Architecture and its Co-existing Atmospheres

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How might we approach something as vague, yet as pervasive and important as an atmosphere? It is regularly said that a room has a cold or warm atmosphere, or a building has an imposing atmosphere, but beyond these general descriptive terms, how might we understand and study architectural atmospheres more exactly? It is tempting to summarize the tone or feel of a room or space under one overarching description such as cold or warm, welcoming or uninviting and assume that an atmosphere's single feel or tone is what gives it the capacity to dictate or dominate a particular situation or environment. In this short piece, I want to suggest that single architectural forms such as rooms, buildings, or spaces, and the people that move within and through them, do not produce single atmospheres that are tied to those forms. Rather, I argue any one architectural form can generate multiple atmospheres, which overlap one another without necessarily coming into contact. In turn, I argue that focusing on the relations and tensions between these multiple atmospheres provides one way of studying architectural atmospherics. To illustrate this approach, in the short space provided, I offer reflections of my own experience in a hospital waiting room several years ago to think through how atmospheres co-exist and co-mingle within a single architectural form.

A Hospital Waiting Room

A group of people is sitting in a square waiting room, next to a series of doors leading to a variety of examination and treatment rooms. Based in the optometry department, the room provides patients a space to sit after they have been booked into the hospital away from the general waiting area, but before they have been seen by a nurse or doctor. The patients are all there regarding some issue with their eyes. Each waits, not knowing the severity or banality of the medical problem the other patients (or perhaps themselves) may suffer from. Nor are they aware of the treatment that the other patients may be about to experience behind the closed doors that line the waiting room's walls. Some may be there for a routine eye test, others for a more invasive procedure and yet others looking to receive a diagnosis for some seemingly obscure ailment. This ambiguity over the medical status of each individual, alongside the fear, anticipation, or calm that accompanies the knowledge, or lack thereof, of what will happen in the examination or treatment room makes it difficult to discern an overarching atmosphere that unites or pervades the various assembled bodies. Some patients appear relaxed, while others tense and nervous. Two older ladies chat about television soap operas and immigration, while a younger man looks at the ground and taps his feet.

Such a description might suggest that the collection of bodies and objects that constitute the waiting room described above have generated an atmosphere of uncertainty or ambiguity. For example, while the older women appear relaxed and chatty other patients appear tense and uncomfortable. However,

turning to this simple vignette again, it is possible to argue that the waiting room is constituted by multiple atmospheres that touch, contact and rub up against one another, rather than a single, overarching or dominant one. The two ladies chatting appeared at ease and the sound and gentle manner of their conversation about ostensibly public issues and television shows touched other waiting patients and drew them into the conversation, bolstering and amplifying an atmosphere of calm conviviality. At the same moment, others sitting in the waiting room clearly did not want to be involved in this conversation and turned their heads towards the floor or away from the conservation to avoid being drawn into the mundane chatter. These patients had a more hesitant or fearful demeanor, expressed through their body language and behavior, such as sighing loudly and shifting from side to side in their seat. Rather than competing with one another, these forces and their associated affects (of hesitancy, calm, and potential worry) existed alongside one another without direct collision or competition.

Here, there was no clear relationship of dominance in which one atmosphere overrode or cancelled out the other. In other words, these multiple atmospheres seemingly contacted or touched one another, while remaining discrete. For example, the sound waves and intonation of the voices of the ladies sitting in the waiting room may have affected the bodies of the more hesitant patients, causing them to shift or look away, but it did not override their atmosphere of hesitancy. In this case, affects that can constitute an atmosphere may completely miss other affects that could cause an atmosphere to change. Harman alludes to objects that "miss" or do not touch and affect one another, even when in the same environment through the simple example of a paper screen:

We can bring to mind an oriental paper screen of the type that is used to divide fashionable rooms into sectors, filtering lamplight into a muted glow. Such a device offers a formidable barrier for the particles of dust that continually drift into it, or even gravel chips that might accidentally be kicked up against it. But the soft light passing through the room encounters it only as a partial obstacle.[1]

Atmospheres can then co-exist alongside one another without fusing or melting together precisely because the objects and bodies that make up an atmosphere do not exist as a set of totally interactive or accessible relations.[2] For example, a sound wave may not affect a concrete block and so be unable to contribute or shape the atmosphere associated with it, even if the sound wave physically touches it. At the same time, when aspects of objects do contact and affect one another this can create a situation in which affective communication takes place and thus an atmosphere is formed. While seemingly

1. Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing, 2002), p. 31
2. Also see James Ash, "Rethinking Affective Atmospheres: Technology, Perturbation and Space Times of the Non-human," *Geoforum* 49 (October 2013): pp. 20–28

abstract, this account of atmospheres having a weight actually chimes with lived experience, where people often refer to a situation as "heavy" or a room as expressing a "light and airy feeling."
We can use this understanding of objects as selectively encountering one another, to understand how atmospheres can be composed of a number of the same bodies and objects, while remaining mutually exterior from one another. For example, the affects the ladies in the sitting room generated through the specific sound and intonation of their voices extended and met the bodies of the other patients in the waiting room. Most patients were affected by this, which caused some to turn and join the conversation and others to turn away. In this case, the same affect had differential impacts on the bodies involved in the encounter. Some affects touched, communicated and weighed against one another generating an atmosphere, while in other cases particular bodies or objects touched but did not communicate or missed one another, thus remaining outside of the atmosphere. In other cases, bodies or object in an environment neither touched nor communicated at all. These relations of touch, communication and non-touch, in turn generated different effects and thus another atmosphere. Crucially both atmospheres, of convivial conversation as well as polite frustration, were equally present, while remaining distinct, even when specific objects and bodies were contributing to both atmospheres at the same time. In the optometry ward, the weight and thus co-existence of these two atmospheres in turn emphasized and highlighted the distinction and difference between them to the patients who were waiting for treatment or diagnosis.

Investigating Flat Ontologies

Such an approach to the coexistence of atmospheres involves a flattening and breaking down of distinctions between living and dead matter, suggesting that all objects have the potential to equally impact or weigh upon an atmosphere. Such an approach would suggest that studying atmospheres is a matter of investigating how different human and non-human objects occupy different perspectives and how these perspectives inform the kinds of atmosphere that seem to consist in different spaces. In the example above, we could begin an investigation of an atmosphere from the perspective of the exhaled air that forms the sigh of waiting patients such as its power, reach, volume, pitch, and so on. Or we could begin with the light bulbs that shape the kind of illumination that the waiting room is bathed in. Attempting to occupy the perspective of a light bulb is not to pretend to understand what it is really like to be a light bulb or a breath of air. Rather it is to focus on forms of exchange and communication which often exist beneath the thresholds of conscious human awareness, or indeed do not appear to humans at all, in order to open up and question the limits and boundaries that shape the co-existence of atmospheres of different architectural forms.[3]

3. This essay is mainly an excerpt from Ben Anderson and James Ash, "Atmospheric Methods," in *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*, ed. Phillip Vannini (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 34–51, and here pp. 38–40.

Further Reading

Anderson, Ben, and James Ash. “Atmospheric Methods.” In *Non-Representational Methodologies: Re-Envisioning Research*, edited by Phillip Vannini, pp. 34–51. New York: Routledge, 2015

Ash, James. “Rethinking Affective Atmospheres: Technology, Perturbation and Space Times of the Non-human.” *Geoforum* 49 (October 2013): pp. 20–28

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