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## ► To cite this version:

Amir Soltani. Atmospheric Gestures of Architecture in Cinematic Aided Design Framework. Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances, Alloaesthesia: Senses, Inventions, Worlds, Réseau International Ambiances, Dec 2020, e-conference, France. pp. 232-237, 10.48537/hal-03220300 . hal-03220300

**HAL Id: hal-03220300**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03220300>**

Submitted on 11 May 2021

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# Atmospheric Gestures of Architecture in Cinematic Aided Design Framework

Amir SOLTANI<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** Atmosphere and ambient properties can be hidden dimensions of architectural space. How can students design with atmosphere in mind? Unlike artists, architects often do not considering multisensory modalities as resourceful possibilities for creativity. In a Cinematic Aided Design framework, we can tap into the potentials of these hidden dimensions in architectural or urban scale. How does the affective atmosphere translate to knowledge for design? A synthesis generated through experimental moving image techniques can be used as source materials for a cinematic architecture that can be influential forces in different stages of design process. This paper suggests atmosphere as a concept is instrumental for decoding architectural gestures and generating meaningful associations.

**Keywords.** Atmosphere, Gesture, Architecture, Cinematic

## Potential Spaces From Atmosphere to Gesture

“Architecture is experienced primarily through the atmospheres it generates” (Janson and Tigges, 2014, 26).

Atmosphere is unseen yet illusively perceptible<sup>2</sup>, a hidden dimension as well as gestural force, it is felt by body and revealed through everyday multisensory experiences of spaces that leaves impressions from body’s initial encounter. For a designer these impressions function with atmospheric potentials, but require decoding of invisible moods into gestures, which helps define the functions of ambient dimensions; in a way gesture works like an inner-eye for ‘ways of seeing’ atmosphere. The aim here is to investigate how perception of atmosphere can be part of heuristic process in design. The word ‘atmosphere’ is already in danger of being clichéd; according to Gernot Böhme, it has been applied to humans, to spaces, and to nature (2017, 13). There has been also a surge in its use in architectural literature, as in environmental ambient, the mood of a place. The main curiosity for atmosphere in the context of built form is through engaging in multisensory design strategies that embodies experiences of architectural elements, as suggested among others by Pallasmaa and Zumthor’s holistic approach to beautiful architecture through harmony, hapticity, attentiveness, and attunement to all aspect of the environment (Pallasmaa, 2000, 2008). Spatial configurations can produce meaningful atmosphere expressions and film can help decode these ambiances and translate them to complement architectural geometric spaces.

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2. “One can only determine the character of an atmosphere by exposing oneself to it” (Böhme, 2001, 41, 52).

“In our disposition, we sense where we are. Sensing our own presence is simultaneously to sense the space in which we are present. Where we are (where we find ourselves) can still be interpreted topologically, as a positioning in space. And indeed, in sensing our bodily presence, both the distances to things (or, better put, their oppressive closeness or their receding expanse) and the geometry of space come into play” (Böhme, 2017, 49).

When interacting with everyday objects we are presented with their particular ‘means’ and gestures; in a multisensory experience spatial boundaries are felt as gestures that are ambient descriptors. Therefore, while sensing objects, the surroundings and our ‘disposition’ or one’s ‘bodily presence’ contribute to the atmospheric perception that signify that space as a particular place. Janson and Tigges describe common spatial atmospheres to “form a peculiar relationship between object and subject” (2014). “Since atmospheres depend on total situations, they cannot be entirely controlled by architectural means, but can nonetheless be substantially influenced by them” (2014, 28). Likewise, Agamben considers gesture to be “pure means” (2000, 59) or “means with no ends.” The concept of atmosphere is mutually endless in form. “An atmosphere is the expressive force through which a situation that has been engendered by architecture seizes us in affective terms all at once and as a totality” (Janson and Tigges, 2014, 26).

## Architectonic Gestures

“How is atmosphere constructed? Atmosphere seems to start precisely where the construction stops. It surrounds a building, clinging to the material object. Indeed, it seems to emanate from the object” (Wigley, 1998).

F.L. Wright’s drawings often blended the sky with the architecture through series of horizontal lines echoing the gesture of building lines. “The air becomes an architectural element. Often this architectonic sky is framed off with a line as heavy as the one that defines the intersection of the building and the ground. The air becomes a suspended plane like those that define Wright’s architecture. This plane is not simply a backdrop that pushes the features of the project forward. It is an integral part of the building” (Wigley, 1998, 20). As Agamben suggest “the gesture is the exhibition of a mediativity: it is the process of making a means visible as such” (2000, 57), thus, a suitable device in making atmosphere perceptible.

Architectural design starts as a set of desires, that at the very early stages it resembles a gesture of possible characteristics of space and form, ideology and requirements. In that sense “the architect begins with the gesture of space - a piece of folded paper” (Eckler, 2012, 222). Therefore, gesture is a “simple motion or position used to express an idea” starting with a compositional strategy leading to programmatic complexity (2012, 223); frequently, design processes start with some simplified form of gesture that signifies the design intent, or configuration of desired space. “Ultimately, the gesture is a basic framework for design that evolves through iteration; through process, the gesture can be incrementally translated into architecture.” Gesture is also a “signifier of the process” of design “that allows the gesture to be a tool of analysis” (Eckler, 2012). Constructing with atmospheric tones is like working with gestural layers of space; as Mark Wigley states “atmosphere might even be the central objective of the architect. In the end, it is the climate of ephemeral effects that envelops the inhabitant, not the building” (1998, 18).

“Architecture is a gesture. Not every purposive movement of the human body is a gesture. And no more is every building designed for a purpose architecture” (Wittgenstein, 1980, 49e).

Wittgenstein stated, “architecture is a gesture,” referring to architecture as a potentially expressive space as opposed to just a building with no expression. He designed a one-off architectural project<sup>3</sup>, a house for his sister that expressed his spatial logic as metaphoric gesture connected space to the abstraction of language and meanings. Wittgenstein’s feelings and emotive values, simplicity and perfection of his spatial order, which he literally sculpted to his own personality with a serious attitude towards its design (Wijdeveld, 1999, 159-183). His expressive architectural style had similar connections with Loos’s style (Wijdeveld, 1999). Wittgenstein described architecture as the one that provokes a gesture, provoking a privileged sense of meanings; in the same way, gesture is not just a plain movement rather it becomes a meaningful expression for architecture appearance. Wittgenstein used linguistic logic to depict the difference between architecture and a building, which is architecture, brings a gesture (or signification). Through Wittgenstein lens, we can frame it this way: genuine architecture is continually morphous, as opposed to a typical building, which its shapes are generic hence, amorphous.

“The form of the house is not amorphous, not a free for all form. On the contrary, its construction has strict boundaries according to the scale of your living. Inherent life processes determine its shape and form” (F. Kiesler, from *Elastic Architecture*, Philips, S. 2017, 287).

According to Andrew Ballantyne the type of buildings that are understood as gesture are the kinds of architecture that has been “resolved in persistence, determination” (2002, 8). These architectures are noteworthy and noble, not just to do with their shapes, size or form, rather the types of buildings that would be Wittgenstein’s “philosophic architecture as gesture” (2002, 10). “Remember the impression made by good architecture, that it expresses a thought. One would like to respond to it with a gesture” (Wittgenstein, 1980, 26e).

## Sensing Atmosphere in Architecture

“We sense what kind of a space surrounds us. We sense its atmosphere. This has consequences for the perception of architecture: if it is true that architecture creates spaces, then to evaluate them, one must go inside these spaces. One has to be bodily present” (Böhme, 2017, 49).

Frederick Kiesler’s designs “exploded the limits of traditional architecture” by using the impression of “flexible space” as his storefront projects that extend their limits beyond the interior surface “while his cinema and theatre projects sought to expand the entire interior atmosphere” (Phillips, 2017). Kiesler’s iconic image of him ceaselessly working with his model of Endless House “becoming ever more ‘elastic’, ‘porous’, and ‘atmospheric’, seems only to further employ tactics of display, advertising, and

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3. In 1925, Margaret Stonborough-Wittgenstein commissioned Austrian architect Paul Engelmann and her brother Ludwig to design a large house on Kundmannsgasse in Vienna. See Wijdeveld, P. 1999.

mass media that manipulate the habits of everyday life, until we become increasingly comfortable assuming our position before the cinema screen” (Phillips, 2017). Kiesler’s avant-garde designs for theatre stage, and cinema created atmospheric spaces to go beyond art and architectural limits. Kiesler produced an array of stimulating works that are pedagogically relevant to today’s dynamic design disciplines, ranging from “time-motion studies and early experimental animated films to his vast study of the scientific, philosophic, and even pseudo-psychoanalytic debates surrounding contracting and expanding perceptions of continuous forms and enfolding spaces” (2017, 11). Kiesler’s particularly poignant architectural is his final gesture and only built project in collaboration with Armand Phillip Bartos, Shrine of the Book, in Jerusalem, a predominantly haptic and atmospheric structure, “The shrine itself is built as a white dome, surrounded by a reflecting pool. The structure it contains is placed two-thirds below ground, and is entered through a long dark passageway imitating the environment in which the scrolls were found.”

Contemporary architect Peter Zumthor is another advocate of atmospheric spaces; by endorsing Turner’s expression to John Ruskin, “atmosphere is my style,” he hints to shapeless and immaterial means of atmosphere as his own style in design (Zumthor, 2006, title page). Zumthor through a series of reflections, using images and film defines how he benefits from atmospheric nuances of a scene or situation by embracing all of its sensory intensities. For students of architectural design it may be daunting to try applying Zumthor or Pallasmaa’s haptic and multisensory visions. This study model would include experimental design inspired by multisensory experiences, observing the limits and the processes of everyday life affects, using moving image in a cinematic aided design framework that can help decipher the space of atmosphere from film.

### **Cinematic Gestures as Atmosphere**

Can atmospheric consciousness and gestures become further tangible through the medium of film? Agamben declares, “gesture rather than image is the cinematic element” (1993, 138). In film, the city is always portrayed with its atmospheric gestures, through post-processing of colour, light, sound, but most effectively through weather. As an example, *Twelve Angry Men* (1957) directed by Sidney Lumet, has memorable atmospheric elements in its scenes that expresses the disposition, mood, and in particular temperature of its place; ultimately indicating feeling of exertion, discomfort, struggle, and other climatic gestural forces. According to Böhme, “the atmosphere of a city is always also determined by regional climate and the seasonal patterns characteristic of an area” (2017, 79); for instance, as Böhme states, old European cities with coloured roof schemes, give distinct atmosphere for each city. Colour effectively controls atmosphere by being both visible and having gestural affects. Extreme colours in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) by Francis Ford Coppola, contributed to the emotive effects of exceptionally dystopian atmosphere as well as the film noir elements such as fan shadow, sweat, haze and fog, which expanded the film’s gesture of conflict. The colours in particular created a warfare atmosphere of an unexpected place. Every film in existence has an atmospheric feature to interpret, and as François Penz points out, “films constitute the most comprehensive lived-in building data in existence - a largely ignored and untapped resource that can be mined in many different ways” (2018, 4).

For increasing design imagination, “film provides us with a formidable array of interpretive human situations, and that it exposes hidden strata of everyday life that would otherwise be inaccessible to us. Film helps us to attain something like fragments or

moments of atmospheres, pertaining to everyday life situations” (2018, 7). The ‘lived space’ approach in decoding cinematic language is a ‘complex model’ but one that in the context of architecture, “opens potential new avenues yet to be investigated, and one that pertains to the world of cinematic-assisted imagination.” Therefore, film is to interpret from cinematic situation the architectural atmosphere. “Cinematic Aided Design, being a play of words on Computer Aided Design (CAD), implies that we need this injection of cinematic intelligence to enrich the design process” (2018, 7). Another advantage of cinematic model is the inclusion of ‘human dimension’, that are lacking in today’s conventional design software, as well as a required dimension in understanding atmosphere.

## Cinematic Aided Design in Research

“To build houses like Kaurismäki makes films - that’s what I would like to do” (Zumthor, P. 1998, 48).

How can students study concept of ambiance and atmospheric effects in a spatial design framework? Can atmosphere be tangible as a repeatable effect, albeit invisible? Utilizing words, ‘linguistic’ and explore ‘gestures’ of architecture. There are other sensory modalities that should also be considered. In the phenomenological sense, experiencing architecture is to find other values besides pure visual style, and pure formal consideration. Architectural theoretician Alberto Pérez Gómez says that the true meaning and translation of the experience of architecture means it is “always mediated linguistically” (Pérez-Gómez A. et al., 2006, 8); yet, architecture is not something that after it is created is translated into words, rather architecture exists as space and has formal presence that necessitate embodied experience. In a research settings, moving image discipline as linguistics can aid in decoding layers of atmospheric meaning (to reverse engineer atmosphere for use in design), that is capable of generating atmosphere, even without presence.

The two cinematic research examples mentioned here, funded by AHRC, at the University of Cambridge, Department of Architecture, explore urban and architectural elements in terms of everyday life and cinematic spaces. The studies employ cinematic means to explore archives of lived space scenarios that each tells about the atmosphere among other gestures of our daily spatial practices. *Cinematic Geographies of Battersea* (2012-2014) is an “urban interface and site-specific spatial knowledge” project on community of Battersea, by studying how this area is portrayed in films in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>4</sup>. The results of the study is combined in an interactive interface called *the Ghost Cinema*, which through location-based GPS app plays a film excerpt from the original historic film made in that area, creating an immersive multi-sensory experience between the user’s body and the place, and blending the atmosphere of Battersea-based film with reality. François Penz also directed project *CineMuseSpace* (2017-2020), building on André Malraux’s idea of the *Musée Imaginaire* (Museum without Walls)<sup>5</sup>. The research aimed to generate an understanding of different cultures and societies in the usage of architecture and space of everyday home. The “architectural records folded away in the film medium” is like a directory for “idiomatic local development of culturally rooted architectural design” as well as helped identifying ambient gestures of everyday life.

4. See at: <https://cinematicbattersea.blogspot.com/>

5. See at: <https://www.cinemusespace.arct.cam.ac.uk/>

In summary, “Gesture, be it bodily, linguistic or musical is meaningful communication” (Albertsen 2000, 91). In design process, generating expressive atmosphere involves a haptic body attuned to objects, places, actions and movements. Cinematic and architectural atmosphere share gestures of being “between possibility and reality,” and “intermediary between force and action” (2000, 95). Since gesture has no end to its means, there are endless potentials for deciphering impressions of atmospheres through gesture using film.

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