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Experiencing and Inhabiting Space: Multi-Sensory Atmospheres in Lived Spaces

The Hegemony of Vision

The characteristics of urban and architectural entities, places and spaces, are usually described and analyzed in geometric, formal and material terms. In fact, visual forms and qualities, as well as their relationships, have been the predominant interest in the modern planning and design theories and practices. The vision-centered attitude is exemplified by Le Corbusier's credo: "Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of the masses brought together in light" (LeCorbusier, 1927, p. 31). This confession concretizes the hegemonic position of vision, which has been supported by the tradition of western philosophy all the way since Aristotle's hierarchy of the senses (R.Flynn, 1993, p. 274).

Le Corbusier's many other exclamations, such as: "I am and I remain an impenitent visual – everything is in the visual" (LeCorbusier, 1991, p. 7), and "Architecture is a plastic thing. I mean by "plastic" what is seen and measured by the eye" (ibid., 191), underline the vision-centered attitude, which even had ethical connotations, as in his notion of "the eye of truth" ¹. When quoting Le Corbusier as an example of sensory reductionism, I need to emphasize the undeniable artistic and existential power of his architectural masterworks. Declarations by other leading modernist architects reveal that the obsession with vision was not Le Corbusier's alone. "He [the designer] has to adapt knowledge of the scientific facts of optics and thus obtain a theoretical ground that will guide the hand giving shape, and create an objective basis" (Walter Gropius, 1956, pp. 15-25), Walter Gropius, director of the Bauhaus School, claimed. Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, one of the reformers of artistic thinking at the Bauhaus, supported the progressive nature of vision equally enthusiastically: "The hygiene of the optical, the health of the visible is slowly filtering through" ². The preference for immaterial whiteness is another example of interpreting visual qualities in symbolic and moral terms.

Whiteness is extremely moral. Suppose there were a decree requiring all rooms in Paris to be given a coat of whitewash. I maintain that that would be a police task of real stature and a manifestation of high morality, the sign of great people. (LeCorbusier, 1925)

Whiteness and the importance of daylight also reflected hygienic ideas of Louis Pasteur from the 1870s. As the modernist interest center on pure form, only focused vision has been considered, while the role of unfocused, peripheral vision, and shapeless atmospheres, feelings and moods has rarely been recognized, not to speak of the essential interaction of all the senses. This conscious limitation gave

the Gestalt laws their dominant position in understanding visual and spatial perception, as well as the appreciation of architectural form. This focus on form also regarded spatial experiences as geometric, immaterial and negative forms. The visual and geometric understanding of space has had especially negative consequences in urban planning. As a consequence of this intellectual and perceptual bias, pleasurable modern and contemporary urban spaces, squares and streetscapes are rare anywhere in the world.

Atmospheres³ and Multi-Sensory Experience

Our real experiences of the world are inherently multi-sensory, peripheral, fragmented, and formally vague. In *The Experience of Place*, Tony Hiss (1991) uses the notion “simultaneous perception” of the perceptual mode that we use in experiencing surroundings. On the other hand, Paul Klee wrote about the significance of dispersed attention, the polyphonic structure of artistic works, and a “multi-dimensional attention”, when describing the essential sensory multiplicity in artistic perception⁴. However, this is also the way we normally observe, with all the senses at once, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) notes:

My perception is . . . not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once. (p. 48)

In real life experiences, the integrated sensations have a more significant role than vision alone, and our ability of sensing extends beyond the five Aristotelian senses.

Sonic and tactile qualities, as well as smells and even ideated tastes, are significant factors in the experience of reality. Each architectural and urban situation is a condition of sensitized reality, not an artistic fantasy. An especially significant sensory quality is the unconscious or ideated touch concealed in vision. “Through vision we touch the sun and the stars”, Merleau-Ponty suggests poetically⁵. Entire landscapes or regions can be sensuously dominated even by smells, as in the case of distinct agricultural practices or polluting industries. Smells are connected with our primal levels of memory and they can thus evoke vivid recollections of places and events, as Marcel Proust’s (1996) *In Search of Lost Time* claims repeatedly. The ears, nose and skin (experiences of temperature, moisture, wind) can create atmospheric experiences that are as domineering as any visually defined situations.

Regardless of the fact that already Greek thinking assigned vision its hegemonic role among the senses, vision acquired its dominant role rather late. “The sixteenth century did not see first: it heard and smelled, it sniffed the air and caught sounds. It was only later that it seriously and actively became engaged in geometry [...] It was then that vision was unleashed in the world of beauty as well”, Lucien Febvre argues⁶. Robert Mandrou, another historian, makes a parallel argument: “The hierarchy [of the senses] was not the same [as in the twentieth century] because the eye, which rules today, found itself in third place, behind hearing and touch, and far after them. The eye that organises, classifies and orders was not a favoured organ of a time that preferred hearing”⁷.

The Significance of Atmosphere

The experiential character of a space or place is not merely a visual perceptual quality. In fact, focused vision makes us outsiders in relation to what we are seeing in focus. Focused vision covers only 4 percent of the entire field of vision, and the experience of enveloping space has to arise from the dynamics of the

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entire visual field rather than focused and restricted perception. The sense of spatial reality and inside-ness calls for unfocused, peripheral, enfolding and fused perceptions and interactions of various sense experiences. This is our reality sense. I wish to argue, that the spatial experience of reality is existential rather than visual; we interact with space with our whole being and sense of self.

Atmosphere or ambience is a kind of a virtual, experiential and multi-sensory condition, which usually has shapeless, undefineable and ephemeral boundaries, and unfocused experiential qualities. An atmosphere can also have dynamically changing characteristics and varying durations, as in the cases of weather, natural illumination or musical experiences. Atmospheres could thus be regarded as limit cases of “placeness”, or as “quasi-places”⁸. An atmosphere gives rise to the experience of a specific location or place with distinct experiential qualities and emotive attributes. We are drawn to specific places by their enticing character, ambience and feeling, which are evidently more complex, integrated and dynamic entities than form.

The biased orientation towards focused vision and clear form has regrettably guided the modern architect’s conscious interest away from the essential experiential realities and qualities of atmosphere, mood and tuning. Architects have regarded atmospheres as something romantic, entertaining or, perhaps, even kitsch, something that has its place in set design, restaurant and shop decoration, but not in serious architecture.

Multi-Sensory Fusion

The judgement of environmental character is a complex, multi-sensory fusion of numerous factors, which are, however, immediately and synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere or feeling. The immediate sensing of atmosphere and mood takes place mostly unconsciously. John Dewey, the visionary American philosopher (1859-1952), who already eight decades ago understood the immediate, embodied, emotive, and largely subconscious essence of experience, describes the nature of such existential encounters as follows:

*The total overwhelming impression comes first, perhaps in a seizure by a sudden glory of the landscape, or by the effect upon us of entrance into a cathedral when dim light, incense, stained glass and majestic proportions fuse in one indistinguishable whole. We say with truth that a painting strikes us. There is an impact that precedes all definite recognition of what it is about.*⁹

We can be similarly struck by a setting, place or space, and the presence and the feeling that it exudes can have an overpowering impact on our mental state, emotive tuning and actions. This unconscious emergence of mood is often the most significant effect of a space or place. It is likely that non-architects sense primarily the atmosphere of a place or building, whereas a formal attention implies a distinct intellectual and theoretical position.

Atmospheres are not necessarily consequences of conscious design intention; the pleasurable ambiences of vernacular settings, for instance, are usually unintentional consequences of traditional building practices and the fusion of man-made constructions and their settings. Even the multifarious and diffuse components of weather create distinct emotive states and moods at a glance. Also the experience of weather has a diffuse and peripheral character, instead of consisting of focused images with clear boundaries or shapes. Weather is a complex experience with a strong qualitative tuning, similar to a landscape, urban

or architectural space. These are all enfolding and embracing experiences that encircle us, and in which we are insiders and participants, not mere onlookers. In man-made settings, atmosphere is the over-all fused and enfolding inside experience of the place, space or situation.

Sensing Atmospheres

An atmospheric perception involves judgements beyond the five Aristotelian senses, such as sensations of orientation, motion, duration, continuity, scale, density, intimacy, temperature, humidity, air movement, and the dynamics of illumination. Indeed, the judgement of the character of a space calls for our entire embodied and existential sense, our sense of being. It is perceived in a diffuse and peripheral manner rather than through precise, focused and conscious observation. This complex assessment also includes the dimension of time as atmospheres can be dynamically changing, and all experiences imply duration, and they fuse perception, memory and imagination. All live experiences glide along a temporal axis between memorizing, perceiving and imagining. Moreover, every space and place is always an invitation to and suggestion of distinct acts. Spaces and true architectural experiences are inherently verbs and promises; the floor is a suggestion to stand up, move around, the door is an invitation to enter and exit, the window a call to look out and expand the interior space to the world, and the stair a suggestion to ascend or descend to another level.

In addition to environmental atmospheres, there are cultural, social, work place, family, etc. interpersonal atmospheres, which all have similarly enfolding characteristics. We can even speak of specific atmospheres in the scales of cultural, regional or national entities. Even countries project their identifiable atmospheres deriving from the characteristic landscapes, typical weather, architectural traditions, conventions of dressing and behaviour, food culture, tone of language, etc.. Powerful atmospheric experiences can feel like an embracing touch of a veil or a lover, and they address directly our sense of being. Altogether, I suggest that instead of vision, our most important environmental and architectural sense is our existential sense, the sense of being.

Genius loci, the Spirit of Place, is similarly an ephemeral, unfocused and non-material experiential feeling or tuning, that is closely related to atmosphere ; we can, indeed, speak of the atmosphere or “spirit” of a place, which give the place its unique experiential identity and quality. *Genius loci* is usually attached to the permanent material, formal and dimensional aspects of the place. Yet, a place can have dynamically changing atmospheres; a great theater hall, for instance, has its own, more or less permanent ambience, and the changing imaginative atmospheres of the performances, and these two different atmospheres interact. I am here thinking of Peter Brook’s Bouffes-du-Nord theatre space in Paris, located in an classical theatre space, parts of which the director intentionally demolished in order to sensitize the ruined space for the varying emotional situations of theatre performance (Todd & Lecat, 2003, p. 25).

Spatial Experience as an Exchange

We tend to think of space and place as something outside of ourselves, as external contexts for our existence and events of life. Yet, space and the self are fused and inseparable, as the notions of space and place are constituted through experience. Similarly, the aesthetic dimension actualizes in the very experience of the phenomenon or artistic work. Martin Heidegger (1997) linked space indivisibly with the human condition:

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When we speak of man and space, it sounds as though man stood on one side, space on the other. Yet space is not something that faces man. It is neither an external object nor an inner experience. It is not that there are men, and over and above them space. (p. 334)

Spatial experience is always a kind of an exchange; as I enter a space, the space enters me, and the experience is essentially a fusion of the object and the subject. The American literary scholar, Robert Pogue Harrison, writes poetically:

In the fusion of place and soul, the soul is as much of a container of place as place is a container of soul, both are susceptible to the same forces of destruction. (Harrison, 2008, p. 130)

Atmosphere is similarly an exchange between the material and immaterial properties of the place or situation, on the one hand, and the imaginative realm of human perception and mind, on the other. Yet, an atmosphere does not consist of physical “things” or facts; it is a human experiential entity, or an imaginative “creation”. A musical piece is similarly an experiential atmospheric entity without factual physical or formal features. Yet, it has an experiential interior space and specific tuning. Edward Relph’s notion “empathic insideness”, gives rise to such a sensation of belonging. Relph (1976) uses the notions of “placelessness” and “existential outsideness” of spatial situations that do not project an inviting image, a coherent experiential meaning of a sense of interiority. Transitional spaces, such as airports, exemplify non-places, that do not have the capacity of evoking a sense of rootedness or belonging, or any kind of domesticity. Also, the atmospheres of human interactions seem to have their own dynamics, which are usually beyond conscious control. A minute emotional dissonance can easily shatter a friendly encounter.

In accordance with Dewey’s suggestion, we grasp the atmosphere of a place before we identify its details or understand it intellectually. In fact, we may be completely unable to say anything meaningful about the characteristics of a place or a situation, yet we have a firm image, emotive attitude, and recall of it. In the same way, although we do not consciously analyse or understand the interaction of meteorological factors, we grasp the essence of weather at a glance, and it conditions our mood and intentions. As we enter a new city, we grasp its overall character without having consciously identified or analysed any of its countless material, geometric, dimensional and sensory properties. John Dewey (1998) even extends processes that advance from an initial, but temporary grasp of the whole towards details, all the way to the processes of thinking:

All thought in every subject begins with just such an unanalysed whole. When the subject matter is reasonably familiar, relevant distinctions speedily offer themselves, and sheer qualitateness may not remain long enough to be readily recalled. (Dewey, 1998, p. 197)

Recent research in the neurosciences provides support to the assumption that contrary to our inherited belief, perceptions and understanding advance from entities down to details. “According to the right hemisphere, understanding is derived from the whole, since it is only in light of the whole that one can truly understand the nature of the parts”, philosopher and therapist Iain McGilchrist (2009, p. 184) asserts.

“Understanding” The Lived Image

In architectural education we are usually advised to develop our designs from elementary aspects towards larger entities, but as I have suggested, our perceptions and experiential judgements advance in the reverse manner, from the entity down to details. When experiencing a work of art, the whole gives meaning to the parts, not the other way round. It is evident that we need to grasp and conceive complete poetic images and atmospheres instead of singular formal elements, and in fact, there are hardly any “elements” in the world of artistic expression; there are only complete poetic images, intertwined with distinct emotive charges and orientations.

As I argued earlier, we have been taught to conceive, observe and evaluate architectural spaces and settings primarily as collections of “elements”, or formal and aesthetic entities. Yet, the diffuse ambience is often more decisive and powerful in determining our attitude to the setting or place. Even buildings and details that hardly possess any noteworthy aesthetic values, can create a sensorially rich and pleasant atmosphere. Vernacular settings and traditional towns are frequently examples of pleasant atmospheres that often arise from aesthetically rather uninteresting components. Such urban atmospheres are most often created by specific materiality, scale, rhythm, colour, or other themes with variations. Materials, colours, rhythms and illuminations are strongly atmospheric, due to their embodied, haptic and enveloping nature. On the contrary, form and formal cohesion seem to have a closing and externalising effect instead of an inviting embracing and emotional impact.

In order to create inviting and accommodating architectural and urban spaces, we as architects need to shift from formal thinking to experiential and empathic thinking. In education, empathic imagination should be trained instead of formal visual imagination.

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ENDNOTES

¹ LeCorbusier as quoted in Mohsen Mostafavi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), 76.

² As quoted in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 96.

³ As most writers on the subject, I am using the notions of *atmosphere* and *ambience* as synonyms. The English and German writers tend to prefer the first and the French the second notion.

⁴ Paul Klee, *The Thinking Eye* (1964), as quoted in Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Frogmore, St. Abans: Paladin, 1970), 39.

⁵ As quoted in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1994).

⁶ Lucien Febvre, as quoted in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes – The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1994), 34.

⁷ Robert Mandrou, as quoted in Martin Jay, (ibid., 34-35).

⁸ The notion of “quasi-place” refers to the title of Tonino Griffero’s book *Quasi-Things, The Paradigm of Atmospheres* (New York: Sunny Press, 2017).

⁹ John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (1934) as quoted in Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Evanston, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 75.