

# *Atmospheres and Environments:* Prolegomena to Inhabiting Sensitive

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## ABSTRACT

My attempt in this paper is to illustrate some of the major developments in current phenomenological aesthetic research in the field of *Atmospheres*, showing how this concept has first consolidated through phenomenological approaches and has then concretized in the context of contemporary architecture. A main issue in this regard is the theoretical-philosophical basis on which the new contexts of this project are based and are therefore marked by a sensitive and perceptive approach toward the inhabited space. Through the concepts of experience, sensitive perception, and predisposition to places I will investigate how Atmospheres today represent an aesthetic way to interpret not only the inhabited space, but also the architectural project in modern and contemporary architecture.

## KEY WORDS

Atmospheres, Experience, Phenomenology, Senses, Architecture.



## 1. Introduction

Architectural structures provide, I should imagine, the perfect *reductio ad absurdum* of the separation of space and time in works of art. If anything exists in the mode of “space-occupancy,” it is a building. But even a small hut cannot be the matter of esthetic perception save as temporal qualities enter in. A cathedral, no matter how large, makes an instantaneous impression. A total qualitative impression emanates from it as soon as it interacts with the organism through the visual apparatus. But this is only the substratum and framework within which a continuous process of interactions introduces enriching and defining elements. The hasty sightseer no more has an esthetic vision of Saint Sophia or the Cathedral of Rouen than the motorist traveling at sixty miles an hour sees the fitting landscape. One must move about, within and without, and through repeated visits let the structure gradually yield itself to him in various lights and in connection with changing moods. I may appear to have dwelt at unnecessary length upon a not very important statement. But the implication of the passage quoted affects the whole problem of art as experience. An instantaneous experience is an impossibility, biologically and psychologically. An experience is a product, one might almost say a by-product, of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world (Dewey 1934, p. 220).

In *Art as experience*, the American philosopher John Dewey introduces a fundamental concept for aesthetics, that of the experiential involvement aroused by a work of art. Architecture, which falls within the typical classification of the arts started with Aristotle, becomes a sort of canvas upon which to interpret the importance of the space experienced as a constituent part of a building or a project. In Dewey’s statement, however, a difference exists between instantaneous impression and qualitative impression. These do not correspond to a single visual perception but to a whole system that Dewey defines as a: “continuous and progressive interaction of an organic self” (Dewey 1934, p. 417). This means that the *organic self* is nothing other than the sensory apparatus that distinguishes the human being.

To a similar extent, Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa has re-

cently underlined the importance of sensory interaction in the enjoyment not only of a work of art but also of architecture (Pallasmaa 2019). According to Pallasmaa, the sphere of visibility has dominated the architectural project for a long time, denoting characteristics linked to a merely qualitative contextualization. The turning point is represented by the introduction of the sphere of experience as a further cognitive channel of the work and therefore of the architectural project. Odours, sounds, textures, light and wear-and-tear identify every place with respect to which the architect's task changes considerably. These interactional scheme falls today within the design dimension. This approach opens up to a new perspective concerning what we understand as the *experience of space*: it is an *aesthetic phenomenology* that allows us to theorize what happens. In this regard I will introduce in the world of Architecture the concept of *Atmosphere* as a “qualitative-sentimental prius, spatially effused, of our sensory encounter with the world” (Griffero 2017, p. 13). Atmosphere can play a major role in the design of a house as well as a setting, scenography or public space.

## 2. *What is Atmosphere? What are its Aesthetic Extremes?*

Before analyzing the notion of *Atmosphere* in purely phenomenological-aesthetic terms and contextualizing it in the world of Architecture and inhabiting, it is necessary to introduce some philosophical and historical references to the term (Griffero 2018). In this regard, it is worth considering the pre-existing concept of *Stimmung* (mood), a term coined by Georg Simmel in his essay on the *Philosophy of Landscape* (Simmel, 1913), whose meaning comes close to that of the modern term atmosphere.

According to Simmel, the sensory perception of nature cannot be solely determined by the visual field: it is part of the common mistakes that hinder understanding of the figurative arts, indeed of visibility in general, the fact that one seeks the spiritual tonality of the landscape only in those general concepts of literary and lyrical feelings. Therefore, a complete reception of the landscape from the totalizing factor of the *Stimmung* appears necessary:

We say that a landscape arises when a range of natural phenomena spread over the surface of the earth is comprehended by a particular kind of unity, one that is distinct from the way this same visual field is encompassed by the causally thinking scholar, the religious sentiments of a worshipper of nature, the theologically oriented tiller of the soil, or a strategist of war. The most important carrier of this unity may

well be the 'mood', as we call it, of a landscape. When we refer to the mood of a person, we mean that coherent ensemble that either permanently or temporarily colours the entirety of his or her psychic constituents. It is not itself something discrete, and often also not an attribute of any one individual trait. All the same, it is that commonality where all these individual traits interconnect. In the same way, the mood of a landscape permeates all its separate components, frequently without it being attributable to any one of them. In a way that is difficult to specify, each component partakes in it, but a mood prevails which is neither external to these constituents, nor is it composed of them. (Simmel 2007, p. 26)

What excites my interest is the sense according to which the *Stimmung*, understood as the faculty of perception, *imbues* the totality of spiritual content, i.e., individual elements of a perception of the sensible. The *Stimmung* exists with respect to the context in which it manifests itself; it does not detach itself from the landscape, nor does the landscape stand out without its intercession. This spiritual tonality, as Simmel defines it, is already inherent in being and is indissolubly linked to its own formal unity. This means that openness to a sensitive experientiality is at the basis of a predisposition common to all, in *feeling* a landscape as well as a place.

In this regard, Simmel examines the question of the *metropolis* as an almost dystopian container of Modern society. In *The Metropolis and the Mental Life*, he illustrates how the environment is intertwined with subjective psychic forces, in order to describe, even in the world of the early twentieth century, how the subject can interact with his own city: "The psychological basis of the metropolitan type of individuality consists in the intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli" (Simmel 1950, p. 409).

The alternation of what happens in the metropolis, with its rhythms and dynamics, is reflected in the spirit that remains influenced in its decisions or activities by this halo – a spiritual tenor that we could also define as *atmosphere*. To the extent that the metropolis creates precisely these last psychological conditions – at every crossing of the road, in the rhythm and variety of economic, professional and social life – it creates a profound contrast in the sensory foundations of psychic life or in the amount of consciousness that it requires of us because of our organization as beings that stand out; a contrast with leads it to oppose the provincial city or country life, with the slower, more habitual and unaltered rhythm of the sensory-spiritual image that these involve (Simmel 1950, p. 409).

On Simmel's account, the sensory tenor of psychic life depends on the reality of the city, as well as the spiritual tenor of the landscape. In both cases, there is a relationship between the *immersive*

and receptive character of reality. It is in this sensitive experience that we can find the first hints of the concept of atmosphere, a reversible concept that depends on different contexts and is created from time to time with regard to the various events by which it is aroused. Depending on the context, the atmosphere functions sometimes as a neutral and descriptive expression of a situation (concerning people, spaces and nature) and sometimes is evaluated through qualifying adjectives (there are tense, relaxed, gloomy atmospheres, etc.). In any event, in the contemporary debate the atmosphere is not intended simply as a decorative aspect of life, but rather as a feeling or affection that is not private or internal but rather objectively and spatially diffuse, so that it “imbues” the situation in which the perceiver finds himself and involves her affectively (Griffero 2018).

The atmosphere is therefore to be understood as a *mood* that covers each one of us according to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The concept of atmosphere was initially introduced into a theoretical system by the first psychiatric conception put forward by Hubertus Tellenbach and in the new phenomenology by Hermann Schmitz. Later, it gained an important role in aesthetics thanks to the philosopher Gernot Böhme. The perceptual condition is at the basis of the constitution of atmospheres, which represent the sensitive properties that we all possess: “Across the whole world of human life they run under the sign of the atmosphere, as well as in the animal kingdom under the sign of the olfactory, many invisible yet selective and effective frontiers” (Tellenbach 1968, p. 56).

The perceptive point of view, apparently in an opposite sense, becomes the way in which our affective conditions are mixed with the bodily conditions aroused from the outside. In this way, it occurs to us that we develop an experiential repertoire of atmospheres that are not only passively perceived but begin to be part of our everyday life (Griffero 2014b, p. 31). The perception of atmospheres – of emotionally intoned spaces – constitutes however only our initial perception. Indeed, we generally go beyond it to orient ourselves in the crowd of objects of our time or in the context of the postponement of our road signs (Böhme 2001). By introducing the concept of atmosphere into the context of everyday reality, *Böhme* underlines its strong connection with space. There are two ways of appreciably experiencing space and the atmosphere that is created in it, what he calls the *ingressive* and the *contrastive experience*:

Both contrastive and ingressive experiences are appropriate to study atmospheres: the specificity of atmospheres is best experienced when their characters are offset, that is, before they have already, as part of all that surrounds one evenly, sunken into inconspicuousness. Thus, for example, they are experienced in contrast when one finds

oneself in atmospheres diametrically opposed to one's own mood, or upon entering when changing from one atmosphere to another. Atmospheres are then experienced as impressions, namely, as a tendency to induce a certain mood. (Böhme 2017, p. 125)

In the case of ingressive experience, space plays a fundamental role, acting as a container of a reality that happens starting from the perception of the subject at stake. The atmosphere is created through access to a given place. For example, the solemn atmosphere of a church inside of which a religious event is taking place can only be recreated starting from the conjunction of the space with the event and the fruition of reality.

We have described the discovery of atmospheres, and with that the objective expression we make of them, first of all in terms of ingression, that is, on the basis of spatial access. But there is also another experience of atmospheres, the one that is based on discrepancy ... Oppressed by mourning, I can for example experience a serene spring day as clearly discrepant with the specific way I feel. It is an experience that has something paradoxical when you want to understand the perception of atmospheres as a sort of phenomenon of resonance. (Böhme 2010, p. 85)

A very interesting aspect of the contrastive experience is the concept of *resonance* through which we have “our” experience of the atmosphere. This is a sort of *glossy rêverie* that is not directly connected to the concept of remembrance but to an activation of the experience itself every time we find ourselves at a certain juncture. The distinction between these ways of experiencing illustrates a system of atmospheres in which *space* and *memory* give rise to an objective experience of reality.

### 3. *Living the Atmospheres: The Experience of Space in the Atmospheric Experience*

Since the feelings of atmospheres are spatialized, it may be worth introducing in this aesthetic contextualization the phenomenological question of the lived space, understood as experienced and consequently inhabited.

Since the early twentieth century, many philosophers have considered the question of the predimensional space, that is, a space of experience linked to a precise *sensation* of the same. With this expression, I mean that the concept of predimensional space refers to a precise sensation denoted by an event within the spatial context: a sort of “spaces without area”:

There are, however, also spaces without area. One example is the space of sound.

I am thinking not so much of the signals for direction and distance relating to the source of the sound, but rather of the space spanned by the rhythmic and tonal movement suggestions of the sound, such as piercing noise, diminishing echo, rising and falling, pressing and circling, everything that jumps from the sound to those who are dancing and marching, likewise of the synaesthetic mass properties of the sound as a far-reaching, sonorous resonance of a gong or a shrill, sharp whistle, etc. The sound has volume, but not a three-dimensional volume, because there are no areas. Very close to it is the area less space of the readily remembered silence, which as a ceremonial silence is broad and dense, as an oppressive silence is close and even denser, as the silence of an untouched morning is broad and delicate. (Schmitz 2016, p. 3)

To mention some of the most significant texts of the first half of the twentieth century that agree on this phenomenological aspect understood as a sensitive living experience and a first approach to lived space, we can cite Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken* (1951), Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), Gaston Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'espace* (1957), Otto Friederich Bollnow's *Mensch und Raum* (1963) and Christian Norberg-Schultz's *Existence, Space and Architecture* (1971) and *Genius Loci* (1980).

Since my aim here is to focus on some precise stages in the involvement of a *phenomenology of the sensitive* in the world of living and on the constitution of the extremes of an *atmospheric* conception of inhabiting, I will focus on Heidegger's *ontological* question of *Dasein* as a starting point towards a different approach to reality, beginning with a directly proportional awareness of *spatiality*. I will then move on to the question of *intimate space* in Gaston Bachelard, arguing for it through the philosopher's analyses of *intimate immensity* and *dreamlike space* in such a way as to reflect a further version of *atmospheric space*.

“Spaces receive their essence not ‘from’ space, but from places” (Heidegger, 2001b). Starting with Martin Heidegger, the concept of spatiality undergoes a change of direction. In his prescient environmental vision, we find the extremes for a certain emotional tonality that plays an important role in the question of the living and *Dasein*: the fundamental ontology of being there. *Beingness/Dasein* belongs to us apriori and foreshadows the *experience* of reality that surrounds us. In the twelfth paragraph of *Being and Time*, Heidegger addresses the fundamental relations between *Dasein* and *being in the world*. These are both ways by which *Dasein*'s Being takes on a definite character, and they must be seen and understood a priori as grounded upon that state of Being which we have called “Being-in-the-world. An interpretation of this constitutive state is needed

if we are to set up our analytic of Dasein correctly". (Heidegger 2001a, p. 78). The "I am in the world" presupposes my existence and my experience of reality.

Nor does the term "Being-in" mean a spatial 'in-one-another-ness' of things present-at-hand, any more than the word 'in' primordially signifies a spatial relationship of this kind. 'In' is derived from "innan", "to reside"? "habitare", "to dwell" [sich auf halten] 'An' signifies "I am accustomed", "I am familiar with", "I look after something". It has the signification of "colo" in the senses of "habito" and "diligio". The entity to which Being-in in this signification belongs is one which we have characterized as that entity which in each case I myself am [bin]. The expression 'bin' is connected with 'bei', and so 'ich bin' ['I am'] means in its turn "I reside" or "dwell alongside" the world, as that which is familiar to me in such and such a way "Being" [Sein], as the infinitive of 'ich bin' (that is to say, when it is understood as an existential), signifies "to reside alongside ...", "to be familiar with ..." "Being-in" is thus the formal existential expression for the Being of Dasein, which has Being-in-the-world as its essential state. (Heidegger 2001, p. 80)

In the concept of *Dasein*, the body of the *individual-entity* is projected onto space, and so its presence in space constitutes the *being-in-the-world*. The *Being-in-the-world* is a structure of Dasein, it is the *spatiality* of Dasein. Space becomes in this way a constitutive part of being and vice versa. Heidegger demonstrates this through three types of spatiality that are respectively illustrated in the paragraphs twenty-two, twenty-three and twenty-four of *Being and Time*: 1) the spatiality of the usable *intra-world*; 2) the spatiality of *being-in-the-world*; 3) the spatiality of Being and space. But what comes closest to the effect of the *feeling* of being-in-the-world is that which concerns the spatiality of Being:

That world of everyday Dasein, which is closest to it, is the environment. From this existential character of average Being-in-the-world, our investigation will take its course [Gang] towards the idea of worldhood in general. We shall seek the worldhood of the environment (environmentally) by going through an ontological Interpretation of those entities within-the-environment which we encounter as closest to us. The expression "environment" [Umwelt] contains in the 'environ' ["um"] a suggestion of spatiality. Yet the 'around' ["Umherhin"] which is constitutive for the environment does not have a primarily 'spatial' meaning. Instead, the spatial character which incontestably belongs to any environment, can be clarified only in terms of the structure of worldhood. From this point of view, Dasein's spatiality, of which we have given an indication in Section 1 2, becomes phenomenally visible. (Heidegger 2001a, p. 94)

Space contributes to make up the world as it constitutes Being. *Being-in-the-world* corresponds to a spatiality that takes into account the space of the world that is constituted thanks to Being. Space does not belong to the body/individual, nor is the world

in space. Space in turn is constituted thanks to *being-in-the-world* which in turn is constituted from *Dasein*.

Twenty years after the publication of *Being and Time*, in his famous 1951 paper delivered in Darmstadt *Dwelling, Building, Thinking*, Heidegger describes the question of building from the concept of *living as being-in-the-world*. According to Heidegger, every construction is aimed at dwelling and vice versa, so that we arrive at dwelling only through construction. The famous statement “Only if we have the ability to dwell, can we build” includes the possibility of knowing how to build from being conscious of experiencing space. Every built space, from houses to power plants, is aimed at man’s habitation. Building already has dwelling in itself.

In fact, according to Heidegger, the τέχνη of architecture indicates the fundamental importance of the *production* of space and the *production* of living. On the other hand, buildings that are not dwellings also remain determined with reference to dwelling, insofar as they are at the service of man’s dwelling. “Thus dwelling would in any case be the end that presides overall building. Dwelling and building are related as end and means” (Heidegger 2001b, p. 144).

In this regard, Heidegger’s position can be strengthened by considering the concept of “place” from the phenomenological point of view. The concept of place is necessary to describe the concept of construction, understood in an existential parallelism with living. From a phenomenological perspective, place is conceived through the relationship of the locus and what happens there: i.e. experiences involving the human being (Seamon, 2020). In this case, the mood of experience is fundamental to understand how the self is involved in the matter of dwelling:

For Heidegger, place and the self are intimately interlocked in the world of concrete work. Not only are tools literal “instruments” that have a functional purpose of their own [...] In such a circumstance, place and self are thoroughly enmeshed, without, however, being fused with each other in a single monolithic whole. (Casey 2001, p. 684)

According to Casey’s interpretation, starting from Heidegger place and self come to be interconnected while maintaining their own identity. Likewise, the concept of building reinforces Heidegger’s thesis:

The focus of ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’ is on the relation between building

and that mode of being-in-the-world that Heidegger refers to by the very ordinary German word *Wohnen* which is usually translated as 'dwelling', but which actually refers, not to any form of special poetic relation (which the term all too readily, if implicitly, evokes), but to that everyday mode of living in the world in which we also find a 'home' in the world, in which we attend to the world and to our place in it. (Malpas 2017, p. 119)

The purpose of architecture, i.e., that of the building, cannot be deatched from that of the place and, above all, of the perception of it. "The question as to what architecture is 'for' (which is, of course, not separable from the question as to what architecture 'is') is thus a question that cannot be answered apart from consideration of the placed character of the human and that question, in turn, depends on a clearer understanding of place itself. In that case, to understand architecture one must also understand place" (Malpas, 2017, p. 120). Once the question of place has been unravelled, we can return to the concept of atmosphere, understood as the experience of a lived emplacement (Seamon, 2020).

"Space is nowhere. Space is in itself like honey in the hive".<sup>1</sup>

In 1957, at the height of his career, Gaston Bachelard published *The Poetics of Space*. Not by chance is this text used in many syllabi in architecture and industrial design. This is partly because Bachelard's writing is equally bewitching and extremely clear, but also because we are confronted with a philosopher who was not afraid to break the mould both in the field of epistemology or the history of the philosophy of science and in the aesthetic field of the world of images and reverie. Referring to his spirit, Bachelard is considered a revolutionary figure, a *sui generis* master, able to go deep into the principles of objective as well as subjective reality.

In the *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard affirms the primary importance of imagination as the greatest power of human nature, capable of acting in the depths of our knowledge. This phenomenological analysis of feeling occurs through the highest common denominator that is space. This is a quantified space with respect to the conditions of one's own sensitivity to experience the places of the house as well as those of the world around us. Through the main elements of topoanalysis and topophilia, Bachelard pushes us to appreciate the space that welcomes us, the space that protects us. These are images of a happy space and belong to an intimate space:

I want to examine are the quite simple images of *felicitous space*. In this orientation, these investigations would deserve to be called topophilia. They seek to

<sup>1</sup> Bousquet (1952, p. 92).

determine the human value of the sorts of space that may grasped, they may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love... First of all, as is proper in a study of images of intimacy, we shall pose the problem of the poetics of the house. (Bachelard 2014, pp. 19-20)

In the first chapters, the house represents all images of living, that is, of a space lived I, and one whose memory is preserved especially in poems (Bachelard 2014, p. 16). Arranged on three floors, the house summarizes the archetypal values of being that<sup>2</sup> develop in vertical order, from the attic representing the values of rationality to the cellar representing those of the unconscious. The journey into the world of living continues through the primordial images of shells and nests, the detailed descriptions of the corners, drawers and chests of drawers, up to the fundamental junction represented by the dialectics expressed in the concept of *intimate immensity*. I am particularly interested in this passage, because I see it as a forerunner with respect to the correspondence with an aesthetic theory of *atmospheres*. Immensity could be defined as a philosophical category of *rêverie*.

In this very dense passage, the fundamental elements for a perception of ingression can be found, in which the contemplation of *grandeur* not only takes on an immersive faculty but even places the *rêveur* in the sign of infinity. The state of mind, described by Bachelard, determines the constitution of an extradimensional space that can be contextualized within a real atmosphere. In this framework, *rêverie* is a dominant faculty because it is incorporated in an instantaneous temporality that refers us back to a predimensional state: “In point of fact, daydreaming, from the very first second, in an entirely constituted state. We do not see it start, and yet, it always starts the same way, that is, it flees the object nearby and right away it is far off, elsewhere, in the space of *elsewhere*” (Bachelard, 2014, pp. 200-1). The elsewhere is to be considered as an “other” space, a dimension that precedes experience. Bachelard illustrates this phenomenon as an *original contemplation*, which reminds us of the concept of *Ur-Phänomenon* in Goethe:

The circumstances which come under our notice in ordinary observation are, for the most part, insulated cases, which, with some attention, admit of being classed under general leading facts. These again range themselves under theoretical rubrics which are more comprehensive, and through which we become better acquainted with certain indispensable conditions of appearances in detail. From henceforth everything is gradually arranged under higher rules and laws which however are not to be made intelligible by words and hypotheses to the understanding merely but at

<sup>2</sup> See Jung, *Mind and the Earth* (1927-1931).

the same time by real phenomena to the senses We call these primordial phenomena because nothing appreciable by the senses lies beyond them on the contrary they are perfectly fit to be considered as a fixed point to which we first ascended step by step and from which we may in like manner descend to the commonest case of every day experience. (*Farbenlehre – The Theory of Colours*, 1808, par. 175)

In all of us there is indeed a predisposition to appreciably grasp reality, which Bachelard regards as a presupposition for the contemplation of grandeur. Without directly relating the Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience, in his attempt to argue for a phenomenology of immensity Bachelard succeeds in undirectly defining visibility as a by-product of existentialism:

In analyzing images of immensity, we should realize within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination. It then becomes clear that works of art are *the by-products* of this existentialism of the imagining being. In this direction of daydreams of immensity, the *real product* is consciousness of enlargement. We feel that we have been promoted to the dignity of the admiring being. (Bachelard 2014, p. 202)

It is in immensity that the subject becomes aware of himself, that is, through a sensitive experience as well as an original contemplation. In this way, Bachelard also distances himself from German existentialism, which seeks *to throw us into the world*: “This being the case, in this meditation, we are not “cast into the world”, since we open the world, as it were, by transcending the world see as it is, or as it was, before we started dreaming” (*ibid.*). Contemplation is the access key to *internalization* through which we make the experience of greatness our own. And it is here that we find one of the most interesting passages for the contextualization of a precedent of atmospheres:

Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming. (*ibid.*)

Using the poetic images of internalized immensity, Bachelard brings us closer to a predimensional world, in which greatness happens to be internalized like a landscape. Among the poets who illustrate the principle of an intimate interiorisation of immensity, Bachelard quotes in primis, Baudelaire, who offers us an examination of the word *vast*; then Rilke, who deals with the enlargement of poetic spatiality through which we perceive in the same way, i.e., a profound expansion of intimacy and correspondingly the rise of greatness. “*Through every human being, unique space, intimate space, open us to the world...*”. Finally, to close such an

intense chapter, Bachelard chooses an image very dear to us in Italy, one taken from Gabriele D'Annunzio's novel *Il fuoco*. It is the hare's gaze at the first light of dawn, intent on *feeling* the nature awakening around it. The surrounding landscape becomes an entire Cosmology that gets graspable through perception alone. The step taken by D'Annunzio allows us to imagine a cathartic moment in which we become one with the immensity – a real *aura*, as well as a unique and unrepeatable *atmosphere*.

An unexpected literary image can so move the spirit that it will follow the induction of tranquillity. In fact, the literary image can make the spirit sufficiently sensitive to receive unbelievably fine impressions. Thus, in a remarkable passage, D'Annunzio makes us see the look in the eyes of a trembling hare which, in one torment-free instant, projects peace over the entire autumnal world. He writes: "Did you ever see a hare in the morning, leave the freshly ploughed furrows, run a few seconds over the silvery frost, then stop in the silence, sit down on its hind legs, prick up its ears and look at the horizon? Its gaze seems to confer peace upon the entire universe. And it would be hard to think of a surer sign of deep peace than this motionless hare which, having declared a truce with its eternal disquiet, sits observing the steaming countryside. At this moment, it is a sacred animal, one that should be worshipped". (Bachelard 2014, p. 224)

The gestation of images of intimate space, immensity, and topophilia would be enough to compare the growing number of *ambiances*. We can add, however, a last image from *The Poetics of space*, that of *oneiric space*. Oneiric space is one that accompanies us in the night, expanding and contracting from the tiny to the infinite, possessing its own dimensions. Bachelard describes it as a spiral intent on wrapping up on itself. We can start from this essential point to understand oneiric space – the space composed of essential envelopes, subject to the geometry and dynamics of winding (Bachelard 1988, p. 153). In the description of the enveloping of the house, of intimate spaces that hold all images of protection we can recognize ourselves. In the oneiric space there is a *willingness to retreat, to become a chrysalis* that creates not only an intrusion into nocturnal life but also a predimension.

Far be it from me to compare unconscious space to what really happens through the perception of places, but in these Bachelardian images we find important cues that precedes the theorization in *The Poetics of space* of images of an intimate space that becomes atmosphere. Space is gaping wide, it opens in every direction, welcoming the infinite possibilities of all the forms that are still to be created. The oneiric space of dawn is invested with a sudden intimate light. In the being that awakens, concentrated imagination is replaced by a will of irradiation: "If a star shines, it is with the sleeper's radiance: a tiny flash on the sleeping retina evokes

an ephemeral constellation, conjuring up confused memories of a starry night “(Bachelard 1988, p. 154).

The intimacy that expands and radiates brings us back to the initial descriptions of an immersive phase of the extra dimension thanks to which we can sensibly experience and above all remember the space that surrounds us.

#### 4. *Designing Atmospheres: Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor*

The Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa, Professor at the Helsinki University of Technology (1991–1997), a member of the jury of the Pritzker Prize for Architecture (2009–2014) and a winner of numerous awards including the *Schelling Architecture Prize* in 2014, has written numerous texts and essays on art and architecture. More interestingly for our purposes here, since the mid-1990s Pallasmaa has developed a strong interest in the phenomenological theory of architecture, which led him to enter the world of *atmospheres*.

Among Pallasmaa’s best-known works are *The eyes of skin: Architecture and sense* (1996) and *Questions of perception: Phenomenology of architecture* (1994), written in collaboration with Alberto Pérez-Gomez and Steven Holl. His interest in the relationship between phenomenology and architecture has led Pallasmaa to approach the world of atmospheres, a venture which is mainly illustrated in *The thinking hand: Existential and embodied wisdom in architecture* (2009). The latest developments of his theory of atmospheres in architectural design can be referred to a systematization of the preconscious dimension of architectural experience in which the concepts of a multisensory nature of perception, architecture as a space of memory and imagination and finally, the experience of the body moving in space (Weisen 2017) are developed.

These are the main themes on which the importance of *lived space* through feeling is based; atmospheres are considered as a sixth senses among the five described by Aristotle, sight, taste, touch, hearing and smell.

To argue for the use of the aesthetic theorization of the concept of atmosphere in architecture, I have chosen to focus on Pallasmaa’s essay: *Space, place and atmosphere: Emotion and peripheral perception in architecture experience* (2014). This essay does not only contain all the fundamental passages of a mutual encounter between the two doctrines, but also many cues referring to the phenomenological theories that we have already illustrated in this

essay. Besides being akin to the theories of Böhme and Schmitz, his philosophical thinking relies on authors such as Heidegger, Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty and Dewey.

Here, I will mainly focus on the paragraphs that Pallasmaa dedicates to the relationship between the world and the spirit, the sensitive appreciation of spaces and places, conscious perception and creative thinking and the relationship between space and imagination. Pallasmaa's position is very clear in relation to the world of atmospheres and also fundamental for understanding the evolutions that have taken place in the last twenty years in the world of aesthetic phenomenology towards an aesthetic approach of architecture.

Already in the introduction one immediately feels the strong importance given by Pallasmaa to the senses in the experience of life. In the epigraph, he inserts indeed a passage from D'Annunzio's collection *Contemplazioni della morte*, taken from a quotation made by Bachelard in *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, a work from 1942, in which the philosopher introduces the fundamental concept of material imagination.

Besides being a great connoisseur of the entire oeuvre of Bachelard, Pallasmaa quotes a verse that illustrates the importance, in the sphere of feeling, of *invisibility* versus mere visibility: "The richest experiences happen long before the soul takes notice. And when we begin to open our eyes to the visible, we have already been supporters of the invisible for a long time"<sup>3</sup>. This means that from the first moment, according to Pallasmaa, the qualities of space are not solely denoted by visual perception, but rather belong to an extremely complex multisensorial fusion, based on a set of factors that are captured in an instantaneous and synthetic way, as in an atmosphere, an environment, a feeling or an affective tone, *mood*, of the whole (Pallasmaa 2014, p. 230).

By introducing the argument of experientiality through Dewey's theories, Pallasmaa confirms his predisposition to a phenomenological aesthetic research on atmospheres. The references used to illustrate the first passage on the fusion of the world with being concern the illustration of the simultaneous perception of an environment that can be found for example in Merleau-Ponty: "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

<sup>3</sup> D'Annunzio, G. (1912), *Contemplazioni della morte*, Milano, Fratelli Treves, qtd. in Bachelard, G. (1942), in *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, José Corti, p. 29, in *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the imagination of Matter*, p. 16.

my senses at once” (Pallasmaa 2014: 231). The immediacy or the instantaneousness of appreciably grasping space (as in the case of Bachelard) involves the being completely through the senses. In the spatial consideration, there is the fundamental contribution of a temporality to the extent that the lived experience implies a precise time. In accordance with the concept of *Genius Loci*, the *spirit of place* represents for Pallasmaa a condition in which the atmosphere assumes its own unique perceptive identity and emotional charge.

In this way, the spatial ambiance is grasped pre-intentionally thanks to the often-underestimated cognitive capacity of our emotions. Another reference to the phenomenological constitution of atmospheres is exemplified by Pallasmaa with respect to the context of the relationship between *space* and *imagination* in which he deepens our innate capacity to grasp them. We are all predisposed to imagine places thanks to the images suggested to us by literature and poetry, but also to elaborate them at night through our subconscious. Dreams are indeed reinterpretations of spaces that we are composing in our mind and that we are directed to experience.

The relationship between the aesthetic concept of atmosphere and the world of architecture lies for Pallasmaa in the conception of a new Gestalt, understood as the form of a principle for the project. This is a capacity that cannot be underestimated in the conception of new spaces that can be lived in and shared. Pallasmaa uses however a polemical tone referring to the world of architecture and its use of the concept of atmospheres: the atmosphere, according to the architects, seems to be considered as something romantic and superficial, a “divertissement”. Moreover, the Western architectural tradition, with its serious inclination, relies entirely on the concept of architecture as a material and geometric object, perceived by a centralized vision. Classic architectural images favour clarity rather than transience and ambiance.

In light of these considerations, we could also cite Pallasmaa’s recognition of Peter Zumthor, one of the first contemporary architects to have introduced the concept of *atmosphere* into *architectural* practice (Labbé 2019). According to Zumthor, a reflection on atmospheres is never disconnected from the architectural project. Together with fundamental elements such as light, materials, sounds, the re-elaboration of memories, memory and reminiscences are part of a totalizing design system. The central pivot is that of emotion: *L’architecture c’est pour émouvoir* (Le Corbusier), and the atmosphere is constituted through the memory of places, as in the

cases of the Mining Museum, the Allmannajuvet Zinc Museum in Norway, the Kolomba Museum in Cologne and the Topographie des Terrors in Berlin.

In *Atmospheres. Architectural environments. Surrounding Objects*, the text of a lecture given in 2003 at the Wendlinghausen Castle Music and Literature Festival on the theme of *Poetic Landscapes*, Zumthor illustrates the important things for creating atmospheres: “Architecture is quality when a building succeeds in touching me emotionally, so where do we start from to design environments that impress us?”<sup>4</sup>

In this *vademecum*, Zumthor addresses an audience of architects, philosophers and researchers, arguing first of all for the importance of instantaneousness. This is an argument that has been so far only developed from a phenomenological and aesthetic point of view, but that must necessarily be part of the architectural project. Drawing on Böhme’s concept of ingression, the impression of a building, must be reconciled with entering a space. The atmosphere captures us in perceiving the immediacy of the place: the atmosphere speaks to our emotional perception, that is to say, to the perception that works more quickly because it is the one that human beings need in order to survive. Something inside us immediately tells us if we like something or if we have to keep away from it, without having to think about a situation for a long time. Immediate understanding is immediate emotion or immediate rejection. This is a different kind of linear thought: we perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensibility, which is a form of perception that works incredibly quickly and which we humans evidently need to help us survive (Zumthor 2006, p. 13). Everything in an atmosphere captures us sensibly: the light, the colours, the sounds – like those in a town square at a certain time in the morning. It has unique characteristics that are not only denoted by its geometry but also by the involvement of the reality that develops inside it. The approach to recreate the atmosphere in the architectural project, according to Zumthor, is that of having the *craft* as well as the method, instruments and tools (Zumthor 2006, p. 21).

The first element is a material presence in the architectural work, *the body of architecture*. In assembling the elements, architecture affects the sensorial importance of our experience of them, an *anatomy* that involves membranes and structure. Consequently, quoting Palladio, the second point concerns the

<sup>4</sup>Peter Zumthor and Juani Pallasmaa, “Architecture speaks”, Alvar Aalto University, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibwvGn3PkFg>

*consonance of materials*, that is, the creation of a harmony of the parts in which stone, wood and glass are all part of the same design, with the only condition of making the architecture itself *vibrate*. The third aspect is that of the *sound of the space* that is created thanks to the harmonic involvement of the elements, but also aroused by memory. In this regard, Zumthor shows us some examples of his experiences of sensitive space as a child “the noises my mother made in the kitchen. They made me feel happy... the noises of the grand interior of a railway terminal ... the noises of the town. So, besides vibrating, the building must also resonate: There are buildings that have wonderful sounds, telling me I can feel at home. I’m not alone. I suppose. I just can’t get rid of that image of my mother and actually I don’t want to”. (Zumthor 2006, p. 33).

The fourth element, *the temperature of the space*, is touched not only with feeling but with *sensation*. In this sense, Steel, for instance, gives us the sensation of cold, wood that of heat. A fifth feature regards the *the objects that surround me*, the object as an element that gives *identity* to the space, such as – for my personal reflection – the Neapolitan flip coffee maker – an iconic object that at the same time represents *memory*, *scent* and *taste*. A sixth, very subtle point concerns the spatial condition *between calm and seduction*, a peculiarity that architects should adopt from directors who work with sequences. The architect must insert a sequence of spaces in his project, ready to capture the interest of living in a living room, rather than a corner or a closet “Guidance, preparation, simulation, the pleasant surprise, relaxation – all this I must add, without the slightest whiff of the lecture theatre. It should all seem very natural” (Zumthor 2006, p. 45). The seventh element comes closest to the aesthetic phenomenological issues we have dealt with so far, i.e., the *tension between inside and outside*, where the relationship between the individual and the public sphere, between the private sphere and the public sphere comes into play: “And Suddenly there’s an interior and an exterior. One can be inside our outside. Brilliant and that means equally brilliant- this thresholds crossings, the tiny loop-hole door, the almost imperceptible transition between the inside and the outside, the incredible sense of place...” (Zumthor 2006, pp. 45-6). There are many examples that bring us back to the concept of *intimate immensity*, from Hitchcock’s *Courtyard Window* to Hopper’s *The Morning Sun*. They depict a world that is *half-closed* and at the same time

remains *open* indoors and where the degrees of intimacy can be designed following only scale measurements. The penultimate element is that of *light on things*. Since light is not designed, it is already the opener of the construction, the materials that must envelope it and not vice versa. In the ancient point of the houses, Zumthor writes, there is something *shining*. This image makes me think of the carob tree, the protagonist of Le Corbusier's *Cabanon*. Let's think of the wonderful effect it makes of a light that does not attack but accompanies summer afternoons, a light that plays with shadow, also a factor of atmosphere. The ninth and last element sums up the *job* of the architect, which is to create *environments: architecture as an environment*. People do indeed remember the building, the house, the town square and not the architect. This is because the environments, even before the architecture, represent their experience of sensitive living, in which we find *memory*, *history* and the seasons of life. *Memory* is that *quid* that needs to be added, precisely because it represents the final synthesis of each project, the absolute value of living.

Architecture, after all, is made for our use. It is not a free art in that sense. I think architecture attains its highest quality as an applied art. And it is at its most beautiful when things have come into their own, when they are coherent. That is when everything refers to everything else and it is impossible to remove a single thing without destroying the whole. Place, use, and form. The form reflects the place, the place is just so, and the use reflects this and that (Zumthor 2006, p. 69).

##### 5. *Creating Atmospheres: Possible Scenarios.*

In a recent interview, Juhani Pallasmaa (Amundsen 2018), addresses some fundamental themes of an aesthetic phenomenology in the architectural research on atmospheres. The perfect picture would be that of an architect who first of all interiorizes the project and works in an intimate and multisensory context. The ultimate goal is not that of the building but, as we have already seen, that of its emotional impact. The question that arises spontaneously is thus what the atmospheres in contemporary architecture may be. Going back in time, we could recognize in Modern Architecture a sort of untheorized or declared tradition of the use of atmospheres by the great masters. Pallasmaa suggests Mies van der Rohe's, but to this we would certainly like to add two more: F.L. Wright and

Le Corbusier. Wright's work can be traced back to the concept of organic, external architecture and harmonious integration with nature. It can certainly be counted as an anticipation of a sensitive experience. In the natural atmosphere of Pennsylvania, *Fallingwater*, perhaps the quintessential celebration of the Wrightian creed, in which everything coincides with creation, rises up on the Bear Run Brook embedded in the rocks. Another example is that of Le Corbusier's architecture, which represents the absolute symbiosis of man and proxemics in interior space.

Just think of the Unités d'Habitations in Marseille, or going even deeper into the Cabanon in Cap-Martin. The *buen retiro*, the *petite maison* designed as a gift to his wife, but also a place of devotion for minimalism, for the poetically reactive object and for a precise liberating act with respect to the bourgeois opulence of city life. These are the first suggestions that come to mind, of a first architectural approach to the world of atmospheres, but surely there will be many others into which it would be worth, at a later date, to delve deeper.

Returning to the contemporary context, Pallasmaa cites some interesting examples of atmospheric architecture, including works by the Australian architect Glenn Murcutt, the American Rick Joy, Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, and the Patkau group.

To offer a reading of these architectures, one could start with Murcutt's works, completely immersed in the uncontaminated Australian nature. The *Donaldson House*, built to the north of Sydney, was built to preserve as many trees as possible. In the interior, the brutal, almost wild sense of matter emerges, reminding the owners that they were *selected* to live there. What strikes the viewer about Joy's work is the scenic aspect of the *Desert Nomad House* in the Arizona desert, which fits perfectly into its natural context, becoming part of it. On the other hand, what strikes us about the *Ice Skating Park* in Brooklyn by Williams and Tsien is its material trick, the texture and the choice of a welcome even in the cold elements. The *Hadaway House* of the Patkau group represents a further example of the contingency of materials and shapes that border on the futuristic where the snowy Canadian landscape becomes the landing strip of a strange object, apparently strident, which instead is perfectly immersed its context.

## 6. Conclusion

Atmospheres reside today in the world of Architecture as a re-

ality that has in fact always existed. The evolution of the sensitive could help us implement our aesthetic abilities – those through which to inhabit our places – in new or revised ways. The semantic, symbolic and identity construct of thought shows how the philosophical system has come closer to the importance of our relationship with an *immersive* reality in which the sensitive approach denotes a cognitive factor and not a by-product of the spirit. The involvement of phenomenology in architectural design does not stop at the principle of formal deconstruction, but appears to be a fundamental glue to connect the creative and proactive aspect of the technique. In this paper, I have attempted to describe the contemporary aspects of this profound reflection on a mutual relationship that I hope will continue over time.

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