

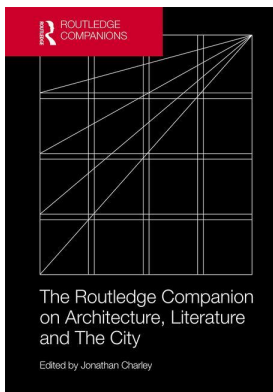
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## **The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature and The City**

Jonathan Charley

### **Writing atmospheres**

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## Writing atmospheres

### Literary methods to investigate the thresholds of architectural experience

*Klaske Havik*

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*The low afternoon sun, straight from the west, ahead of me, lit the pavement and facades of the Grotemarktstraat as if to set them on fire. No flames, just warmth. The pedestrians and cyclists all became evenly soft and dissolving figures, actors in the scene of an old movie, and I was one of them, just until the shock of recognition made me stop. I had to turn, step out, walk back and stay in that very moment for just a little longer in order to fully grasp it, to frame, take notice how the street was alive and brought to life by light and figures. I had to stop to be able to write about it now, a day later in an airplane to other cities, I had to stop since she not only offered me that moment but also demanded me to receive it and to reveal it, to you: she made me act. The city speaks, and I reply in silent words, later, on a page.*

How do people experience and remember their cities? How are the places they inhabit, visit or long for anchored in their minds? And how can such experiences be studied in terms of their atmospheric properties? “We have to find a different way of talking about, describing and planning our cities that suggest thinking of them as places for our bodies (and our souls); remember how mutable is our way of perceiving the urban environment,”<sup>1</sup> said Mirko Zardini. He aptly formulated the need for a “sensorial” approach to urbanism, that takes into account “experience as a potential tool to properly calibrate the relationship between inhabitants and the built environment.”<sup>2</sup> He states that “we need to discover the possibilities provided by the urban environment in its various aspects – those of sound, smell, touch, vision and climate – and to look at them in new ways.”<sup>3</sup> The affective relationships that people establish with places are simultaneously conscious and embodied, material and conceptual, spatial and temporal – relations, indeed, where the notion of *atmosphere* appears as a mediating force. Atmosphere, described by German philosopher Gernot Böhme as the coming together of objective, spatial and material arrangements and the embodied, perceiving subject,<sup>4</sup> is a crucial notion to conceptualize the complex affective relations between citizens and urban space. Its vagueness – resulting from this position in between subject and object – might at first seem to render such a notion unsuitable for analysis, in contrast however, as Italian philosopher Tonino Griffero argues, atmosphere is “philosophically interesting not *despite* but *precisely because* of its vagueness.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, if we aim to better understand urban atmospheres, we need to find ways to produce “atmospheric description” which “designates a vague entity in a precise way.”<sup>6</sup>

In the past decades, the theme of atmosphere has been surprisingly absent from architectural discourse. From the times when modernist thinking and its related faith in scientific objectivity prevailed, to recent decades in which image-culture was celebrated and architecture was mediatized by means of icons made by “starchitects”, atmosphere as an unfocused, vague notion, connected to site-specificity and memory, had indeed little chance to be taken seriously.<sup>7</sup> It is probably true to say that in the language of ‘modernist’ architectural education, words such as atmosphere, character and beauty have long been absent. Today, renewed interest in these themes is noticeable, and a growing number of architects, urban planners and students have rediscovered atmosphere as an essential quality of architecture and urban space. The challenge for architects, urban planners and researchers in these fields is to find appropriate methods to explore atmospheres. While conventional architectural tools such as maps, plans and sections may help to design some conditions for atmospheric spaces they need to be complemented with others that better address the complexity of architectural experience. It is literary language that may provide researchers of architecture and urban places with the appropriate tools to do so. In literary descriptions of architecture in novels, stories and poems, atmosphere is often eloquently brought to the fore. If writers and poets are able to capture atmospheres in their work, literary methods may provide ways for architects, urban planners and researchers in this field to be equally sensitive to the atmospheric possibilities of place. A further investigation into the relationship between atmosphere, language and space would help us understand urban atmosphere as the conscious and embodied, material and conceptual, spatial and temporal relations between people and their environment.

Phenomenological discourse, which investigates the embodied experience of the world around us, provides a crucial point of departure for research into the atmospheric qualities of urban places. From this perspective, Alberto Pérez-Gómez pleads for a balanced (*attuned*) relationship between man and his environment. In *Attunement* (2016), he investigates the related notions of “stimmung” and atmosphere.<sup>8</sup> He suggests that it is through the linguistic dimension of architecture that we are able to make sense of ‘attuned’ atmosphere. It is my intention to further explore how insights derived from the skills of literary writers to observe, describe and evoke atmospheres can become operative as analytical methods to understand and conceptualize the ambiguities and complexities of architectural experience.

### Atmosphere as threshold – and the mediating capacity of literary writing

Atmosphere is essentially ambiguous, always mediating between seemingly opposite notions, such as subject-object, individual-collective, naivety-expertise, here-there, parts-whole. Working on the *Building Atmosphere* issue of *OASE* journal of architecture with Peter Zumthor, Juhani Pallasmaa and Gernot Böhme in 2013, we repeatedly found ourselves balancing on such thresholds, and concluded that atmosphere is situated in “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 agelessness.”<sup>9</sup> In the same journal issue, Gernot Böhme suggested we see atmosphere as an intermediary “between mindful physical presence and the body, between sensitivity and activity, between the real and reality.”<sup>10</sup> In a later discussion he added more explicitly that atmosphere “is essentially *in between*, and that means in particular between subject and object.”<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, if atmosphere mediates between the embodied and the conscious, we may discuss the position a researcher of atmosphere must take: that of the naïve, receptive observer, or that of the informed expert? If atmosphere is an all-encompassing experience, an

impression of the totality of a place, how does such a whole relate to the multitude of parts it consists of? And how does atmosphere mediate between different temporalities, between traces of the past and the very moment of its experience?

In *A Place Between*, Jane Rendell argues for an in-between position in writing about art and architecture: “a ‘voice’ in criticism can be objective *and* subjective, distant *and* intimate.”<sup>12</sup> This position of the author, being situated precisely between seemingly opposite notions, addresses such different categories simultaneously, and offers a productive starting point for evoking atmospheres in writing. The gaze of literary writers provides ways to address such seemingly contradictory ideas and to replace dualist thought with a more open, experiential mode of investigation. Indeed, literature deals almost by definition with subjective experience and may give objects and places identity; it experiments with the interactivity between the writer who initiates a story and the reader who co-produces it; it balances between a given reality and the imagination of other possible situations. In the following paragraphs, I will highlight some of these *in-betweens*, those thresholds where atmosphere resides, and show how literary language, that precisely operates on such thresholds, can offer new directions for research.

### Between subject and object: evocative description

*old wall, standing silently in rain  
in your cracks the roots of life.  
I am you, I am your stones, a hand touches  
my rough surface, in passing.*

According to Böhme, one of the preconditions for atmosphere to exist is the simultaneous presence of a subject and an object. An atmosphere can only be experienced by a perceiving subject, and vice versa, some physical object is needed for someone to experience atmosphere at all. It is precisely in the interplay between these that atmosphere arises. As Merleau-Ponty suggested, the relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object, and their interactivity, is at stake in our perception – and thereby in any attempt to define atmospheres. If, as researchers of architectural atmospheres, we aim to find out “whether it is possible to transcribe into words the experience of a given ambiance and to describe it articulately,”<sup>13</sup> then it is useful to turn to poetic language. As Bachelard has argued, it is the great capacity of poets to “note how things speak to us.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, in poems, objects may have the faculty of speech and subjects may identify with objects. In *Thanks to Things*, Dutch poet Rutger Kopland spoke for instance of: “the night in which / the deadly silent window breathes again / with sleeping crowns in the wind.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in this fragment, “the duality of subject and object is iridescent, shimmering, unceasingly active in its inversions”, as Bachelard formulated so aptly in his discussion of the poetic image.<sup>16</sup>

An atmospheric analysis requires a physical encounter with a place. “The very possibility of the appearance of things – of objects, self and others is possible only within the all-embracing compass of place”, states Jeff Malpas, “. . . it is, indeed, in and through place that the world presents itself.”<sup>17</sup> Investigating a site-specific atmosphere, entails taking time to absorb different sensory perceptions, to wander around, closely observing and describing phenomenological and atmospheric aspects of a place and our bodily and cognitive responses to it. Not only should we take notice of spatial arrangements and of material, textural and luminous details, we should also note how these aspects affect our perceptions and associations. Such a meticulous experiential analysis asks for poetic language rather than the factual language of prose and science to bring across atmospheric qualities. To verbalize such responses, we may turn to synaesthetic descriptions – descriptions which seek connections between different senses based on what one

might call “emotional similarity”: “synaesthetic constellations of words such as cold glass and steel, warm bricks, sharp or heavy tone.”<sup>18</sup> Also, associations and observations may be translated into metaphors, through the comparison of atmospheric aspects to other, external situations. Importantly, after the collection of material comes the process of selection. This involves stripping down all the impressions, sensory details, associations and metaphors to the bare essence of what makes the site specific and remarkable. In this it resembles the work of a poet, who has only words to mould his or her impressions into a condensed but highly communicable expression of atmosphere. For the Dutch poet Hans Lodeizen, the light and weather conditions of the city, “a breathing animal, giving light and being dark”<sup>19</sup> often set the tone of his poems. In New York, he described the atmosphere of Central Park, and of the roofscape after rain:

*there I stand now, as the elevated  
mist of a metropole, smiling  
over the roofs, a half-understood joke  
and meanwhile the parks weep  
as the trees without happiness<sup>20</sup>*  
...  
*like this, morning after morning, the city rises  
pale in the mist as a girl after  
a wedding night and in the streets the labyrinth  
of the heart that walking and murmuring  
streams up and down in the houses.<sup>21</sup>*

### Between individual and collective: writing through the eyes of another

*We gathered in a restaurant I remembered, in a town where I had lived. Its windows facing a small canal, on its side a quiet alley. We sat around a wooden table in the back of the room, on what seemed to be a former church bench. Some paintings of Venice -where some of us had been, last year- on the walls. We shared that space, our memories, and thoughts.*

We perceive atmospheres individually, as indeed, atmosphere requires a physical presence of a perceiving subject in space. Descriptions of atmosphere thus depend on the perceiving subject and are therefore subjective. Though everyone can perceive atmospheres, different people will have different responses, depending on their relation to the place, their own background, their memories, their moods. In his discussion about the experience of place, Jeff Malpas argues that objectivity (the place itself), self-subjectivity (how I see the place) and other-subjectivity (how others see the place) are mutually dependent:

only given a grasp of the possibility of different but simultaneous perspectives on the world – a grasp of simultaneously existing yet distinct subjectivity spaces that implies a grasp of both one’s own subjectivity and the subjectivity of others – can one arrive at a grasp of the concept of an object as capable of giving rise to distinct but simultaneous presentations.<sup>22</sup>

The same object can thus evoke different views at the same time. In daily life, we can to a large extent communicate about atmosphere, and more or less agree about the perceived atmosphere of a certain place or occasion. To some extent, “atmosphere is part of what can be called common sense: knowledge and experience embedded in a larger community, able to be shared and exchanged.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, atmosphere is an architectural quality, which can be experienced by professionals and users, by people of all ages, by inhabitants or visitors. Speaking

about architecture and urbanism in terms of atmosphere may even offer an opportunity to deal with the gap between professionals and the general public. The question arises as to whether such reverberations are possible in terms of research into atmosphere, and in what ways our investigations of atmospheres can be transferred to others. Again, the comparison with poetry occurs: how can the singular, subjective experience of the poet be translated into words in such a way that it becomes understandable, communicable, and so that the poetic image reverberates, that is coincides, with the mind, emotions and associations of the reader? In this regard, Bachelard speaks of “transsubjectivity”: it is indeed possible that the images and sensations evoked by the poem stir in the mind of the reader memories and imaginations that make the reader “live” a poem. Does such transsubjectivity also apply to atmospheres? Can we speak about our personal atmospheric encounters in ways that others can recognize?

Whilst our own impressions of atmosphere are of crucial importance to our investigations, and we can find modes of writing that allow us to closely “read” and describe atmospheres, research cannot rely only on the perceptions of a single person. Again, the mediating character of atmosphere comes to the fore: it mediates between places and the people using them. We thus need to find methods which allow for multiple voices to be heard. In literature, atmospheric descriptions of places are often linked to characters. Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul* is by no means neutral: the city’s atmosphere is coloured by the memories, expectations and perceptions of the protagonist, just like Marcel Proust’s descriptions of the French countryside and Parisian public spaces rely on the age and changing memories of the protagonist, experiencing them at different times in his life. An excellent example of looking at one place from the perspective of multiple characters is James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, in which the city of Dublin is depicted through the eyes of multiple characters from different social groups, each having their own ways of perceiving the city. In architecture, John Hejduk would speak of the subjects and objects of the city, using different characters such as a bridge man, a park attendant, a wood cutter, nail woman, a botanist or even a “curator of Japanese armour” to feature in his readings of cities<sup>24</sup> (Hejduk, 1993, 24–26). As mentioned previously, Juhani Pallasmaa also speaks about empathy as a crucial skill for architects, and stresses the importance to design of engaging with the needs and desires of possible future users:

[t]he only proper way to deal with the everyday practice of architecture is that the architect internalises the client. ... The spaces have to be occupied and lived during the design process, and only the architect can project that imaginary life.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, if we address atmosphere as an active relationship between places and people, if we address the tension between the individual experience and the collective sharing of atmospheres, we should acknowledge the necessity of including multiple voices in our investigations. Involving existing users in the research of places helps to gain greater knowledge about the relationship between people and places on a daily basis. Through interviews people can be asked for their personal impressions: how do they feel about the place, which emotions does it evoke, what are their memories and associations, which materials, details and characteristics bear meaning to them? A source of such impressions is found in their daily trajectories in the city: when narrated or drawn in cognitive maps, these spatial biographies reveal daily routines and relationships with place.<sup>26</sup> While such personal accounts of architectural experiences are based upon the observation of existing inhabitants, fiction can be an instrument in imagining new users and experiences. Specifying characters in terms of their age (a child, for instance, perceives a place differently and looks at other details than an adult), physical condition (an elderly person would move with more effort and notice obstacles in a

more dominant way) or preferred senses (for example, visually impaired people would stress the use of other senses) offers the possibility to include other aspects than we would do if we were only to take ourselves as a reference point. Fictional characters thus force us to distance ourselves from our own perspectives, to develop empathy for the experiences, needs and wishes of other characters, and to see the place with different eyes.

### Between naivety and expertise: automatic writing

*Our tents stood at the edge of a cornfield. It was early in the morning when I opened the tent, which I shared with my little sister. A flurry of fog above the cornfield, the grass under my feet still wet. Standing in front of the tent opening, I got dressed - no socks, no shoes. Bare feet gave me a sense of freedom. I walked along the tents until the end of the field, and then entered a dark path between the trees, which lead to an old barn. I walked silently to the big cages, where chicken and other birds resided. The animals walked and fluttered behind the wire. The turkeys looked mean and made a screaming noise. I heard the sound of a creaking door. A woman stood in front of the barn. I could not see her face in the shadow. I walked slowly to the barn. I stepped on a stinging-nettle, but walked on. When I was close to her, she greeted. Her face was friendly, grey hair hung in a string on her back. "Are all those animals yours?" I asked her and she nodded. A grey and red parrot sat next to her on a stick. It was dark inside, I saw sofa's and a wooden table. Flowers in buckets, two cats sleeping in a zinc tub. I touched all things with my fingers: the flowers, the sofa's, the uneven edge of the wooden table. Then I saw the vase, on top of a cabinet. It was filled with tall feathers ending in the shape of an eye, purple, blue and green. I stared. "Do you like them?" she asked. The woman pointed at the door opening, where one of the peacocks passed. "Pay attention", she said. The big bird shook his head and then lifted his tail. Thousand purple-green eyes looked at me. Gently, I approached the peacock, but he dropped his tail and walked away, nodding. I did not dare to say anything. The woman laughed at me, picked one of the feathers from the vase and handed it to me. "What you have seen there, is art."*

An atmospheric approach to site analysis requires first and foremost, an open, receptive mind-set in the researcher. As the Dutch philosopher Ton Lemaire argues, when pondering the perception of landscapes, the practice of poetry has the capability "to amplify and solidify the awareness and experience of things."<sup>27</sup> We need to open, as it were, our senses to be able to perceive such amplified experiences. As phenomenological theorists contend, the challenge is to set aside preconceptions and allow ourselves to perceive before reflecting upon these perceptions. Therefore, a certain form of naivety is necessary: we need to be able to experience things as new. As Bachelard argued, we need to "forget knowing", not in the literal sense, but as "a difficult transcendence of knowledge."<sup>28</sup> The Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa created a heteronym for this purpose, the poet Alberto Caeiro, whom he gave the skill to "know how to see without thinking / to know how to see when one sees / and not to think when one sees."<sup>29</sup>

Both Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor, in our interviews for OASE, touched upon the balance between naivety and expertise in the creative process of design. Pallasmaa stated that while an architect needs to be an expert, and present his/her expertise to the outside world, uncertainty is just as essential.

An architect needs to be a credible actor, surely. You need to behave as if you know. That is because of our culture: only people who know, who show their knowledge, are respected in our culture. Not the ones who do not know and confess that they don't know. Nevertheless, I render the uncertainty of not knowing much more important in processes of creativity.<sup>30</sup>

In a similar vein, Peter Zumthor, often relies on childhood memories for his judgement of architectural details: “memories like these contain the deepest architectural experience that I know.”<sup>31</sup> In his architectural projects, he asks his assistants to work from a sort of non-expert, non-intellectual position. He encourages them to make decisions based on intuition rather than expertise.

I want them simply to say: ‘I like it’ or ‘I don’t like it’. You have to allow yourself to be concentrated. Just being there, doing your thing. It sounds like a contradiction but it is a relaxed concentration. The trick is thus to take away the pressure of rationalization. To be connected to your feelings. To really feel the things and see them. This is confidence. This is concentrated confidence.<sup>32</sup>

Of course, an architect (or researcher in the field of architecture, for that matter) cannot rely on confidence alone; on the contrary, only when balanced with expertise do these “naive” observations become productive in achieving atmospheric architecture. It is thus a matter of allowing for moments of intense observation, and to pair the observation only afterwards with professional knowledge. How can a researcher in the field of architecture, trained to reflect and consciously deal with knowledge, create moments of productive receptivity?

Turning to literature, the exercises practiced by surrealist writers that rule out rationality and give priority to their imagination, can come in very useful. “The mind which plunges into Surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood” states André Bréton in his *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (2010), “from childhood memories, and from a few others, there emanates a sense of being un-integrated, and then later of *having gone astray* which I hold to be the most fertile that exists.”<sup>33</sup> “Automatic writing” (also called pure psychic automatism), for instance, entails that the writer for a period of time keeps on writing without stopping, no matter what thoughts or associations occur in his or her mind. The writing simply follows the thoughts, impressions and associations of the writer without reflecting on them and without being able to select or judge the text while writing. It is important not to stop even for a moment, so that the flow of thoughts continue without restriction, and so that the most spontaneous metaphors and associations can freely appear. In surrealist writing, therefore, different spatial images and temporalities may merge, since one thought can lead to another and associations with one situation may evoke memories or imaginations of others. The metaphor is therefore a figure frequently used by surrealist writers, it is this point, where differences seem to come together, that new imaginations emerge. In Arragon’s *Paris Peasant*, the Passage de l’Opéra is seen as;

...a big glass coffin, and like that same whiteness deified since the times when people worshipped it in Roman suburbs, still presides of the double game of love and death... In the changing light of the arcades, a light ranging from the brightness of the tomb to the shadow of sensual pleasure, delicious girls can be seen serving both cults...<sup>34</sup>

His description of a Parisian arcade carries the reader convincingly from an initially accurate description of the spatial dimensions and materialities of the arcade to a wild series of associations caused by the many small shops with their shopping windows, leading to other imagined worlds. Other surrealist techniques celebrating a sense of naivety as a creative force are the narrated dream or writing from a state of daydreaming. Aragon describes how his own daydreaming imagination is stimulated by the presence of the bars in the very space he is describing; he speaks literally about “the role of played by bar and café owners: yet they



are the people who make a very real contribution to the maintenance of true civilisation,”<sup>35</sup> and he continues:

And how easy it is, amidst this enviable peace, to start daydreaming. Reverie imposes its presence, unaided. Here surrealism resumes all its rights. They give you a glass inkwell with a champagne cork for a stopper, and you are away! Images flutter down like confetti. Images, images everywhere. On the ceiling. In the armchairs wickerwork. In the glasses’ drinking straws. In the telephone switchboard. In the sparkling air. In the iron lanterns which light the room.<sup>36</sup>

Bachelard also referred to this state of *reverie* as crucial in the coming into existence of poetic images. As André Breton described, such imaginations occur at “a certain point of the mind in which life and death, the real and the imagined, past and present, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, if atmosphere is a threshold, a matter of both the physical and mindful, subject and object, naivety and expertise, it is through such writing, that is the bringing together of seemingly contradicting notions, that it may be captured and become communicable.

### Between parts and whole: focused fragments

*there it is. the house on the hill  
could it really be built out of blind walls  
the path a dead-end street? come closer.  
touch the rough material, question  
how impenetrable these walls are  
what hides behind the holes  
whose hands once poured the concrete  
- it seems to breathe. and that  
that is the strange part  
that it is nowhere black  
and nowhere really white  
it is just how the light falls*

The experience of atmosphere is tied to the immediate: it “happens” the moment that one is present in a place, it is the encounter between the place and one’s being at a specific moment. We are thus able to grasp the specific atmospheres of places in an instance, even if such atmospheres are complex and composed of multiple aspects. Pallasmaa speaks of atmospheric experience as all-encompassing:

Our perception and understanding does not process from details towards entity but the other way around: from entity to details. This is an essential aspect of atmosphere: it is an immediate experience of the whole, the entity, and only later can one distinguish the details that are part of it.<sup>38</sup>

While the experience of atmospheres thus departs from the whole, in the making of atmosphere, details are crucial. Peter Zumthor, for instance, isolates in his design process the different aspects, such as form, materiality and structure, and stresses the need to work on them separately. According to Zumthor, each of the many different aspects that make up an atmosphere, require full and isolated focus within the design process.<sup>39</sup> This balance between parts and whole not only occurs in the making of architectural atmospheres, but

also influences the ways in which we can approach atmosphere in research. Thibaud and Siret notice that when aiming to qualitatively describe experiences “we see that the milieu splits into a set of different sensory ambiances, which specify situations that are actually experienced.”<sup>40</sup> While a totality of atmosphere may be described in terms of metaphor or synaesthetic expressions, its different constituent parts such as materiality, texture, sound, structure, temperature, rhythm, light and shadow and the different senses at stake when perceiving atmospheres, require attention separately.

In the literature of Italo Calvino, examples of descriptions focusing on one single aspect can be found. In *Under the Jaguar Sun* each short story is dedicated to one of the senses; in the well-known *Invisible Cities*, containing fifty-two short stories, each highlight one single aspect of the city, but when read together describe the city in all its layered complexity. This idea of isolating specific aspects to describe them in full detail, or in the case of *Invisible Cities*, even to exaggerate their characteristics, is a useful tool in the investigation of atmospheres. If we force ourselves, for instance, to focus exclusively on sounds when describing an atmospheric experience, we will start to notice its influence much more precisely. Also, repeating such descriptive exercises at different times of the day, helps to understand the temporal dimension of atmospheric experience: the atmosphere of a place can be completely different when seen at dawn, in the midst of the day when many activities take place, or at night-time, while seasonal aspects greatly influence our perceptions as well. By the use of separation and repetition in writing, atmosphere can thus be dissected into a series of focused fragments.

### Between here and there, now and then: metaphor, memory and montage

*where does one reside when  
floating above trees or seas from place  
to place, arriving in a silent night, exchanging,  
in a taxi on an empty road some words of darkness  
in a language, parking at a door?  
I place my coat on a rack and  
let my letters float into an evening  
into a time-difference, an hour, a year  
a life? and I remember  
being in a room, before*

While atmospheres are thus experienced in immediacy, depending on the physical presence of a subject in a specific place, while we can immediately grasp an atmosphere at the very first encounter with a place, atmospheres go beyond the here and now. Activities and events have the capacity to change the atmosphere of a place dramatically – at least temporarily, sometimes even permanently. Sites of cultural heritage and touristic places often impress the visitors, not only because of their sheer physical dimensions and characteristics, but also because of a connected sense of history. Informal nicknames given to places often reveal connections to historical events. How can such characteristics of place that are not immediately perceivable be investigated and communicated? As Danish theorist Niels Albertsen formulated:

“Can descriptions which are inherently dependent on presence, be transported to absent people in such a way that the “presencing” of the atmosphere in other times and places somehow resembles the in-situ point of departure? How can descriptions of atmosphere presented in other times and places themselves be atmospheric, and what can atmospheric similarity mean?”<sup>41</sup>

Albertsen suggests that the language in which we describe atmospheres can be “gestural”: “in gestural language sensuousness and meaning merge through the tone, the rhythm, the cadences of words and our own feelings for them.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, we find such rhythms and cadences often in poetry. When describing atmospheres in metaphoric language, the specificity of place can be evoked by means of a comparison: expressing its similarity or difference compared to another place. Despite the importance of presence and immediacy, metaphors thus allow us to make connections to the ‘there and then.’ The excessive use of language of some surrealists, which take the reader into an intense experience of multiple, simultaneous impressions, as mentioned earlier, can also have such an effect on the reader. It has been said that Walter Benjamin’s urban descriptions not only describe the city, but as it were take the reader into that city: the text becomes the city, reading the text is to experience the city as if we ourselves are walking there.

In the city portraits of Benjamin, the literary narrative appears in the image of the spatial experience, and at once, the particular structure of the literary depiction gives shape to the spatial narrative itself, as it is experienced on paper.<sup>43</sup>

His texts are – if we were to use a categorization – impressionistic, vividly describing the momentary impressions urban situations evoke in him. His text about Moscow was an attempt to “present a picture of Moscow as it is at this very moment,”<sup>44</sup> evocatively describing his impressions as a stranger coming to the city: “Now the city turns into a labyrinth for the newcomer... the city is on its guard against him, masks itself, flees, intrigues, lures him to wander its circles to the point of exhaustion.”<sup>45</sup>

Likewise, the texts of architect Rem Koolhaas can be seen as “gestural” texts, in which the form, rhythm and cadence of the text resonate with the very phenomenon he describes. His book *Delirious New York*, for instance, is composed of a grid structure within which blocks with different identities reside, together evoking the organized delirium of the metropole. The text *Junkspace*, on the contrary, is written almost without inter-punctuation, as a cascade of un-hierarchical “junk.”<sup>46</sup> Both Benjamin and Koolhaas, in these cases, use the literary (and cinematic) technique of montage to stitch different spatial narratives together, creating a sequence of experiences. This method allows us to make references to other times and places, while the form and composition of the text itself, can help to write the text “as” atmosphere.

## Language as a threshold of architectural research

The aim of this contribution has been to provide appropriate methods to understand urban and architectural atmospheres. Approaching the thresholds between subject and object, between here and there, now and then, between naivety and expertise, between parts and whole, and between individual and collective, I have proposed a set of literary tools which may contribute to the investigation of atmospheric spaces and their actual, embodied experience. Simultaneously, this endeavour highlights another threshold, too: atmosphere as situated at the intersection between spatial experience and language. Relating the life experience of architecture to language remains one of the most challenging thresholds for architectural research to address. However precisely we can map out endless objective data and technological details of architecture in scientific research, that knowledge alone will not bring us any closer to understanding the way people relate to, experience and appreciate places. At the edge of academic research, where impressions can be verbalized in language, where the experience of architecture meets the capacity to reflect on it in conceptual terms, literary writing appears as a practice able to transfer experience into communicable knowledge.

## Notes

- 1 Zardini, M. "Toward a *Sensorial Urbanism*", in *Ambiances in Action 2nd International Congress on Ambiances*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud and Daniel Siret (Montréal, QC: International Ambiances Network, 2012), p. 19.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., p. 26.
- 4 Böhme, G. "Atmosphere as Mindful Physical Presence in Space", in *Building Atmosphere* (with Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor). (Vol. Ed.): *Vol. 91*, ed. K. Havik, G. Tielens and H. Teerds (Rotterdam: NAI010 publishers, 2013), pp. 21–32.
- 5 Griffero, T., *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 12.
- 6 Ibid., p. 15.
- 7 Juhani Pallasmaa, lecture at the seminar *Architecture and Atmosphere*, organised by the Tapio Wirkkala Foundation, Helsinki June 2nd 2014. Published in: Böhme, Griffero et al. 67–68.
- 8 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement. Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2016).
- 9 Klaske Havik, G. Tielens and H. Teerds, *Building Atmosphere* (with Juhani Pallasmaa and Peter Zumthor). (Vol. Ed.): *Vol. 91*. (Rotterdam: NAI010 publishers, 2013), p. 11.
- 10 Böhme, 2013, 31.
- 11 Böhme, G., Griffero, T. and Thibaud, J. P., *Architecture and Atmosphere* (Helsinki: Tapio Wirkkala-Rut Bryk Foundation, 2014), p. 8.
- 12 Jane Rendell, J. "Site-Writing", in *Critical Architecture*, ed. Jane Rendell, Jonathan Hill and Murray Fraser (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 151.
- 13 Thibaud, J.-P. and Siret, D., *Ambiances in Action 2nd International Congress on Ambiances* (Montréal, QC: International Ambiances Network, 2012), p. 11.
- 14 Bachelard, G., *The. The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), p. xxviii.
- 15 Kopland, R., *Dankzij de dingen [Thanks to Things]* (Amsterdam: G.A.van Oorschot, 2000), p. 34. Translation Klaske Havik
- 16 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p. xix.
- 17 Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience. A philosophical topography* (Cambridge / New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 15.
- 18 Albertsen, N., *Gesturing atmospheres*. Paper presented at the Ambiances in Action 2nd International Congress on Ambiances (Montréal, 2012), p. 70.
- 19 Lodeizen, H., "De avond in Central Park, New York" [the evening in Central Park, New York], 1950, (translation KH), in *Verzamelde gedichten* (Amsterdam: G.A. van Oorschot, 1996), p. 19.
- 20 Ibid., p. 15.
- 21 Ibid., p. 20.
- 22 Malpas, *Place and Experience*, p. 143.
- 23 Havik, Tielens and Teerds, *Building Atmosphere*, p. 3.
- 24 These particular characters feature in the Berlin Night project: Hejduk, 1993, 24–26.
- 25 Pallasmaa, *A way of Looking*, p. 41.
- 26 A recent example was the 2016 diploma project of Kate Unsworth at TU Delft for the city of Sheffield. Inhabitants with different occupations and backgrounds were interviewed about their spatial biographies.
- 27 Lemaire, T., *Met open zinnen. Natuur, Landschap, Aarde* (Amsterdam: Ambo, 2002), p. 186.
- 28 Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p. xxxiii.
- 29 Pessoa, F., "The Keeper of Flocks", in *The Collected Poems of Alberto Caeiro* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2007).
- 30 Pallasmaa, *A way of Looking*, p. 41.
- 31 Zumthor, *A Way of Looking*, p. 6.
- 32 Zumthor, P., *An interview with Klaske Havik and Gus Tielens*, "Concentrated Confidence. A Conversation with Peter Zumthor" in Havik, K., Tielens, G. and Teerds, H. (2013), p. 75.
- 33 Andre Breton, A., *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010) (1969), p. 39.
- 34 Louis Aragon, L. *Paris Peasant* (Boston: Exact Exchange, 1994) (1926), p. 34.
- 35 Ibid., p. 81.
- 36 Ibid.

- 37 Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, p. 3. For a more extensive discussion of such techniques in surrealist literature see Havik, K., *Urban Literacy. Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: NAI010 publishers, 2014), pp. 154–158.
- 38 Pallasmaa, *Interview with Havik*, p. 37.
- 39 Zumthor, *Interview with Havik*, p. 71.
- 40 Thibaud and Siret, *Ambiances in Action*, p. 9.
- 41 Albertsen, *Gesturing atmospheres*, p. 69.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- 43 Balat, P., “The Physiognomist and the Rag-Picker. Reading the City-as-Text and Writing the City-as-Text”, in *Once Upon a Place. Architecture&Fiction*, ed. Pedro Gadanho and Susana Oliveira (Lisbon: Kaleidoscope, 127–134, 2013), p. 127.
- 44 Benjamin, cited in Elliot, p. 27.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 46 See for a more extensive discussion on Koolhaas’ writing see Havik, *Urban Literacy*, 2014, pp. 183–192.

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