

AN ATMOSPHERIC APPROACH TO URBAN AESTHETICS

Un enfoque atmosférico a la estética urbana

DOI: [10.17981/mod.arq.cuc.18.2.2018.06](https://doi.org/10.17981/mod.arq.cuc.18.2.2018.06)

Fecha de Envío: 10/01/2018 Fecha de Aceptación: 12/03/2018

Zhuofei Wang

University of Kassel (Germany)
zfw@uni-kassel.de

Para citar este artículo:

Wang, Z. (2018). An Atmospheric Approach to Urban Aesthetics. *MODULO ARQUITECTURA-CUC*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 161-180. DOI: [10.17981/mod.arq.cuc.18.2.2018.06](https://doi.org/10.17981/mod.arq.cuc.18.2.2018.06)

Abstract

Usually, our aesthetic experience in urban environment is oriented towards the picturesque tradition which focuses on the visual image of an aesthetic object as well as its form-related qualities. In this respect, the elements of the urban environment are visually selected, highlighted and combined. A unified urban space is thus split apart. However, what aesthetically appeals to us in a city should not be solely related to its pictorial image, due to the fact that our relationship with environmental conditions primarily exists in a multi-sensually perceptible way which is essentially atmospheric. Here, the term atmosphere has gone beyond the physio-meteorological scope and become an aesthetic concept which was initially developed by German scholars in the past decades. As the primary sensuous reality constructed by both the perceiving subject and the perceived object, atmosphere is neither a purely subjective state, nor an objective thing, but essentially a quasi-thing pervaded by a specific emotional quality. As a ubiquitous phenomenon, atmosphere forms the foundation of our life experience. It is impossible to free ourselves from its power. In this respect, urban scenes which we experience cannot be reduced to a pictorial image as well. Rather, they are atmospheric phenomena which are primarily grasped through a co-present body-being. Starting from this point of view, the central focus of urban aesthetics should therefore not be on the question of how to see and assess the physical form and spatial structure of a city, but on how to perceive their characteristics through the whole body, namely of how we are bodily disposed in urban space.

Keywords: atmosphere, urban environment, body, smellscape.

Resumen

Por lo general, nuestra experiencia estética en el entorno urbano está orientada hacia la tradición pintoresca que se centra en la imagen visual de un objeto estético, así como en sus cualidades relacionadas con la forma. En este sentido, los elementos del entorno urbano son seleccionados visualmente, resaltados y combinados. Un espacio urbano unificado se divide así. Sin embargo, lo que nos atrae estéticamente en una ciudad no debe relacionarse únicamente con su imagen pictórica, debido a que nuestra relación con las condiciones ambientales existe principalmente de una manera sensible a la percepción múltiple que es esencialmente atmosférica. Aquí, el término atmósfera ha ido más allá del ámbito fisiometeorológico y se ha convertido en un concepto estético que fue desarrollado inicialmente por los estudiosos alemanes en las últimas décadas. Como la realidad sensorial primaria construida tanto por el sujeto que percibe como por el objeto percibido, la atmósfera no es un estado puramente subjetivo, ni una cosa objetiva, sino esencialmente una cosa casi impregnada por una cualidad emocional específica. Como fenómeno ubicuo, la atmósfera es la base de nuestra experiencia de vida. Es imposible liberarnos de su poder. A este respecto, las escenas urbanas que experimentamos no pueden reducirse también a una imagen pictórica. Más bien, son fenómenos atmosféricos que se captan principalmente a través de un ser corporal co-presente. A partir de este punto de vista, el foco central de la estética urbana no debería ser, por lo tanto, la cuestión de cómo ver y evaluar la forma física y la estructura espacial de una ciudad, sino cómo percibir sus características a través de todo el cuerpo, es decir, de cómo estamos dispuestos corporalmente en el espacio urbano.

Palabras clave: atmósfera, ambiente urbano, cuerpo, olor.



**Fig. 1. Philharmonic Building in
Szczecin - Main Hall**

Fuente: © DrKssn / Wikimedia

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the aesthetic experience of urban space concentrates on its visual image. A common example of this is that urban space often manifests itself in the form of two-dimensional paintings or photographic pictures. The vision-oriented mode of urban experience is based on a distanced, analytical approach. Allen Calson defined this vision-oriented mode as the model of *Traveler-Scene*, given the fact that strangers like tourists often learn about the image of a city through its visible information like building styles, materials and colors, emblems, street signs, etc. In this connection, Gernot Böhme pointed out, “the image of a

city is the consciously projected self-portrait and the sum of its advantages that an outsider might enjoy” (Böhme, 2014, p. 48).

In my presentation here today, I would like to explain that the aesthetic impression of a city should not be reduced to purely optical perception. On the contrary, *urban aesthetics concerns essentially the all-encompassing experience of a city, namely concerns the issue of how we sense a city with the whole body*. In this regard, our aesthetic relationship with urban environment is primarily based on a multisensory experience which is essentially atmospheric.



Concept *atmosphere*

Etymologically speaking, the term “atmosphere” referred to “gaseous mass emanating from celestial bodies and surrounding them” (Schultz, 1996, p. 454). Later it designated “the air layer around a planet, the gases enveloping a planet or a star, and especially the aerial envelope of the earth” (Schultz, 1996, p. 454). Starting from a fundamental understanding of aesthetics as *a theory of general perception* which was first expounded in the 18th century by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, modern aestheticians are giving increased attention to the wide range of human sensual experiences. This transformation in a way challenges the art-centered understanding of aesthetics in the modern western context which led to a narrowing of the aesthetic field to vision and sound. Against this background, the concept *atmosphere* has gone beyond the physio-

meteorological field and is coming more and more to the center of aesthetic research.

Walter Benjamin’s theory of aura is a pioneering study in the aesthetic exploration of atmosphere. Etymologically, the word aura comes from the Greek and means breath, breeze or gentle wind. In Latin aura is a visual object referring to shimmer. In the essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” which was written by Benjamin in 1935 (Rauh, 2012, p. 32), the concept of aura was introduced in the field of aesthetics. In everyday life, aura means “eine diffuse, im naturwissenschaftlichen Sinne nicht objektivierbare, oft jedoch intensiv empfundene physisch-materielle ‘Ausstrahlung’, die einen Wahrnehmungsgegenstand zu umgeben scheint” (Barck, 2000, p. 400).

Therefore, aura is thus difficult to understand in a sufficiently clear and precise manner. According to Benjamin, objective components such as material, color, form and proportion are reproducible in a replica. On the contrary, the aura of the original is not transferable. In this connection, Benjamin wrote: "Hier und Jetzt des Kunstwerks - sein einmaliges Dasein an dem Orte, an dem es sich befinden" (Benjamin, 1980, p. 475). A crucial factor of aura is therefore its uniqueness. In this connection, the uniqueness is to be understood in terms of time and place, namely both the location of the original and the perception of it are unrepeatable and irreplaceable. Starting from this point, Benjamin criticized the disappearance of aura in the modern age because of the increasing spread of the replication technology. Benjamin's exploration provided a critical inspiration for atmosphere studies whose focus lies particularly on vague, ambiguous and invisible phenomena.

As the primarily perceived object, atmosphere refers to a pre-reflective sphere in which the human situation and external conditions are corporeally brought together and are pervaded by a specific emotional quality. In this connection, particular attention should be given to the following aspects:



Atmosphere is the first object that is perceived. In other words, what is primarily given or experienced, is atmospheric. The experience of atmosphere is connected with an immediate, pre-reflective level. Although atmosphere exerts direct effect on the field of sensory perception, it usually unconsciously guides and even modifies our feelings. In this sense, the perception of atmosphere does not belong to a single sensory domain, but to an area of holistic, pre-differentiated experience which is usually characterized by synaesthetic effects. Arising from the interaction of different senses, synaesthesia makes possible the experience of a particular object in an intermodal way, such as warm red, cool blue, bright orange and fresh green. Moreover, as the primarily perceived object, atmosphere provides the basis for further modes of perception such as for the categorizing perception which aims at identifying and differentiating the individual elements of the objective world (Haubl, 1998, p. 74). Starting from this point, further levels like objects, materials, forms, contours, colors etc. can be analytically distinguished (Böhme, 2013, p. 48).

Fig. 2. Philharmonic Building in Szczecin

Fuente: © DrKssn / Wikimedia



As sensuous reality, atmosphere can only be corporeally experienced. In this aspect, the role of the lived body (Leib) moves to the foreground. As the primary object of New Phenomenology, the lived body differentiates itself from another term “physical body” (Körper) which is often regarded as the object of natural sciences. Various parts of the physical body (eyes, ears, mouth, nose, tongue...) have fixed positions, constant distances between each other and distinct

sensory functions (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch...)(Schmitz, 2009). Other than the stable sensual schema of the physical body, the structure of the lived body is variable. It frees itself from the domination of the principles of position and distance, and is able to simultaneously coordinate different sensuous elements. We can experience this corporeal structure instantaneously, but it is difficult for us to tell its exact location. As the access to atmosphere, the lived

body contributes to a situation where on the one hand the meaning of atmosphere is conveyed in a sensually ascertainable, holistic manner, and on the other the atmospheric manifestation is variable, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Here, two further points should be noted: a) Although the existence of atmosphere is based on individual corporeal experience, it may have the same meaning for several perceivers in the same situation because of the quasi-

objective qualities of atmosphere, as well as the common biophysiological, sociocultural and psychological structures of perceivers. In this case, atmosphere is communicable; b) It is also possible that due to the disparities of the subjective factors (personal disposition, individual experience, educational level, etc.), different perceivers do not experience the same atmosphere, that is to say, the atmospheric effect may vary with the subjective conditions.



Fig. 3. Panorama of Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge

Fuente: © DrKssn / Wikimedia

Despite the diversity of atmospheric phenomena under different circumstances, a particular atmosphere radiates a single emotional quality pervading the whole space. Correspondingly, we always use a single adjective to describe its character such as a cheerful landscape, a depressed market or a comfortable hotel. John Dewey defines this single quality as “pervasive quality”.

In his opinion, a situation consisting of various factors usually has a quality which merges different factors into a coherent whole and thus provides the situation a single property (Dewey, [1931](#), p. 93). Furthermore, this single quality is not constant and unchangeable, but finds itself in a dynamic process composed of different phases—emergence, strengthening, weakening, disappearance.



**Fig. 4. Rialto Bridge
(Venice Italy)**

Fuente: Andrés Nieto Porras / Wikimedia



Urban atmosphere

The concept of atmosphere can broaden the perspective towards the aesthetic relation between humans and the environment and make us reinterpret the focus of urban aesthetics. When entering an urban space, we usually develop aesthetic experience from the whole to details, that is to say, the first thing that touches us is usually not the detailed properties, but rather the overall impression of the city which inevitably conditions our mood and intentionality.

The overall impression of the city can be understood as urban atmosphere which lays the foundation for the subsequent aesthetic analysis of the detailed components of the city. Here, special attention is directed to the following two levels:

Experience level

What matters in the atmospheric experience of a city is how we sense it with the whole body. The atmospheric experience of urban environment is therefore multisensory. The conditions and ways of perception are thus crucial for the effects of the aesthetic experience in urban environment. Böhme (2017) wrote, "In order to really get to know them, we ourselves have to enter into them fully,..." (p. 132). Juhani Pallasmaa expressed a similar opinion, "As we enter a space, the space enters us, and the experience is essentially an exchange and fusion of the object and the subject" (Pallasmaa, 2014, p. 20).





Various sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, muscle etc.) simultaneously participate in the perception process and collaborate with each other. “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” - as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1992, p. 48) mentioned.

Although urban atmosphere exists in individual sensory experience, this experience is not limited to the private world. Rather, it can be shared based on the same sociocultural background. So, in a deep sense, the experience of urban atmosphere is to be understood in an existential sense. The atmosphere of a city can easily attract the attention of an outsider, whereas it is too commonplace and self-evident to be noticed by the local residents. For the latter, the atmosphere of a city is perceived in a habitual and sometimes unconscious way. In this sense, the urban atmospheric experience offers a feeling of being at home, especially for those who inhabit the city.

**Fig. 5. Balbi Bridge
(Venice Italy)**

Fuente: Joanbanjo / Wikimedia

**Fig. 5. St. Mark's Square
(Venice Italy)**

Fuente: Par La Voux Du Nord (2018)



Design level

The traditional urban design is visually dominant. Special attention is usually given to the visual components of a city, such as materials, structure, proportion, scale, color and signs. To achieve this goal, the elements of urban environment are visually selected, highlighted and combined. According to Juhani Pallasmaa, such a cityscape is “a momentary situation, a passing condition of light or an isolated, framed, and focused fragment” (Pallasmaa, 2014, p. 38).

Now we know that urban atmosphere can be experienced as something quasi-objective, as the qualities of a city (Böhme, 2017). This quasi-objective property makes it possible to develop the conditions for generating atmospheres through city planning and design.

The first attempt can be traced back to the landscape architect Christian Cay Lorenz Hirschfeld (1742-1792) whose representative work in this area is “Theorie der Gartenkunst” (1779). In the English garden design, Hirschfeld paid special attention to the interrelationship between the equipment and the sensuous impression it made. In this way, the environmental design was closely related to the feeling of life (Lebensgefühl). According to Böhme, the contemporary atmospheric design in urban environments can be considered as the extension of Hirschfeld's ideas (Böhme, 2014).

In the contemporary urban design, the atmospheric approach is oriented towards entirety, engagement and intercommunication with the goal of promoting nearness and intimacy.

As discussed previously, urban space which we experience is not only connected with a visual image. Rather, it is an atmospheric phenomenon which is primarily grasped through a co-present body-being. In particular, the historical

dimension of a city cannot be exclusively grasped through visual qualities. Rather, the sense of the distant, historical past often arises from the non-visual experience. Starting from this basis, one focus of urban design is on the creation of atmospheres with the help of various non-visual media such as sound, tactility and smell. Here, visual factors like color, light, scenic decoration and spatial constellations still play a role. However, this is not just about

**Fig. 6. West 44th St
(New York, USA)**

Fuente: Pixabay



the issue of visual perception, but concerns how they function together to co-generate atmospheres.

In the context of urban design, atmosphere is produced primarily not for strangers like tourists, but for inhabitants involved in urban daily life, based on the fact that the formation and experience of atmosphere cannot be separated from the influence of local culture, life and customs. Böhme noted, "The atmosphere of a city

is that which is commonplace and self-evident for the inhabitants and which is constantly produced by the locals through their lives, ..." (Böhme, 2017, p. 48). According to this statement, inhabitants also participate in the creation of urban atmosphere through their lifestyles in order to develop the feeling of being sheltered and being at home. In a word, the atmosphere of a city is precisely the way of life goes on within it (Böhme, 2017).

175



Case study: olfactory atmosphere in urban space

With regard to the experience and design of urban atmosphere, I would like to exemplarily discuss olfactory atmosphere in urban environment which has so far enjoyed little attention in the literature on urban aesthetics. *Olfactory atmosphere plays a significant role in city life. In a sense, olfactory atmosphere is the most essential form of atmospheres, due to the fact that olfactory experience is almost unavoidable in comparison with other sensory experiences like seeing, hearing and touching which we can to a certain extent freely choose not to participate in.* Böhme (2017) stressed, “A city without an odor is like a person without a character” (p. 126).

The German psychiatrist Hubert Tellenbach was a pioneer in the study of the relationship between olfaction and atmosphere. According to Tellenbach, olfactory atmosphere offers the basis for the relationship of trust between people, between people and their environment. Pleasant taste and smell can give us the feeling of being part of the world. On the contrary, unpleasant taste and smell may cause the feeling of being isolated from the rest of the world. An atmospheric attunement is therefore crucial for developing harmonious interpersonal relationship. Otherwise, people may face the risk of suffering mental illness.



The British urban designer Victoria Henshaw's book "Urban Smellscapes" (2014) is the first English study that explored theoretically and practically urban olfactory atmosphere. Henshaw investigated the role of olfaction in contemporary urban experience. In her opinion, olfactory atmosphere contributes to the development of the perception of place. With case studies from urban environments mainly in the UK, such as factories, breweries, parks, as well as experimental smell environments, she analyzed the management and control processes of urban odor environments and offered practical recommendations to city planners and managers.

Urban olfactory atmosphere can be understood in two ways: the micro level, such as the smell of flowers, cosmetic products and food from restaurants; the macro level, such as the smell of the air, the sea, the river or the mountain. The odors at macro-level often constitute the background factors of a city's atmosphere which are often unnoticed by local residents because of habituation and adaption and are more likely to be noticed by visitors and tourists.



**Fig. 7. Brooklyn bridge
(New York, USA)**

Fuente: Pixabay

Human olfactory system is mainly in the area of nose and nasal cavity. The olfactory mechanism consists primarily of two parts: olfactory receptors and trigeminal nerve. The former provides primarily olfactory information, while the latter provides additional information (Henshaw, 2014, p. 24). Practically, the two phases cannot be clearly differentiated from each other. The resulting olfactory atmosphere is not limited to the pre-reflective level, but often fuses with mental activities. To further explore this aspect, I would like to highlight two points of olfactory atmosphere:

Olfactory atmosphere and memory

Smell and memory are closely related. The 2004 Nobel prize winners Buck and Axel conducted groundbreaking research into the olfactory system. One important aspect is the physiological origin of olfactory memory. “When a smell is inhaled, it travels through the nose and is dissolved in nasal mucus. Information is passed through neurons to the receptors and on to the olfactory bulb which is located in the limbic system, known as the emotional center of the brain. This relays information to other parts of the brain to form a pattern, and it is this pattern that the brain recognize, drawing from previous memories of encounters with that odor” (Buck and Axel, 1991, p. 65). The close connection between olfaction and memory allows us to review the previous olfactory situation, “rather than being limited to first encoun-

ters with odor” (Henshaw, 2014, p. 32). It is often the case that even after many years, we can still recall some kind of smell.

In an olfactory atmosphere, the memory of the related odor is evoked. Such an atmosphere usually has a nostalgic character. For instance, the smell of food has a strong potential for recalling memories. It connects us not only to the food itself, but also to the corresponding people, events and places. The smell of favorite food can transport us back to childhood. Some businesses use the feature of olfactory memory in their marketing strategies to design elaborate advertising, such as the advertisement for NF Black Sesame Paste. Odors can also evoke negative memories and emotional reactions. A survivor of Thailand’s tsunami of 2006 has an involuntary fear of the smell of water since it always evokes his memory of the horrible catastrophe at that time (Linklater, 2007).

On the basis of the connection between smell and memory, it can be concluded that olfactory atmosphere does not always happen at an unconscious level. Rather, it is deep-rooted within individual experiences and is socioculturally influenced.

Olfactory atmosphere and place

In a deep sense, olfactory atmosphere helps us confirm the identity of the place at which we are situated. There are different understandings of the concept “place”. One generally accepted view is that place should not be understood solely in the

physical sense. Instead, it is a combination of geographical, individual, social and cultural factors.

According to Henshaw, “wider olfactory perceptions of place are therefore formed through a combination of experiences, memories and associations with the parts and mixes of odors within an urban smellscape, and are further informed by representations, experiences and expectations of that place” (Henshaw, 2014, p. 37). Olfactory atmosphere in connection with a specific place or a specific type of place tends to be much more favored by the inhabitants, because it offers a familiar odor environment making them feel more comfortable and more at ease.

Today, in the process of globalization, the homogenisation of olfactory environments is increasingly achieved. Starting from this basis, Edward Relph distinguishes the geography of places from the placeless geography. In his opinion, the former is characterized by diversity and meaning, while the latter is a labyrinth of endless similarities (Relph, 1976).

The globalized odours of products like coffee, burgers, perfume and gasoline which are released from ubiquitous chain stores suggest their transcultural identity. Jim Drobnick interprets such homogeneous experience as “an alienating sense of placelessness” (Drobnick, 2002, p. 34). For in this case, the authentic smell of a city exists only in the past, but no longer in the present. Nevertheless, when visiting a city, people tend to find the authentic smell of this location to gain an experience related to its historical and cultural

identity. A typical example is the Christmas markets, which take place annually throughout Europe. As an attractive annual cultural event, they attract visitors from the whole surrounding areas. One of the most important programs is self-evidently to enjoy local culinary delights. Over the past decades, many Chinese cities established large-scaled food centers to provide culinary specialties with a long tradition. These food centers copy smells from other times, in order to offer experiences that previously only existed in memories. Despite the commercial purposes and idealized business models, the effort to restore traditional smellscape plays some part in preventing the excessive spread of homogenized odors from McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, Subway, etc.

CONCLUSION

As a ubiquitous phenomenon, atmosphere forms the foundation of our life experience. It is impossible to free ourselves from its power. Based on this fact, the central focus of urban aesthetics should not be on the issue of how to visually assess the physical form and spatial structure of a city, but of how to perceive their characteristics through the whole body, namely of how we are bodily disposed in urban space. As Pallasmaa (2014) pointed out, “the diffuse overall ambience is often much more decisive and powerful in determining our attitude to the setting” (p. 32). -- a fact that has received too little attention, but is now becoming more and more the focus of urban experience and design.

REFERENCES

- Barck, K. (ed.) (2000). *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Band 1: Absenz - Darstellung*. Stuttgart [u.a.]: Metzler Verlag.
- Benjamin, W. (1980). *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Böhme, G. (2017). *The Aesthetics of Atmosphere*. New York [u.a.]: Routledge.
- Böhme, G. (2014). Urban Atmospheres: Charting New Directions for Architecture and Urban Planning. In: C. Borch (ed.): *Architectural Atmospheres. On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*. (42-59). Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014.
- Böhme, G. (2013). *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.
- Buck, L. and Axel, R. (1991). A Novel Multigene Family may Encode Odorant Receptors: A Molecular Basis for Odor Recognition. *Cell*, 65. 175-187.
- Dewey, J. (1931). *Philosophy and Civilization*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Drobnick, J. (2002). Toposmia: Art, Scent and Interrogations of Spatiality. *Angelaki*, 7(1), 31-46.
- Haubl, R. (1998). Mit Sinn und Verstand. Einführung in die Umweltästhetik. In: A. Günther (ed.): *Sozialwissenschaftliche Ökologie*. (61-134). Eine Einführung. Berlin [u.a.]: Springer Verlag.
- Henshaw, V. (2014). *Urban smellscapes: understanding and designing city smell environments*. New York [u.a.]: Routledge.
- Hirschfeld, C. (1779). *Theorie der Gartenkunst*. Leipzig: M.G. Weidmanns Erben und Reich. <https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.1626>
- Linklater, A. (February 10, 2007). The Woman who was Afraid of Water. *The Guardian*.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1992). *Sense and Non-Sense*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Pallasmaa, J. (2014). Space, Place, and Atmosphere: Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience. In: C. Borch (ed.): *Architectural Atmospheres. On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*. (18-41). Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Rauh, A. (2012). *Die besondere Atmosphäre. Ästhetische Feldforschungen*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Relph, E. (1976). *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion.
- Schmitz, H. (2009). *Kurze Einführung in die Neue Phänomenologie*. Freiburg [u.a.]: Karl Alber Verlag.