classical times, with prominence in late 18th-century French theory. Etienne-Louis Boullée (1768) suggests that buildings can derive from nature means of producing atmospheric effects based on light and darkness, molding the sensations received by the observers. Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières (1780) considers the world of domestic interiors as inhabited by a genius, understood as a demonic presence capable of striking the resident and conferring to each room a particular character. A further moment of interest arises with the German debate on empathy in the last years of the 19th century: Heinrich Wölfflin (1886) observes how buildings can suggest a mood or *Stimmung* by means of their expressive characters, received by the observer in a form of corporeal mirroring. This early reference to bodily resonance, however, is mostly bound to the isolated architectural object rather than to the vague and diffuse spatial occupation characterizing atmospheric situationality.

THE CURRENT DEBATE

A specific notion of atmosphere that considers the affective engagement by means of the felt body has been introduced in the architectural debate by Gernot Böhme, who has provided the first systematic elaboration of the topic (2006). Böhme stresses the relevance of the subject's bodily presence as the origin of architectural experience, thereby countering the classical notion of geometrical space – *spatium* – and the post-modern focus on place theory. The experience of architectural space is considered to be fundamentally atmospheric, a grounding perceptual condition that is direct and deambulatory, kinaesthetic and affectively engaging, synesthetic/polymodal. Buildings are thus no longer described as objects of visual art, but rather as affording possibilities of emotional involvement (Griffero 2019). The designers' "aesthetic work" can configure the material support facilitating the supervenience of immaterial agents such as light, sound, air, haze and fog, etc., which will influence the subject's emotional response, thereby transversally tincturing space for all those who are perceptually present. According to Böhme, the effects of design are such that an atmosphere can be at least in part produced, albeit considering the architectural configuration as a "stage set" for the unfolding of variable and not fully determined situations.

In parallel to Böhme, from the early 2000s the architect and theorist Peter Zumthor has provided some essential yet key reflections on the role of emotions and feelings in built spaces (2003). In his view, the architect's work is deeply shaped by previous spatial experiences, feeding into the imaginative process by which buildings are designed and crafted. Despite the meticulous care in the material definition of his architectures, Zumthor considers experience as fundamentally oriented by atmospheres, evoked by means of light, sound, the radiance of material objects and a diffuse emotional content that can pervade space. He thus conceives of architectural design as a form of "emotional reconstruction", where feelings both present and past become embedded in the space the buildings institute.

The work by Böhme and Zumthor has fueled a wide array of further reflections and inquiries on the role of atmosphere in the understanding and definition of architectural space. The critic Juhani Pallasmaa (2014) grafts this notion onto his preceding work centered around the subject's perceptual experience, grounded on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. He underscores the fusion between felt body and experienced space, and how the perception of and through atmospheres elicits an emotional response feeding into the cognitive process. By considering the role of peripheral vision over the single focal point, Pallasmaa highlights the potential of a vague and blurred atmospheric perception as an antidote to the object-centered frontality of classic architectural perspective.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez (2016) inscribes the concept of atmosphere – intended as an "in-between" pertaining to architecture's communicative space – in a broad historical continuum, where the architects' quest for *attunement* to the natural world and its man-made objects represents the permanence of the classical discourse on harmony and temperance.

The theoretical implications of atmospheres in architecture have also elicited criticism: David Leatherbarrow (2015) observes how the notion of atmosphere is related to several other terms previously central in architectural theory, such as character, mood, climate, ambiance and milieu. As a specific concept, it sustains a transversal tendency in contemporary design for architecture's shedding of materiality, in an orchestration of effects that intends to create an integral impression. In his view, the inherent limit of atmospheres is their reliance on the first impression afforded by a spatial setting, with little ability of explaining architecture's capacity of giving rise to thought and articulate practical experience. A further transversal concern variously discussed by several authors is that of the subtle manipulative power implicit in atmospheres, as exemplified by the architecture of totalitarian regimes or late capitalism (Borch 2014; Hasse 2014).

The more general discussion on atmospheres has been complemented by punctual explorations of some specific aspects of spatial experience, such as architecture's gestural qualities and their ability of suggesting movement, central notions in Hermann Schmitz's spatial theory (Meisenheimer 2004, Jäkel 2013). Extensive interdisciplinary research crossing architecture and urban studies with anthropology and ethnography have yielded contributions on thematic areas such as urban lighting (Sumartojo et al. 2019), domestic interiors and lighting (Bille 2019), archaeology (Bille, Sørensen 2016). Several studies have focused on the methodological issues of adopting atmospheres as a research tool, considering epistemological problems such as their representability (De Matteis et al. 2019) or how they can sustain the transition between scholarship, practice and policymaking (Sumartojo, Pink 2019).

Besides such an extensive theoretical discussion, the notion of atmosphere has also sparked several practice-oriented approaches variously grounded on the emotional dimension for either the understanding or the conception of architectural and urban space. Thus, atmosphere can be integrated with objective data, to provide an account of the comprehensive qualities of urban space or serve as descriptor of the character of a building's interior space.

URBAN ATMOSPHERES

The theory of atmospheres has proven particularly fertile in a range of observational approaches to the city and urban space. With the notion of *affective atmosphere* geographers Ben Anderson (2009) and Matthew Gandy (2017) refer to the pre-personal and transpersonal dimensions of affective life and everyday experience, as collective emotions that are simultaneously indeterminate and determinate. In their being both experienced and created by the subjects' bodies, atmospheres play a crucial role in the politics of urban space, influencing the relations between individuals and groups as they unfold within the physical infrastructure of the city. Although this approach is less focused on the specific architectural qualities of the urban settings, it is nevertheless capable of describing how the processes of transformation of the city are shaped by the affective atmosphere and mood toning the inhabitants' individual and collective presence.

With the concept of *ambiance* – related to that of atmosphere – Jean-Paul Thibaud addresses the experienced qualities of urban spaces primarily in terms of the situated, built and social dimension of sensory experience (2015). By shifting the focus from physical space to affective and experienced space, ambiances provide an operating mode that is both analytical and design-oriented, considering the sensory environment as a field of action, as an alternative model of intelligibility including the contemporary concern with atmospheric phenomena. A large research network active on the various declinations of this field also animates the online journal “Ambiances”.

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