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# Conceptualisations of Atmosphere in Text and in Image in Architectural Journalism (1991 - 2013)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** *This article considers the conceptualisation of architectural atmosphere through text and image in the context of architectural magazines (1991–2013). First, the article summarizes four conceptualisations of atmosphere as found in the texts, namely ‘atmosphere’ defined as: 1. Quantum of Architectural Effects, 2. Mysterium, 3. Pars-Pro-Toto of a Context, 4. (Philosophical) Phenomenon. The second part summarizes how atmosphere is conceptualised via illustrations, taking the form of: 1. Immersive and Theatrical Spaces, 2. Almost Monochromatic Mist, 3. Haptic Details. The article aims at stimulating future historiographic explorations along these lines.*

**Keywords:** *atmosphere, conceptualisation, historiography, text, image*

## Introduction

### *Architectural Magazines as Producers of Meaning of Atmosphere*

The aesthetic concept of atmosphere has gained increasing attention in the architectural discourse since the 1990s. Alongside it being addressed in monographs of contemporary thinkers such as Peter Sloterdijk, Gernot Böhme or Juhani Pallasmaa and architects, most prominently Peter Zumthor, the discourse about architectural atmosphere is transmitted to current and future generations of practicing architects via (lecture) courses at design schools and via architectural periodicals. By linking contemporary practice, theoretical insights and historical references through assemblages of image and text, especially the architectural magazines create a ‘resonant internal relation’ (Dilnot 2009) within both architectural design practice and the history of architecture. In other words, architectural magazines shape the way in which the aesthetic concept of atmosphere is and will be understood, reproduced and referenced by the architectural scene in the long-term history of architecture (Banham 1966, Jencks 2000, Jannièrè 2008). On the backdrop of these developments, this article grapples with the mediation of the concept of atmosphere in both text and image in various architectural magazines. It

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1. Acknowledgement - this article is a shortened and updated follow-up on the article “Constructing Atmosphere in Architectural Journalism (1991-2013)”, recently published in *kritische berichte* 2.2016, pp. 100-111.

covers the German magazines *Werk, Bauen + Wohnen* 7/8 (1997), *Daidalos* 68 (1998) and *Arch+* 178 (2006), the English periodicals *Architectural Design* 193 (2008) and *AA Files*<sup>2</sup>, the Japanese *A+U Architecture and Urbanism - Questions of Perception* (1994), the Swiss *Faces* 67 (2010), the French *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale* 42/43 (1998) and the Dutch *Oase* 91 (2013). These periodicals are referred to in this article for their actuality, as they have recently – between 1991 and 2013 – devoted a special issue, or have give special attention throughout a series of issues, to architectural atmosphere. And also because of their influence due to their global dispersion and international orientation. The magazines function on two interrelated levels. While the texts conceptualise the atmospheric by reflecting on theory, history and architectural projects (see part I of this article), the illustrations conceptualise the atmospheric visually (see part II of this article).

## I. Four Conceptualisations of Atmosphere in Texts

*Atmosphere as Quantum of Architectural Effects - The Operational Approach* 'Constructing Atmospheres', 'Production of Presence' or 'Building Atmosphere' are examples of the kind of subtitles given to the special issues of architectural magazines focussing on the topic of architectural atmosphere. These subtitles suggest that atmosphere can be fabricated, as if it was a matter of crafting and assembling architectural effects. This operative view is especially prevalent in articles and interviews where prominent architects share their secret recipes for creating atmosphere. Peter Zumthor shares his 9+3 points of 'atmospheric architecture': nine constitutive ones such as light, sound, temperature or materials and three overarching ones: love, coherence and beauty<sup>3</sup>. Steven Holl names 11 points of 'perceptive architecture' like light-darkness interaction, proportion and detailing (Holl 1994), while Miroslav Šik applies varying design strategies for different 'architectural proximities', for example the silhouette, the façade and the interior (Widder & Confurius 1998). Following the same logic is the scientific-operational approach in which understanding atmosphere is a matter of visualizing it in a complex system of many variables. For example, Woloszyn and Siret (1998) developed a computer model in which the atmosphere of any place (*complex ambiance*) can be mathematically analysed by entering the values of each of its constitutive aspects (*simplexes*) into a multi-dimensional graph. Guest editor Mark Wigley, introduces the special issue of *Daidalos* (1998) with an article in which he states that architects have always been occupied with effects, even when they claim the opposite. In relation to consciously formulated guidelines for creating this or that

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2. Here referenced: David Chipperfield, *Thermal Bath at Vals* by Peter Zumthor, *AA Files*, 32, 1996, pp. 72-75 & Ákos Moravánsky, *My Blue Heaven: The Architecture of Atmospheres*, *AA Files*, 61, 2010, pp. 18-22

3. Peter Zumthor's lecture on Atmospheres stating the 9+3 points of atmospheric architecture was given in June 2003 in the barn of Wendlingshausen castle, was published in the monography «Atmospheres. Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects» in 2006 and is compactly re-published in *Arch+* 178 (2006), pp. 30-31.

atmosphere, it is often the 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape architect C.C.L. Hirschfeld (1742-1792) with his 'Theory of Garden Art' who is mentioned as the earliest reference.

### *Atmosphere as Mysterium - The Non-Intellectual Approach*

However, speaking about the possibility of constructing atmospheres through architectural design by rafting it out of light, sound, smell, texture and temperature, all editors do express side remarks that engage critically with the limitations of this purely instrumental approach. Wigley (1998) concludes his editorial article by relativising the architect's idea of full control on the creation of atmosphere. He states: 'at the same time, those who embrace effect cannot approach atmosphere directly – cannot point to it, cannot teach it. [...] Atmosphere may be the core of architecture but it is a core that cannot simply be addressed or controlled.' (Wigley 1998) This view on atmospheres being both effectively operational and fundamentally uncontrollable is in a way exemplary for the antonymic theoretical grounding of the atmospheric in architecture. After the initial intention of wanting to grasp the nature of atmospheres, some editors coquettishly express the desire of keeping the term ephemeral and undefined. As such, these authors and editors seem to embrace an anti-theoretical non-intellectualism of the kind earlier described by architect, theorist and teacher Bruno Reichlin – and recalled by Moravánsky (2010) – as 'growing aversion' among the younger generation 'against any theoretical construct which tries to explain in form of a rational discourse both the creative search for meaning in the design process and the critical reception of the work.'

### *Atmosphere as Pars-Pro-Toto of a Context - The Environmental Approach*

Opposite to the operational approach - where atmosphere is supposed to be built from inside out and constituted by its constitutive elements - in the environmental approach, atmosphere is considered to be determined by the outside, more or less immaterial conditions. As a *pars-pro-toto* of a context, atmosphere is constituted by the specific place, the neighbourhood, the city, the political system, the cultural traditions, the 'way of doing things', the natural environment, etc. 'Thus, addressing architecture in terms of atmosphere, means being sensitive to the living environment. This requires a 'modal approach rather than causal addressing of the physical and affective dimensions' (Chelkoff 2010). Publicly significant buildings like parliaments, main squares or monuments are symbolic of the kind of power they represent and are read in relation to the aesthetic traditions and their political associations (Amaldi 2010). Yet the environmental approach is as much about the iconic atmospheres as it is about the daily and the ordinary ones. In this context, references are made to projective and performative practices where users are actively involved in establishing, making and transforming atmosphere (Hofmann 2006). Historical precursors of atmosphere as a *pars-pro-toto* of an environment are to be found in older debates on *genius loci* and in the newer debates involving environmental ethics.

### *Atmosphere as Phenomenon - The Philosophical Approach*

Sooner or later – sometimes just a little further on in the same issue of the magazine – editors and authors are searching for some kind of philosophical

grounding of the phenomenon 'atmosphere'. The amount and diversity of thereby referenced thinkers is as enigmatic as it is overwhelming, spanning the whole history of knowledge from Socrates to Einstein. The phenomenologists Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, Hermann Schmitz, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are by far the most popular. Yet, they are often considered as historical background to the heavily referenced philosopher Gernot Böhme (1991) who describes atmosphere as synaesthesia, where multi-sensorial experiences of the subject and various characteristics of the object (described as quasi-object) are intrinsically interrelated. The conceptualization of atmosphere as interaction between object and subject is creatively re-appropriated by other editors and authors. For example, the editors of the Francophone magazines *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale* (1998) and *Faces* (2010) make a clear difference between the operational atmosphere (solely rooted in the object) to which they refer to as *ambiance* and the actual atmosphere (as interaction between the object and the subject) which they in fact call *atmosphère*. Drawing on the same lines, when speaking about this interdependence of subjective perception and the objective spatial configuration in atmosphere, Rochus Urban Hinkel uses the metaphor of *hardware* (for space) and *software* (for the perception of the beholder)<sup>4</sup>.

## II. Three Conceptualisations of Atmosphere in Images

### *Atmosphere as Immersive Theatrical Space*

The conceptualisations of atmosphere as something immersive and theatrical include images of sharply contrasted *clair-obscur*, colourful and often glowing-in-the-dark spatial compositions framed by darkness. 'The premise of this darkness constructs a spatial enclosure, but not a limiting boundary. Appealing to sensorial pleasure, light-infused surfaces and objects emanate rather than emit energy' (Preston 2008). The immersive theatrical images suggest multisensory indulgence in spatial effects and are often linked to carefully designed and technologically controlled (interior) spaces such as the theatre, the cinema or the discotheque. 'The[se] spatial designs themselves make no distinction between night and day, they float timelessly in space with their prefabricated atmosphere, ready for the long haul' (Schmedding 1998). The illustrations represent architectural spaces such as the sensual interiors of Philippe Starck or neon screens at Broadway in NY City. Both Sloterdijk (2006) and Moravánsky (2010) compare these spaces to the late 1980s and early 1990s computer-based submersion in virtual realities and point to the 360° panoramic paintings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as the spatio-painterly precursors of these immersively theatrical spaces.

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5. *The phenomenological approach provides in a sense in a meta-framework in which all other approaches can be positioned, depending on how they formulate the share of subject and object in the creation of atmosphere. The operational approach is clearly about the object and its inherent characteristics. The environmental approach is considering the object as it is created, understood and interpreted by the subject in the light of its physical and cultural context. And, the non-intellectual approach suspends its judgement in the light of the enormous dynamics and complexity between object and subject.*

### *Atmosphere as Almost Monochromatic Mist*

The conceptualisation of atmosphere as an almost monochromatic mist is often expressed through hazy images in which the line between spaces and objects is blurred. The shapes of things emanate by the gratitude of a tempered *claire-obscur*. It is of one colour or of different colours, which softly and slowly transgress one into the other and dissolve into an indefinite and infinite space. These images – suspended somewhere between the formless and the form-suggestive – evoke feelings of being not only surrounded by something indefinite and ungraspable, but of being one with it through the inhalation of its air and having the sensation of feeling its air's temperature with one's own body and 'merging it with the atmosphere' (Wigley 1998). These hazy and almost monochrome illustrations seem to be a matter of graphics and can take the form of drawings, photographs or reproductions of paintings, although there is also the 'hazy and monochrome architecture' like the Blur Building of Diller & Scofidio, SANAA's glass pavilion next to the Museum of Art in Toledo and spaces and surfaces wrapped (*à la* Christo) in monochromatic textiles by Herzog & De Meuron. Often found historic images displaying the same visual language are the monochromatic domestic and club interiors of the early 1970s and paintings of J.M.W Turner on which Sigfried Giedion commented: 'landscape and the interior spaces dematerialise and dissolute into the infinite as a result of the misty atmosphere' (Amaldi 2010).

### *Atmosphere as Haptic Detail*

The conceptualisations of atmosphere as something 'tacitly detailed' are represented by illustrations of architectural details and textures. Most of the images are sharp and clear, but fiercely zoomed-in, evoking the sensation of an intimate close encounter with a detail as if one could touch it. The special issue of *A+U* (1994) is dominated by the illustrations of such haptic details. There, Alberto Pérez-Gómez illustrates his article with zoomed-in black-and-white photographs of aircrafts' riveted steel surfaces. In the article about the seven – instead of five – senses in architecture, written by architect and former professor Juhani Pallasmaa, one sees fragments of Renaissance paintings and details of paintings by René Magritte. Steven Holl illustrates his article with details of cities and of buildings, adding on top of them their technical drawings presented on tracing paper typically used by architects during the design process. In other periodicals, we see photographs zooming in on pieces of façades, corners, textures of walls of well-detailed modern and minimalist architecture, curvy shapes of digital architecture, textiles, etc. There are also pictures of random, beautiful, utilitarian, tedious, scholarly, macabre, rare, banal, eerie, and sentimental (historic) objects. In the tacitly detailed conceptualisations of atmosphere, the detail is in the spotlight as if it could tell everything about the whole or its surroundings: 'I am looking at an element – doesn't matter how miniscule – of a whole and it seems decisive to me' (Chelkoff 2010).

### *Conclusion*

Considered as agents in cultural debate and transmitters of knowledge, architectural magazines contribute to the production of meaning of the aesthetic concept of atmosphere. Through the interweaving of contemporary projects, theoretical exposés and historical references taking the form of both texts and illustrations,

architectural magazines co-create the meanings of the atmospheric in architecture. For the moment, it seems that atmosphere is mostly conceptualised as quantum of architectural effects, as mysterium, as *pars-pro-toto* of a context, as philosophical phenomenon, as immersive theatrical space, as almost monochromatic mist and as haptic detail. Each of these seven conceptual lines – four first ones derived from the text and three last ones derived from the illustrations – are to be considered complementary perspectives, all worth of being developed and researched further.

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## Author

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