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# Atmospheres + Design

## Session 3 – Introduction

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Shanti SUMARTOJO<sup>1</sup>

Even at their most abstract and conceptual, atmospheres are tethered to configurations of spaces, materials and the sensory and affective feelings that these afford. Always available if we attune to them, atmospheres help us to understand and value our surroundings in ways that stretch to include what we sense, imagine, feel and remember. Accordingly, they are deeply entangled with design of all sorts, both in terms of built, made or manipulated artefacts, and the processes of creativity and making that generate those artefacts. This means that whilst atmospheres might be the goal of design processes - buildings, objects, lighting schemes or interior décor, for example - this relationship is reciprocal. That is, just as atmospheres are linked to the designed world, design can also help us understand atmospheres, and their constitution, impact and analytical limits. This group of papers explores what happens when we think about design atmospherically, and what insights might emerge from this pairing.

While the generation of atmospheres has been the goal of a range of design fields, they inevitably escape this intention when they are taken up in the experiential world. Even when places, buildings or events are understood atmospherically by people who encounter them, the specific terms of these atmospheres, and what they connect to in the imagination, remain distinctively individual, even when some of these feelings are shared. Atmospheres might be a spatial quality, but they do not begin and end definitively, or remain spatially contained. Instead, ‘the role of design is to create interventions that make possible the circumstances through which particular types of atmosphere might emerge, but alone it cannot predetermine or predict exactly what these atmospheres will be experientially (Sumartojo and Pink, 2018, 95). This is because atmospheres always exceed the intentions of the designer, because they are made and made sense of by the ‘perceiving subject’ (Anderson, 2009).

Moreover, precisely because atmospheres are relational and dynamic, they configure and are understood ongoingly. This echoes the inherent incompleteness of design itself, which is never a finished process. Design artefacts of all types are taken up, modified and become valuable and useful in ways that go beyond the control of the designer. Indeed, while design may have a long history as an area of specialist expertise, vernacular, ‘everyday’ and improvisational modes of design and making (Duque and Poplow, 2019; Wakkary and Maestri, 2007) are enacted constantly, and have long aimed to configure atmospheres. This is exemplified in ‘the ongoing adjustments that

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people make to improve their surroundings or routines ...[that] are equally relevant in both making designed objects, services or other things active in the world and in the making of atmospheres' (Sumartojo and Pink, 2018, 95).

Atmospheres and design have this in common: their unfinished and ongoing quality - and sometimes these come together empirically in illustrative ways. An example is Pink *et al*'s (2014) project related to energy use in the home. Here research participants showed how they improvised the use of technologies, such as lighting and heating, to make their homes 'feel right'. They designed routines to ongoingly tweak how their homes 'felt', such as switching on lights in different rooms, opening or closing curtains, and adjusting heating and cooling. These actions were routine and continual ways of configuring the sensory and affective feel of their homes - that is, their atmospheres - showing how design and atmospheres come together in people's ways of understanding and manipulating aspects of their surroundings. This work showed the entanglement of atmospheres and energy use in the home, connecting directly to technology design. Bille's (2014) work on lighting similarly shows the curation of light and lighting in Danish homes, a quotidian routine aimed at curating a 'cosy' or 'homely' atmosphere where lighting technology was directed at supporting culturally specific domestic interior spaces. These examples show how design, as both a process and an outcome, is entangled with atmospheres.

Atmospheres thus offer great value as something to think with in order to help understand our worlds and forms of intervention in it. We can deploy atmospheres conceptually to grapple with and link up affect, the senses, movement, spacetime, imagination and memory. They help us connect these concepts to a world that we can reach through empirical research, bringing them into dialogue with methodologies that, while directed at investigating atmospheres, also treat it as an expansive category of experience that can be determined by different people in different ways. In the examples of making homely atmospheres discussed above (Pink *et al*, 2014; Bille, 2014), atmospheres provide a valuable concept that can draw together everyday routine, technology, energy usage and domestic interiors, assembling these aspects in aid of designing for more sustainable homes. However, it was not a concept that the researchers necessarily provided, but rather one that emerged from the research participants' accounts. Moreover, it can help to connect the details of everyday experience to much larger conceptual frameworks, and can link up social science research methodologies with design processes and outcomes. Thinking atmospherically is therefore generative across multiple scales and perspectives.

It follows that if atmospheres can help us understand design, then design can also help us move forward empirically and analytically in our understanding of atmospheres. This is because design tethers atmospheres to the things, activities and imaginaries we dwell in. Design gives us empirical and methodological entry points to thinking with atmospheres. An example is the use of visualisation, particularly in architectural design and marketing. In a fascinating study of a large-scale redevelopment project in Qatar, Degen *et al* (2017) detail how designing atmosphere was an explicit goal of the team producing digital visualisations of the as-yet-unbuilt structures. They show how 'computer-generated images are... a new form of visualising the urban that captures and markets particular embodied sensations'; in other words, atmospheric images are crucial in both imagining and selling the project (Ibid., 3). Connecting graphic effects and the 'virtual engineering of sensory experiences', designers purposefully attempted to depict not only the designed structures, but also the atmospheres that they imagined would configure along with them. This included attending to light, colour and the placement of smiling people in 'happy scenes', all digitally

produced. This suggests that atmospheres, even only virtual ones, are still effective in drawing people in, and in this case, selling property.

Spatial and material prototypes also engage atmospheres in creative and imaginative processes. If digital visualisations are intended to be perceived by the eyes (and sometimes the ears), then prototypes can also engage touch, spatiality and proprioception, testing how things feel across a wide range of sensory affordances. Both an outcome of design and a process of designing, prototypes can help us understand how design feels, but also remind us that the context in which we encounter design is crucial in our responses to it. That is, design does not exist in a world devoid of other objects, processes or people; prototypes, whether in the studio or elsewhere, are manifest in a world in which atmosphere is already at play. Moreover, as with atmospheres themselves, the relationship between design artefacts and the worlds they are part of is not fixed, static or certain. While visualisations or prototypes are important tools in design processes, they can never predetermine or predict exactly how atmospheres will be experienced, even when this is the aim. At the same time, many places, buildings, events or routes are understood atmospherically by people who experience them, whether or not atmospheres are the purposeful goal of designers.

### *Ambiances2020*

The goal of this *Ambiances2020* panel is not to determine what causes or controls atmospheres, or extent to which atmospheres may be designed or not. Indeed, the problem with thinking about atmospheres as 'designable' is that it treats them as 'things' in their own right that pre-exist our apprehension of them. The result is that we can easily lose sight of their location in relationality, and push to the background their indeterminate, ongoingly configuring and multiple qualities. As I say above, like design, atmospheres are never finished.

Instead, this set of papers takes on the relationship between atmospheres and design, considering what happens when we pair them conceptually and empirically. It seeks to probe the relationship between atmospheres and the processes and interventions of design, architecture and other forms of creative practice. The papers begin with two accounts of how lighting design and other sensory qualities configure into the experience of people in hospital settings. Papers in located the distinctive environments of tattoo studios, football stadia and a museum continue the exploration of the particular role of atmospheres in contributing to the feel of these places and contributing to how they are valued (or how they disappoint) the people who use them.

The panel hinges on a paper about individual atmospheric apparatuses designed specifically to generate atmospheric experiences when worn by their users. The panel concludes with three papers written by designers that explicitly explore atmospheric affordances through their own practice-based research. Here, air - and its qualities of temperature, humidity and flow - is explored through gallery installation. A paper on fog considers how this inherently atmospheric quasi-substance reacts to its surroundings, and how designers might best shape its distinctive shapes and movements. Finally, the capacity of objects to carry or evoke atmospheres finishes the session.

Together, the papers show a variety of approaches to atmospheres, demonstrating its value as a conceptual framework, and the creative, interdisciplinary and highly applicable research insights it can evoke.

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