

CONFERENCE SERIES OF COST ACTION CA23145  
**SHAPING THE FUTURE  
LIVING PLACES**

**PROCEEDINGS**

CITYSENZ | ACT1  
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**CITYSENZ | ACT1**  
3-4 JULY 2025  
**DEFINING AMBIANCES**

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## Inhabited Atmospheres: Philippe Rahm's Climatic Ambiances through the Lens of Care

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### Abstract.

*The research aims to orient design and theoretical thinking towards the production of ambiances through a design-driven approach, critically analyzing the oeuvre of Philippe Rahm as a milieu where ethical and environmental concerns intersect with implicit spatial manipulations. The contribution delves into interior designs, specifically crafted through climatic variations to generate inhabitable atmospheres. These spaces foreground bodily perception as a tool of care to disrupt the conventional passivity of occupants, while aligning with Swiss energy standards. The paper adopts a comparative methodology, confronting the trajectories of normative and revising these processes through the care theory. Therefore, the research addresses political implications of designing an ambiance—or an atmosphere—when it seeks to adhere to normative standards of sustainability. How would the architectural microclimates designed by Rahm help redefine comfort normative standards? The outcome is a formalization of a Use-Ambiance paradigm as a design tool, which claims architects' role as ethical and environmental caretakers.*

### Keywords:

Atmospheric Design, Philippe Rahm, Climatic Architecture

## On a Climatic Architecture

Architecture is atmosphere, atmosphere is climate; a paradigm guiding the work of Philippe Rahm that could also be condensed into *climatic architecture*.

In the aftermath of the Atmospheric turn (Soentgen, 1998), Rahm's architecture stands as a manifesto of intentionality, explicitly uncovering design production as a manipulative tool for moulding environmental perception.

Rahm's work aligns architectural practice with individuals' bodily perception, as not accidental or subjective, but rather intentionally crafted. Hence, by acknowledging the role of architects as craftsmen of atmosphere—fine-tuning its climatic conditions—he unveils the often-overlooked political responsibility inherent in spatial manipulation, reframing awareness of inhabitants as active perceivers of the space.

His work is slightly shifting in the realm of thermodynamics, as primary design actions are read in terms of radiation, conduction, convection, pressure, evaporation, or digestion (Rahm, 2009), orchestrating environmental parameters—air, light, temperature, pressure, humidity.

In his experimental projects, specifically when dealing with interiors, the aim is to address physiological needs by allowing movement across a multitude of microclimates.

Thus, functions are not identified by confinement but as a set of basic conditions supporting uses. At stake is, indeed, mutual adaptation with the setting—as an open thermodynamic system—while dissipation is mediated by technical devices.

This approach is applied across scales—from interior to landscape—to alert and disrupt habitual living patterns, moving from fixed to unstable, from homogeneous to scattered, towards a nomadic appropriation of space both in private and public realms alike.

This shift might be seen as anticipatory, as it enables individuals to grasp continuous transformations, which are otherwise implicit in normative standards or marketing objectives.

Therefore, by subverting traditional tools of built design, he dissects the most intangible phenomenon—atmosphere—into its physical components, to reach an ultimate bodyarchitecture combine, where the environment, soma, and senses form a whole, whilst the architect is conscious of the neuronal processes involved in body-atmosphere exchanges (Vincent, 1990; Givoni, 1969).

## Ambiance-Use: an astronomy of vapours

The experiment of Domestic Astronomy and its later actualization in the Evaporated Rooms, explicitly articulates atmospheric variations while addressing normative requirements for energy efficiency. By relocating functions as volumetric clouds, Rahm redefines canonical composition from plan to planes of section. These spatial manipulations exploit air's physical behaviour to arrange furniture across heights, allowing a free-floating use of space. The latter apartment for a doctor in Lyon functions as a thermal Raumplan where volumes of air are distributed within a 240 cubic meter space, and inhabitants move to find their preferred tone.

The resulting space balances the sensorial richness of *exterieur intériorisé* of XIX century apartments—where rooms were confined by distinct uses to avoid heat loss—and the modern *plan libre*—where temperatures mingled indistinctly into energy-intensive wholes.

A rational organization is achieved by working on the physiological condition of use: furniture are situated according to Archimedes' principle, defining a natural scape of meteorological moments, where the shower is above for the lack of clothing, and the bed lies in the coldest zone with almost 10°C of disparity from the ceiling.

The design complies with the Swiss Standard for Construction (SIA) recommendations on differentiated heating within the domestic environment, without sealing off compartments. Within this framework, spatial manipulation is approached through the lens of care, considering the occupant's body as a responsive organism situated within a range of atmospheric gradations as an indoor natural landscape—a climatic, atmospheric ecosystem of astronomical and biological forces.

Despite the bare appearance, bodily experience is enriched by climatic phenomena, and digested without confinements as in a natural geography. And in this home for a doctor, science intersects architecture and calcifies its structure with medicine and physiology, admitting mutual relationships among bodies and space.

Thus, invisibilities are materialized within fields of delicate gradients where one is guided by the metabolic core. This methodology defines an ambiance—or many in one—and offers a sustainable

response to modernist spatial continuity, which often resulted in inefficient and inhabitable environments according to a Form-Function logic (Sullivan, 1896), proposing instead a model grounded on a relation *Ambiance-Use*.

Similarly, it transcends contemporary, redundant air-conditioned interiors, which arose alongside the development of physiological comfort models. Among these, the one framed by Willis H. Carrier, sought to improve indoor well-being by inflating volumes of air to establish a constant condition of 21°C and 50% humidity, regardless of location, program, age, or gender (Carrier, 1911).

Counterfactually, Rahm's approach negotiates the limits of modern architecture as it often deprives humans of their natural climatic, geographic, and temporal conditions (Hegel, 1835–1837), and embraces *Dasein* as an acceptance of specificities.

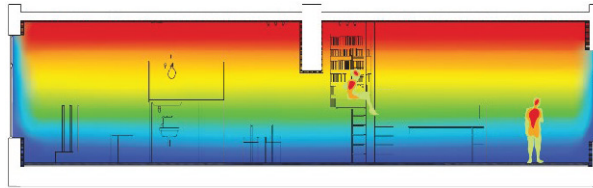


Figure 1. Philippe Rahm architects. Appartement Louis M. Lyon, France, 2012

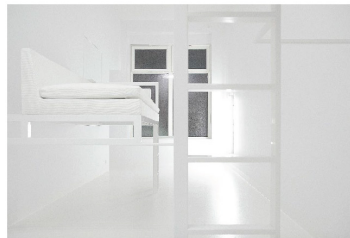


Figure 2. Philippe Rahm architects. Appartement Louis M. Lyon, France, 2012 photos: © Nicolas Pauly

## From prescriptive to adaptive: mapping thermal standards

According to technical notes and isotherm maps, the research scope is to cross-read this practice by reviewing changes in normative standards, to define a comprehensive outlook on the expected trajectories in future *ambiance* production. In *Evaporated Rooms*, Rahm diversifies three primary micro-climatic zones, whose fluctuations are registered in vertical isotherms by employing two metal planes as heat conditioners. At the time of the project, the Swiss regulatory framework was governed by the SIA 384/2 and Minergie-P standards. The first was providing a prescriptive approach to design, without any explicit physiological model of thermal perception. The latter, similarly, would favour zones with a reduced temperature, yet for energy-saving objectives. Contrarily, Rahm reinterprets these prescriptions as a design tool, where gradients become central, anticipating later shifts toward climate-responsive comfort.

Starting from the 2015 revision, the SIA standard integrated the ISO 7730 norm and introduced comfort as a regulatory category. In particular, the ISO model target is to limit dissatisfaction to 10% of inhabitants, operating on two parameters: the PMV (Predicted Mean Vote) and the PPD

(Predicted Percentage of Dissatisfied)—factors depending on the values of air temperature, radiant temperature, air velocity, humidity, clothing insulation (clo), and metabolic rate (met). To balance out energy consumption and individual wellbeing, the Swiss framework defines acceptable thresholds within which exposure is considered physiologically tolerable, with appropriate clothing or activity level. Therefore, temperature variation is endorsed mainly as a concession to energy efficiency, while local variations are recorded as discomfort sources.

Evaporated Rooms instead foresees an idea of comfort as negotiated and embodied. The ISO 17772-1:2017, which complements ISO 7730, indicates then a change towards an adaptive model by recognizing a broader set of contextual and behavioural factors—previous thermal experiences, seasonal variation, cultural expectations, and individuals' perceived control. It legitimizes a range of acceptable variables in thermal conditions, although relying on climate management to avoid local discomforts, such as draughts, radiant temperature asymmetry, or vertical air temperature differences. In other words, comfort values range is widened—accepting a discard of  $\pm 3^{\circ}\text{C}$  from setpoints, depending on seasonal and personal factors—yet remains a tolerance margin. The novelty of Rahm's work lies instead in the perceptive autonomy, where the body is to consciously adapt by moving, and modulations are reframed as active design tools.

## Architecture as Critical Care

A dozen years after the project, questions arise as to whether, at some point, thermal comfort regulation will be able to account for singular corporeal parameters. Through diversification, Rahm validates a matrix by which it is Use to follow Ambiance, rather than Function shaping the Form of space.

A critical reading through care theory is endorsed to cease separation between physiological needs and climatic conditions, and to ultimately reject a sensorial standardization which targets one ideal Corp only. At stake is what would be a future in the normative of comfort management, to reduce leaks and uniformization while embracing discomfort as an ethical act of care.

A theoretical formalization of a Use-Ambiance binomial is already somewhat foreshadowed by ISO 7730, as its calculations are consistent with the intended uses. Hence, it envisions regions deprived of functions and valid across the program, related to the activity and clothing. This approach, though, starts from the Use to later derive the required Ambiance, still echoing a Form-Function dogma. Similarly, while Theory gradually admits Atmospheric design tools, it refuses to address the political implications beneath its construction.

Contrarily, this research suggests a reversed approach, which first defines the Ambiance and then accepts its Uses, as free exploratory processes of bodily appropriation. Instead of pre-setting an atmosphere to predict behaviours, architects shall design a stage-set of atmospheric tones, acknowledging that ambiance is co-produced by its inhabitants.

In conclusion, whereas current practice relies on seamless climatization that impoverishes intellectual processes and, more crucially, depletes resources, Rahm challenges commonalities and advances a Critical Care where science is reengaged with climatic and physiological issues.

The user is given freedom of use within both comfort and discomfort, in a meteorology of habitation that brings environmental questions into the architectural limits. He fluidifies relations in adherence to individual elective affinities and advocates for making an atmospheric toolkit explicit for the designer. What would be the implications of an Ambiance-Use perspective?

As Architecture is a form of care (Fitz & Krasny, 2017), I argue that the scalability of this process, beyond providing a body-centred design, would embrace an ethics that addresses the challenge of living amid ecological ruination (Tsing, 2016).

And as for its definition, care « includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible.» (Tronto & Fisher, 1990), architecture is central for caring about the habitat and its inhabitation at all scales, in condition of interdependency, for which we urge to consider more than human entanglements (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, 70). Thus, by broadening the practice towards spatial enrichment, architecture should provide for mutable processes of trade, widening the scope and targets of design.

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