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Room for Transition by Aesthetic Empowerment?

Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of a New Hospital Birth Environment

Birgitte FOLMANN¹

Abstract. This paper focuses on how the design, aesthetics and atmosphere of a new hospital birth environment affects the experiences of new fathers. Based on a phenomenological study it shows how atmospheres are experienced in a new birthing room intended to stimulate the senses in a comforting and equanimity-evoking way, and especially how the fathers attuned themselves to the situation of being present at the birth of their new-born infant. Studying fathers' transition to parenthood through the lens of atmosphere and interrogating the meaning of atmosphere in hospital rooms offers a more nuanced approach to our understanding of the relationship between people, space, time and event in future design of new hospital rooms.

Keywords. Atmosphere, Aesthetics, Hospital Design, Re-Enactment, Sensory Experience



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Atmospheres – Aesthetics in Interaction

Denmark is currently undertaking major investments in the construction of new and improved hospitals. One of the architectural objectives of this renovation is to build hospital wards that aside from offering effective treatment, also provide a synthesis of functionality, design and sensory experiences (Frandsen et al., 2009). While clear cut evidence, preferably based on quantitative research is still predominant in the hospital context, there is a growing interest in understanding the importance of various ‘non-measurable’ phenomena such as sensory experiences and their impact on treatment and satisfaction. This interest in the sensory experiences in the hospital resonates with a broader trend in urban development and architecture generally, where focus on the physical environment now also includes an understanding of the sensory environment in interplay with the body, with an explicit strategy that focusses on inhabited space using concepts such as ‘atmosphere’ and ‘ambiance’ (Thibaud, 2014 ; Bille, 2014; Chebotareva and Rask, 2018).

Atmospheres are strange and ambiguous and bound to space. They can affect our very being by colouring our perception and influencing our experience. Furthermore, perception is active. As Jean-Paul Thibaud reminds us, perception “cannot be reduced merely to passive contemplation of the world - it involves moving in a certain way” (2011, 210). This means that experience is formed by bodies moving in the tuned space, and materiality and perception are intertwined in the process (see Hasse, 2008, 44). This study is based on interviews with Danish first-time fathers who participated in the birth of their first child at a regional hospital in Denmark. Based on these phenomenological interviews, I argue that rather than the objects in the birth room per se, what is at the core of the father’s experience is atmosphere - the in-betweenness of objects and subjects in the room (see Böhme, 2006). Rather than focusing on the agency of objects, this study is concerned with the body, in what the German philosopher Gernot Böhme has framed as “tuned spaces” (2013). Tuned spaces are spaces with a certain atmosphere where the spatial sense of atmosphere affects or disturbs the individual’s conception of the situation. In foregrounding “tuned spaces” (Böhme, 1993, 121), or what “corporeally moves the perceiving person” (Smits et al., 2011 in Bille et al 2015, 32), I argue that people actively seek to attune themselves to the situation or the spaces in which they find themselves (Bille et al., 2015). In my analysis of the significance of atmosphere for the fathers in the birthing room I will apply the ideas of Gernot Böhme and his definition of atmosphere as *aesthesis* (1993). In his proposal for a new *æsthethics*, Böhme (1993, 2013) argues for an *æsthethics* that is not focused on assessment of art but on sensory experience. Atmospheres become central to this *æsthethic* due to their unclear state; they belong neither to a human subject nor to a material object. Rather, they point to “[t]he relation between environmental qualities and human states” (Böhme, 1993, 114). For Böhme atmosphere is not simply the subjective experience of a room or situation, nor is it an objectively observable state of the physical environment. Nevertheless, Böhme argues that atmosphere belongs to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings. This sensory experience, is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in a space (1993, 122). In this sense, atmospheres are the perceived quality of a situation (or space), comprised by the constellation of people and things in a specific place and in a specific situation (Böhme, 1995, 33). Atmospheres are in Böhme’s word, “spheres of the presence of something, their reality in space”. An atmosphere approach requires that the subject be present in a space, and that the subject sense the presence of surrounding objects, other people, nature, etc.). Atmospheres is thus created out of engagement between persons, things, and their constellations (1993, 123). Thus, in order to study how atmospheres affect human practice, we need to focus on sensory experiences and emotional effects

Exploring the Significance of Atmospheres in Hospital Rooms

The study is undertaken at Regional Hospital Herning, where an innovation project was initiated to explore new designs of hospital rooms, in several departments including at the existing maternity ward. Aside from being informed by medical research and knowledge of hospital design, the design of the experimental birthing room had been developed through several workshops where health professionals, game designers, parents, designers and interior decorators among others discussed the possibilities and limitations that characterise a birth environment. The result was a birth environment where as much medical gear as possible had been removed to an adjacent room or hidden behind screens. In addition, the room had been fully furnished with Nordic décor, including chairs, coffee table and a rearrangeable sofa-bed. Thus, everything except the delivery bed had been chosen with the purpose of creating a home-like feeling, calmness and to accommodate the needs of both the mother-to-be and the birth supporters.

Using phenomenological theory to guide the interview a total of 12 interviews were conducted between March 2016 and June 2016. Nine of the interviews were with fathers participating at the birth of their child in a newly designed birthing room, and the remaining three interviews were with fathers participating at the birth of their child in a conventional birthing room. All interlocutors were part of a randomized controlled trial (first time mothers/fathers, ethnically Danish, uncomplicated pregnancy, not induced labor) as part of a larger quantitative study (Lorentzen et al., 2019). The study used embodied methodologies (Pink, 2009). Hence, 10 of the 12 interviews were conducted in the actual birthing room where the birth had taken place as part of a re-enactment method in order to facilitate the fathers' recollections and bodily sensations from the experiences. In this way, the fathers were able to point out, for example, which parts of the room were used the most and by whom. The re-enactment method was supplemented by the use of photos. All interviewees were asked to select and share pictures from the birthing room, if they had any, that represented something special to them. This allowed the fathers to emphasise what they found important, with the photo providing a point of departure for conversation. At the same time, the photo helped stimulate the fathers to recollect sensory experiences. Thus, both re-enactment and the use of photos helped facilitate the phenomenological approach. One of the advantages of using visual material and re-enactment is the heightened awareness of materiality and practical dimensions. As such, this approach complemented the interviews by affording the fathers an opportunity to explain how the physical conditions of the birth environment and their felt senses influenced their experiences of entering fatherhood.

From Sensory Experience to Practices of Attunement

During analysis of the data, it became clear that the two birth environments in the study affected the fathers in different ways. Whereas fathers who had their child in a conventional birthing room had difficulties in describing their sensory experiences, fathers who had their child in the new birthing room had deeply engaged transactions with the environment and were much more aware of the self and surroundings. The new birthing room, seemed to stimulate the fathers to explore the different possibilities of being an active part of the situation. Becoming aware of the atmosphere influences our perception and ways of perceiving and thus our possibilities for action. Perception, action and meaning are thereby closely related, as we engage directly in the meaning of events in an environment. Constituted as a relationship between environmentally available information and the capacities, sensitivities, and interests of the perceiver, the individual engages what Clarke call an "aesthetic attitude or

attunement” (Clarke, 2005, 91). The fathers in the newly designed birthing room were more explorative in performing their role; they described their sensory experiences in a more nuanced way, and their immediate reflections led them to be more active during the event of the birth. Since action can modify perceptions, the fathers more active participation in the birth ended up changing the way they perceived their experiences. Since atmosphere is a spatial carrier of attunement (Böhme, 1995) and a stimulating atmosphere is much more than enjoyable distractions, focusing on the atmosphere offers the possibility of more deeply engaged transactions for the fathers. This in turn, will make the overall birth situation more enjoyable, or at least less stressful for the parents. The fathers narrated how they could easily adjust and remain calm in the process of attunement. One could say that they were captured by the atmosphere but their attunement also affected the atmosphere in the birthing room. Other examples of practices of attunement were clearly visible in the photos that the interlocutors chose for the recall interviews. Several photos showed how the fathers felt at home, removing taking their outer shirt when the room temperature was warm, how they left their shoes under the sofa-bed and hung their clothes over the armrest of the sofa, as if they were in a home environment. People not only perceive the world through atmospheres; they also perform activities and practices and thus transform these atmospheres as well (Bille et al., 2015). They truly engage with the atmosphere in a dynamic process. The atmosphere, therefore, is not just ‘there’. It is constituted by subjects and their engagement with it.

Attunement as Co-Constitution of Atmosphere

Attention to multi-sensorial surroundings can lead to new possibilities and actions for the fathers as they attune themselves to the space and perform the practices of making a place feel right. The fathers-to-be, all of them experiencing a life-changing event, all seek to attune themselves to the situation during the birth. However, the possibility of being immersed into a different kind of atmosphere than the traditional clinical one, an atmosphere quite different from the conventional hospital experience, seems to stimulate their paying attention to the atmosphere. This engagement with the atmosphere inspires the user to explore new interactions. The new birthing room stimulated the fathers’ sensibility, while their attention to the atmospheric quality was inviting them to be more engaged in the situation.

Being able to attune to a particular atmosphere means that the “pervasive quality” of a situation “gets inside us” and orients us towards particular actions and expressions (Thibaud, 2011, 209). Modes of perception and cultural socialization influence this attunement process, and determine how a given atmosphere is co-created. Rather than being passive, mutely attuned and uncritically receptive individuals, people modify and play an active role in co-constituting atmospheres (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015). Those who were in the newly designed birthing room - an environment quite different from any other clinical setting, found the experience to be pleasurable in itself. Despite the stress of the birth process and the life-changing event of being a first-time father, the newly designed birthing room made them “feel right.” The fathers were engaged in both the surroundings which gave them both a sense of autonomy and of well-being and in the event of the birth. Moods in the birthing room that stimulate the senses in a comforting and un-stressful way, and the inter-changeability in the technical features that the fathers themselves could manage, gave them a greater feeling of mastery and self-confidence in a situation normally marked by anxiety and stress.

Conclusion

Atmosphere exists at the intersection of the built and social environments. As such, it can create affective moods that even when unarticulated can influence our well-being and tune our being in the world. The atmosphere in a particular space is dependent on both object and subject, but subjects are also active agents in the atmosphere (Edensor and Sumartojo, 2015). The atmosphere is not just 'there'. It is also a creation of the subject's engagement with space. Actively co-constituting the atmosphere generates autonomy, enabling the subject to better attune to the space precisely because their attentiveness to the atmosphere was heightened. Entering a white-walled hospital environment, with its highly visible medical equipment, seemed to be counterproductive for attunement and active engagement in the situation. Birth of one's first child is certainly a key life transition for all humans. Due to the liminal status in this process, people are especially sensitive and susceptible to messages from the environment (Reed, 2005, 87). For the fathers who experienced the different birthing spaces, the importance of atmosphere for a supportive birth environment became evident. In a transformative process, an individual requires an environment that is as supportive as possible. The design of the birthing room can thus empower the fathers to take a more active supporting role in the birth process. The capacity to stimulate positive sensory experiences can raise awareness of the atmosphere - helping the fathers to be active co-creators of the atmosphere, which again influences the way they can act during the birth process and reflect upon the event. An atmosphere cannot be designed (Sumartojo and Pink, 2018). However, by viewing atmospheres as "tuned spaces" that can influence patients and their relatives' perception, co-creation and agency in the situation, the atmosphere approach can be useful in designing new hospital rooms.

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