Building Atmosphere

What do we mean when we speak of architectural quality? It is a question that I have little difficulty in answering. Quality in architecture . . . is to me when a building manages to move me. What on earth is it that moves me? How can I get it into my own work? . . . How do people design things with such a beautiful, natural presence, things that move me every single time. One word for it is Atmosphere.¹

Remarkably, unlike in descriptions of art or music, the notion of atmosphere remains largely unaddressed in architecture. Atmosphere, it can be argued, is the very initial and immediate experience of space, and thus, as in the above quote of Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, can be understood as a notion that addresses architectural quality. The contribution of architecture theorist Mark Wigley to the 1998 issue of the architecture journal Daidalos, dedicated to the ‘construction’ of atmospheres, questioned why the notion lacks attention within the profession. He argued that the discussion of atmosphere in architecture entails, by definition, a certain ambiguity. After all, atmosphere is something personal, vague, ephemeral and difficult to capture in text or design, impossible to define or analyse. Atmosphere, Wigley says, is precisely that which evades analysis. Although atmosphere can perhaps be seen as the essence of architecture, it is not easily defined, let alone constructed or controlled.² Today, 15 years after the publication of this inspiring issue of Daidalos, the theme has lost none of its relevance. On the contrary, after a period in which ‘programme’, ‘data’ and ‘image’ reigned supreme, we are witnessing a renewed search for atmosphere in many contemporary architecture practices.

And indeed, as Wigley suggested, in making this issue of OASE we experienced that such questions lack ‘easy’ answers. Nevertheless, just as Argentine poet Jorge Louis Borges said of poetry that it cannot be defined but can be recognised, in fact that we can only truly know it when we are unable to define it,³ atmosphere too is a phenomenon that, though difficult to pin down, at least can be identified intuitively. Using the notion of intuition inherently suggests that atmosphere is part of what can be called common sense: knowledge and experience embedded in a larger community, able to be shared and exchanged. Atmosphere exists where architecture, beyond its autonomous trajectory, its technical apparatus, and its programmatic approach, is connected with the surpassing of daily use. And by doing so it bridges the gap between professionals and laymen, since it affects both. Atmosphere delivers, moreover, a conscious experience of room, place, space – an experience that lasts.⁴

Likewise, the process of this issue of OASE started from intuition. Since the questions we want to raise in this issue, such as how atmosphere is present in and through architecture, and how architects can construct atmospheres, cannot be answered in a mere rational sense, we have felt that the best way to prepare for the conversations is to investigate our own intuitive associations with atmosphere by collecting photographs and words from our own memory and experience. We started to collect, roam around, and read. We gradually sketched around the topic, in words and images, and only slowly did things fall into place. Old places visited, the reflection of water, a tree, stacked stones and a lady in a flower dress. The memory of movement in sand, chairs in a dark place, a curtain. A concrete house designed by Belgian architect Lampens, hidden between trees; the tree-filtered light in the interior
landscape. What intuition revealed to us, through these images, was an emphasis on material, texture and tactility, as well as on light, shadow and aging, or to put it differently, the images showed ‘experiences’, evoking sensory perceptions, and stirring the mind. Our personal research, investigating how atmosphere is inextricably linked with spatial experience and architectural quality, resulted in the booklet Stepping Stones from which a selection of images is included in this editorial. The booklet was the starting point of our conversations with the two leading voices in this issue of OASE: Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor.

Both Peter Zumthor and Juhani Pallasmaa have identified atmosphere as a core theme of architecture. Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa argues that the experience of atmosphere can be related to the concept of spatial quality: ‘The quality of a space or place is not merely a visual perceptual quality as is usually assumed. The judgement of environmental character is a complex multi-sensory fusion of countless factors, which are immediately and synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere, feeling, mood or ambiance.’ At atmosphere is an essential concept for Swiss architect Peter Zumthor as well. In his text Atmospheres (1996) Zumthor identified a series of themes that play a role in his work in achieving architectonic atmosphere, including ‘material compatibility’, ‘the temperature of a space’, ‘levels of intimacy’ and ‘architecture as environment’. The two architects address atmosphere in different ways: while Pallasmaa reflects on the relation of atmosphere with other crucial aspects of architectural experience in a theoretical sense, Zumthor directly uses atmosphere as a guiding principle in his architectural practice. For this issue, OASE invited Peter Zumthor and Juhani Pallasmaa to engage in a conversation about ‘building atmosphere’.

With Juhani Pallasmaa, who we visited in his office in Helsinki around midsummer 2013, we discussed how atmospheres are constructed in, for instance, painting, literature and music, adjoining professional fields that, according to him, reveal much of the essences of the field of architecture. Concerning the role of the architect, Pallasmaa identified a need for a certain balance between naivety and expertise to develop a sensibility for atmospheres – which may very well be, as he stated during the interview, our sixth sense. In any case, Pallasmaa argued, atmosphere is immediately experienced as a unity, in which all senses are simultaneously at work. The experience of atmospheric quality in architecture, then, is by definition an embodied experience. However, since architecture is subject to use, atmosphere is by no means a merely individual task. Pallasmaa noted, moreover, that it is crucial for architects to empathise with users, clients and other perceivers of architecture, no matter how anonymous or distant they may seem. He thus considered, next to embodiment, compassion as a necessary skill for architects to be able to build atmosphere. In addition to this interview, Pallasmaa shares his experience of Frank Lloyd Wrights Taliesin West studios in Arizona, where he resided for some months in 2012-2013. He reflects on the atmospheric qualities of the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, using the word orchestration ‘to emphasise his intuitive manner of integration through similarity and contrast into a unified, but dynamic unity, as in musical counterpoint’.

In the winter of 2013, we visited Zumthor in his atelier in the Swiss mountain village Haldenstein. During a day at his office we witnessed the modus operandi of the atelier, literally following Zumthor in his daily practice, joining him on a tour through
the office, and took part in numerous small project discussions with Zumthor and his team around models and drawings. The transcription of this visit, published in this OASE, describes how themes such as landscape, character, materiality and reality guide the building of atmosphere in his projects. It becomes clear that these themes are not conceptually approached and discussed: rather, they are embedded in the way of making. Models play a prominent role in this making. While the visit to Haldenstein is portrayed in an anecdotic mode, offering the reader a close, almost participatory view of the way ‘atmospheres’ are built in the Zumthor office, in an added article written by Mathieu Berteloot and Véronique Patteeuw OASE also presents a theoretical investigation that distinguishes a number of guiding principles in Zumthor’s work though the use of models.

While the conversations with Zumthor and Pallasmaa form the guidelines of the issue, presenting both a reflective (Pallasmaa) and an operational (Zumthor) architectural view, this issue also delves further, in a theoretical sense, into the definition of atmosphere as a dynamic interaction among objective architectonic aspects and their subjective perception. To achieve this OASE introduces the German philosopher Gernot Böhme as a third voice in the conversation.

Böhme, in the aforementioned issue of Daidalos, argued that atmosphere may be a conjunction of personal and emotional impressions of space, but this conjunction is reproduced by the objective assembly of materials, spatial proportions, the aging of the materials, the connections of the materials and the connections to the place or other buildings, rhythms, light, etcetera. Atmospheres, Böhme continues, are ‘characteristic manifestations of the co-presence of subject and object’. The way we experience atmosphere is determined by many aspects, and as such scarcely definable, but what can be concluded is that atmosphere is first and foremost a total experience, not a mere accumulation of constituent aspects. To give room in this issue for an in-depth theoretical reflection on atmosphere, the volume includes a text from Gernot Böhme’s seminal book Architektur und Atmosphäre. As a primer for the interviews with Pallasmaa and Zumthor, this essay forms the theoretical opening of the issue, constructing a foundation on the basis of which a definition of atmosphere as a dynamic interaction among objective architectonic aspects and their subjective perception can be drawn. Further, and following the contributions by Zumthor and Pallasmaa, Böhme reflects on the notion of atmosphere in the work of both protagonists in a separate article, especially written for OASE.

After these intuitive, theoretical and reflective investigations, this issue once more returns to the operational potential of the concept of atmosphere, urging the question of design, as in the quote of Zumthor above: ‘How can I get it into my own work?’

We wondered how the interest in such an elusive concept as atmosphere relates to the concrete practice of building: How does the search for atmosphere work within the design process in relation to the notions of material, craft and detail? More specifically: Is it actually possible to build atmosphere? Therefore this OASE features a number of architectural projects: a church in Helsinki and one in Berlin, a social housing block in Amsterdam, and a public space in Ghent. These projects, that were chosen because of a specific materiality or program, are investigated and presented through two perspectives: an artist provides a reflection upon the spatial experience, while an architect rethinks the theme of atmosphere and design through this very project.

Where Pallasmaa uses the word orchestration when discussing the intuitive
manner of integration of different parts by Frank Lloyd Wright, an analogy to music is also at stake in the church in Myyrmäki, Helsinki, a work by Finnish architect Juha Leiviskä from the 1980s. Here, the atmosphere is light, rhythmical and fragile, addressed through a poem by Klaske Havik and a reflection by Gus Tielens. An entirely different atmospheric quality than one we find in Zumthor’s buildings, which are more grounded and heavy. The church in Berlin by Werner Duttman, presented by means of an essay by Vincent Kompier and a poem by Maria Barnas, is characterised by the strong material presence we also know from Zumthor’s work. If atmospheric quality can be achieved in buildings embedded in a powerful landscape, such as is the case with Taliesin West, or in sacral buildings, we wondered whether attempts to build atmosphere have any chance in more mundane assignments like social housing, where only limited budgets are available and the landscape or urban context does not offer much to hold on to. OASE editor Gus Tielens confronted her own work for a social housing block in an Amsterdam suburb with a reading by film directors Nanouk Leopold and Daan Emmen. Hans Teerds found the key to this project’s atmosphere in the threshold zone between public and private, specifically in the collective entrance, indeed the primary architectural element of the entrance that Juhani Pallasmaa suggests in his interview, which allows for a moment of atmospheric experience.

Finally, architect and novelist Christophe van Gerrewey ponders whether atmosphere, which he defines as an intimate relationship between building and man, can exist outside the private house. The recently built market hall in Ghent, designed by Robbrecht en Daem architecten and Marie-José van Hee, is a public building that provokes such a relationship. OASE chose to portray, by means of the work of young Belgian photographer Frederik Sadones, this building from its silent, subdued side. Indeed, the complex relationship between man and architecture – being at once mindful and embodied, simultaneously evoking energy and silence, materially grounded and touched by light, alive and ageless – is what we encountered when building this OASE issue on atmosphere.

Klaske Havik, Gus Tielens, Hans Teerds

Notes:
3 ‘We might say that we know something only when we are unable to define it. . . . This is what we know what poetry is. We know it so well that we cannot define it.’ – Jorge Luis Borges, from the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1967-1968, in: This Craft of Verse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
4 Compare with Gerard Visser, De druk van de believing: Filosofie en kunst in een domein van overgang en ondergang (Nijmegen, Uitgeverij SUN, 1998).
7 Zumthor, op. cit. (note 1), 13.