

Special issue:

Phenomenographies

Describing urban and architectural atmospheres

Proposition

The 2019 special issue of Ambiances intends to gauge the breadth and scope of phenomenographies, thereby meaning the vast variety of methods and techniques adopted to describe the atmospheric qualities of lived space, especially in a cross-disciplinary context. Phenomenographical accounts do not simply aim at providing a representation of phenomena: they should be considered as tools to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of space, and to sustain design practices that anticipate their transformation.

Atmosphere, mood, Stimmung

Atmosphere, mood, Stimmung are phenomenological notions that, among other aims, describe the affective content of space, considered in its transient, situational manifestation. In both architectural design and research, these concepts represent powerful tools to express all that exceeds the physical constitution of the built environment, agencies that may have little or no material presence, yet nevertheless profoundly affect subjects' emotional and bodily states. As such, these concepts also have an influential role in debates crossing disciplinary boundaries, encompassing the fields of aesthetics, phenomenology, embodiment, politics of atmospheres, material culture, and affective geographies. However, although the built environment is a prominent element in these discussions, the resulting insights and descriptions of atmospheres have often been limited their ability to inform design practices. As a constituent part of lived space, emerging solely through the subject's direct embodied experience, atmospheres can only be investigated and represented through mediated tools, such as first-person accounts, autoethnographies, promenades, parours commentés, or properly architectural visualizations relying on a variety of techniques. Second-person accounts may include interviews; quantitative methods attempt to trace physiological and perceptual responses of individuals to spatial conditions, while third-person descriptions sometimes favor frontal and oculo-centric views, that can erroneously border into "touristic" clichés. Accordingly, it might be argued that atmospheres are by definition impossible to frame in any univocal way and thus can benefit from the cross-disciplinary knowledge base and richness of methodological approaches. At the same time, there is a need to understand how their representation may become a more defined and precise field of inquiry, eventually feeding into the process of urban and architectural design.

Topics

Methods of description: phenomenographies across disciplines

Across disciplines, a wealth of methodologies addresses the representation of lived space, through panoramic approaches or by focusing on specific aspects of sensorial stimulation, such as light, sound, or smell. Cities and buildings serve as testing grounds for these descriptions, but the results often appear to reduce the depth of spatial experience to its analytical components. In this sense, what methods of description can present atmospheres in their pervasive nature, without falling into reductionism? Can the notion of atmospheres, by virtue of its intrinsically interdisciplinary nature, be a fruitful ground for the development of mixed methodologies that incorporate different perspectives?

Bridging the gap between qualitative and quantitative accounts

The recent infusion of architectural and urban theory with knowledge from cognitive sciences presents a new avenue to investigate the embodied and affective experience of spatial settings. The question of atmospheres, however, remains underexplored from both the theoretical and experimental perspectives. In this sense, how can different methods and interdisciplinary approaches probe the link between embodiment, affect, and atmospheres, where the practices of description and experimentation range from first- and second-person experiential accounts to third-person methods that capture physiological and perceptual responses? How can a cross-disciplinary understanding of embodiment and affect – encompassing diverse fields such as architecture, philosophy of mind, cognitive neuroscience, affective geography, anthropology – provide a richer conceptual grounding of atmospheres and perhaps, inform design and scientific hypotheses? How can scientific experimentation expand our theoretical and design-oriented understanding of atmospheres?

Atmospheric images: visualizing lived space

Architectural design relies on a strong tradition in the production of atmospheric representations of spaces, from Piranesi's Carceri to contemporary photorealistic renderings. These often leverage on artistic techniques, adapting them to the forecasting of future transformations; furthermore, visual representations of existing spaces through various media, such as photography or film, are capable of incorporating affective expression beyond the mere measured restitution of physical reality. How can the use of images and increasingly present technologies, such as augmented and virtual reality, lead to the emergence of atmospheric feeling? What non-metric visualizations of space, e.g. those adopting tonal or metaphoric techniques, are capable of conveying the deep sense of lived experience?

From theory to design practices

The representation of atmospheres, in both existing situations and future projections, is a powerful tool to understand the immaterial aspects of lived space. There is, however, the need to understand the possibilities of transition from theory to design, of how phenomenographical practices feed into the process of architectural conception. How can these descriptions of space bridge between the poetic and technical aspects of architectural conception, while maintaining the translatability of analytical results in a "design-friendly" language? In the context of user-centered design approaches, e.g. participatory design or co-design, can atmospheres become a tool to capture the richness of the users' experience, as mediator in the conversation? Finally, what can the application of phenomenographical practices bring to (architectural) education?

What places feel like: urban and architectural narratives

Literary and philosophical accounts of the spatial experience of cities and buildings often provide representations of atmospheres that express the supervenience beyond the environment's physical constitution, challenging us to reflect in depth on the controversial issue of the cognitive penetrability of perceptions. These descriptions can explore the living fabric of human presence in places, granting access to phenomena that may otherwise be overseen, yet, as shared emotions, become central to what actually happens in spaces. How can phenomenographical accounts voice the affective nature of impalpable notions such as *conflict*, *fear*, *comfort*, *belonging*, *history*, and the like? In which way can this insight become active in the conception of spatial transformations?

Papers

We strongly encourage contributions that address the above topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, crossing between fields such as architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, visual arts, geography, anthropology, cognitive science, philosophy and literature. Papers may address theoretical questions, discuss methodologies, focus on relevant case studies or merge different approaches.

Special issue editors

Mikkel Bille, Anthropologist, Associate Professor at Roskilde University

Federico De Matteis, Architect, Associate Professor at the University of L'Aquila

Tonino Griffero, Philosopher, Professor of Aesthetics at the University of Rome Tor Vergata

Andrea Jelić, Architect, Postdoctoral Researcher at Aalborg University



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