REAL MATERIAL ETHEREAL

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CURATING ATMOSPHERE

Abstract

This paper addresses relationships that form between the body, space and atmosphere in architecture. It aims to provide awareness into the possibilities of designing for these relationships by discussing a research through design project entitled Temporal Shadows*. This project is part of an ongoing PhD in Architecture, Building and Planning which aims to discover how designers can curate atmospheres within existing space to engage with the body's multi-scalar physical, emotional and sensorial capacities.*

The theory of atmosphere provides us with an understanding of these ephemeral relationships, however, the discourse typically addresses existing and significant architecture and only tentatively delves into the process of designing for these experiences. It is hoped that this research will provide some insight into the methods and processes of designing for atmosphere.

Temporal Shadows *was a site-specific research project that first captured minor immaterial powers within an existing space and then augmented them to carefully curate a more tangible atmosphere. A shadow pattern within a space was documented through a series of techniques that engaged with the body, temporality and scale. These documentations were then disrupted and synthesised, resulting in a semi-translucent sculptural piece displayed in the space; augmenting the shadow patterns through colour and light.*

By evaluating this project and engaging with the theoretical discourse this paper will provide an understanding of designing for atmosphere through the curation and augmentation of existing effects. By attending to existing atmospheric moments and curating them through spatial design we could challenge current ideas of bodily occupation and perception.

Introduction

Our experience of space is not defined solely by solid and aesthetic architecture, but by immaterial and ephemeral spatial relationships and our emotive, sensorial and bodily

engagements. Ontological and phenomenological theories within architecture provide us with an understanding of how the human body experiences space beyond purely visual and physical relationships. This paper focusses on the theory of atmosphere, which explores the sensing body and its perception of space and objects; encompassing emotion, mood, ambience and sensation. As theorist and architect Juhani Pallasmaa states, “atmosphere is the overarching perceptual, sensory, and emotive impression of a space, setting, or social situation. It provides the unifying coherence and character for a room, space, place and landscape, or a social encounter” [1]. The discourse of atmosphere focuses on interpreting the human experience of architecture, with ambiguous suggestions of how to design atmospheric spaces. With the aim to provide an insight into designing for atmosphere, this paper first introduces the theory of atmosphere and then discusses a research through design project that has explored a temporal, minor atmospheric moment within an existing interior space; extracting and augmenting it through an interdisciplinary spatial practice.

Architectural Atmospheres

Atmosphere is an immersive, sensorial and emotional experience that is blurred, continuous, dynamic and temporal [2]. Theoretically, atmosphere exists in a relationship between subject and object, perhaps emanating from an object or a spatial environment and then experienced by the body; first through our senses and subsequently interpreted emotionally [3]. Juhani Pallasmaa defines atmosphere as being a multi-sensory, perceptual and emotional impression; a tangible relationship between the sensing body and architectural space [4]. Pallasmaa argues that an atmospheric experience not only engages our sensorial capacities, but it also encompasses our relationship with the architectural body [5].

An atmospheric impression is experienced in a diffuse, peripheral manner, rather than through careful observation [6]. It is dynamic and ongoing, as noted by Pallasmaa; “[atmosphere] emphasises a sustained being in a situation, rather than a singular moment of perception; atmosphere is always a continuum” [7]. Atmosphere is inherent to architecture, however it is difficult to express through design, as theorist Mark Wigley states; “to concentrate obsessively on the architecture of atmosphere is ultimately to evaporate the figure of the architect. Atmosphere may be the core of architecture but it is a core that cannot simply be addressed or controlled” [8].

Despite this cynicism, tentative suggestions can be discovered within the discourse of how the architecture discipline can approach atmosphere. We are repeatedly steered towards set design as precedent for atmospheric design, due to the discipline’s ability to craft moods and evoke emotion [9]. Pallasmaa suggests we focus on “orientation, gravity, balance, stability,

motion, duration, continuity, scale, and illumination" [10]. Philosopher Gernot Böhme suggests we articulate architectural form, light and sound, to create confines, expanse and direction, while addressing the senses through colour and texture [11].

Within *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments – Surrounding Objects,* architect Peter Zumthor outlines his methods for creating atmospheric architecture. While Zumthor highlights typical architectural considerations such as form, composition, space, materiality, lighting, tectonics and so on, he also addresses the sensing body by determining that temperature, sound, thresholds between exterior and interior space and intimate scale are major components of atmospheric design [12].

Scale, immersion, temporality, sensorial and bodily engagement, interplays of colour, light and materiality, ritual and event are essential to creating atmospheric architecture. This paper asks the question; what might we discover when approaching an existing atmosphere within architecture? How can we re-interpret existing space and curate tangible atmospheres through an interdisciplinary spatial practice?

Temporal Shadows

Temporal Shadows was a site-specific research through design project, situated within the Glyn Davis Building of the Melbourne School of Design. The project first aimed to capture a minor atmospheric effect, caused by an actual meteorological occurrence, and then augmented it through spatial intervention; with the intention to curate a more tangible atmosphere.

Context

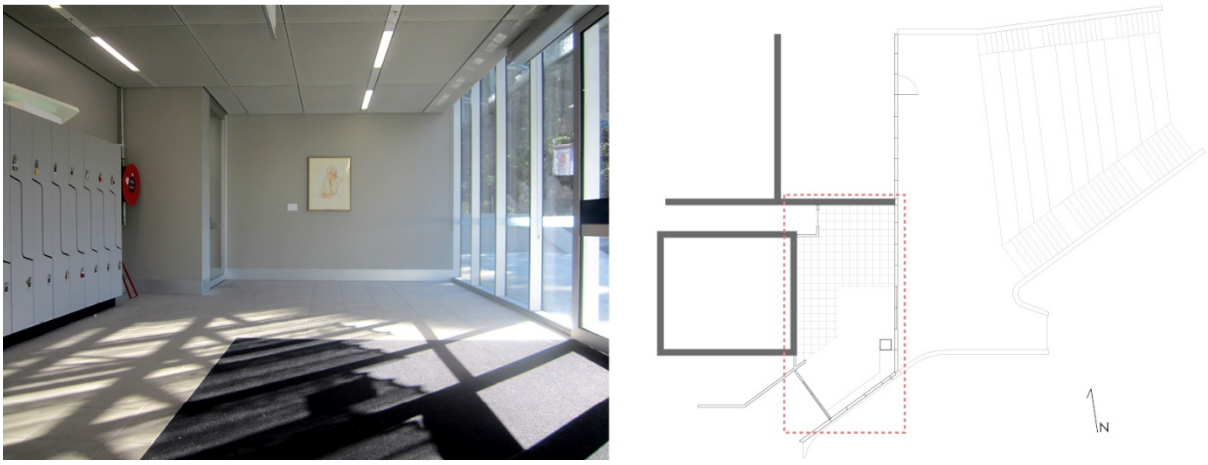

Figure 1. Site of design enquiry. Photograph and plan view of site; area of enquiry within pink dotted line (plan not to scale). Source: Author.

The eastern facing, level one space is highly traversed and filters the flow of people entering the atrium; the standard height space creating a compression before the openness that follows. It is a hardy and unassuming area; painted in a grey-beige paint, with a white metallic false ceiling, fluorescent lights, sandstone tiles and a black carpet. It is vastly glazed and is semi-shaded by the external perforated screens that wrap around the building.

Temporal Atmosphere

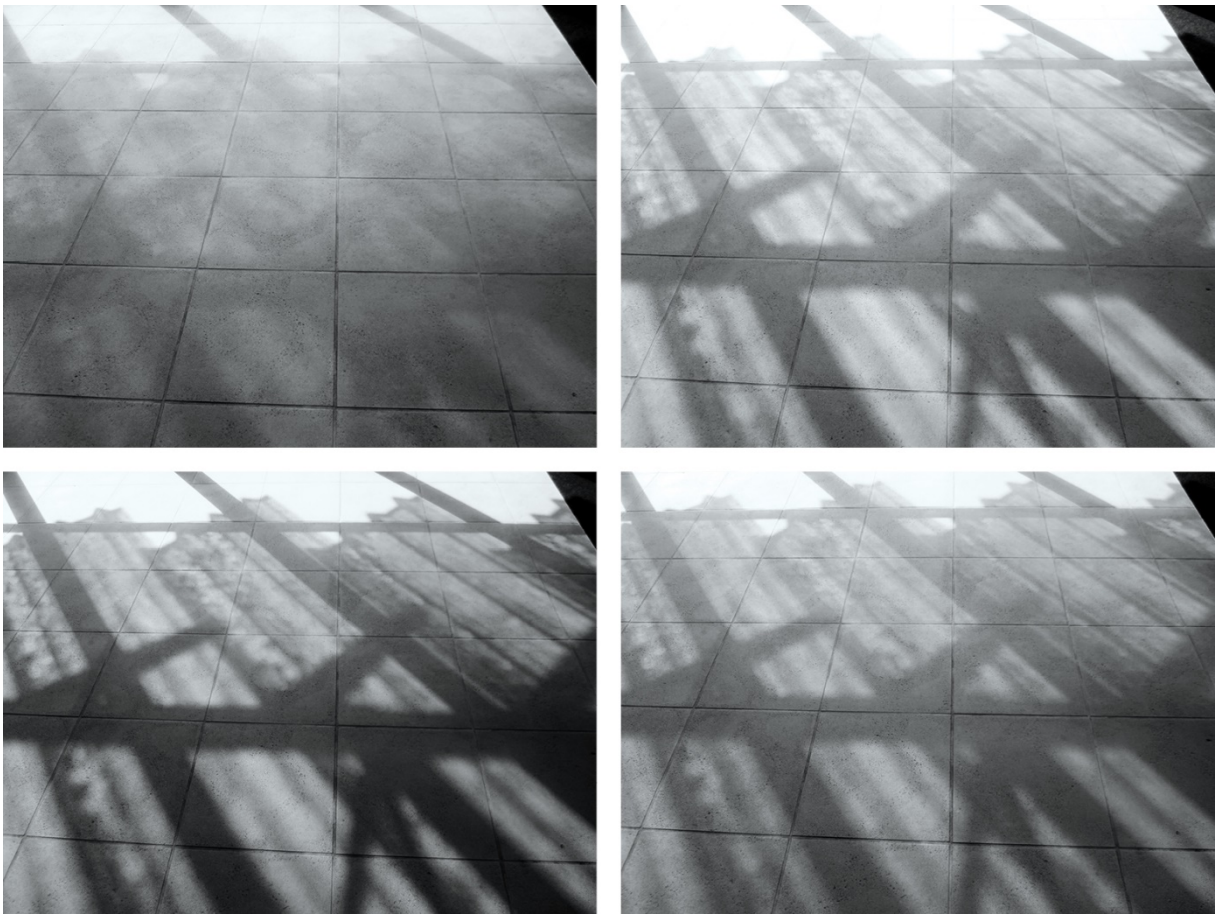

Figure 2. Shadows fluctuating over time within the space. Source: Author.

While the room initially presents as a ‘nothing’ space, upon close analysis an atmospheric moment can be experienced. This moment, produced by an intermingling of the external climatic environment and the architecture, is largely ignored by those who cross the space.

On sunlit mornings, a unique shadow pattern is cast through the external screens and shifts across the room over time (Fig. 2). The linear shadows trace the form of the room, stretching and compressing as they move, augmenting the otherwise dull interior. As clouds pass the shadows deplete and shift, enacting a dynamic and everchanging pattern; from non-existent, to subtle, to stark. Trees outside, moving with the wind, create a shimmering effect amongst

the shadows; adding movement. It is a temporal trace that informs a minor atmosphere within the space, but it is unnoticed by those who move through it.

This architecturally and climate generated trace became the focus of the research project, with the intent to augment and highlight the effect to expose people to a more tangible atmosphere; to alter their perception within the space with minor, ephemeral intervention.

Design Process

The design process was initiated through various mediums of analytical representation and evolved into an iterative design generation process, eventually leading to a sculptural intervention within the space. As this process was extensive and unconstrained; this paper highlights the more successful outcomes to provide a linear understanding.

Drawing Shadows

The process began with documenting the shadows to fully understand their atmospheric effect on the space, by using techniques that expressed their temporality and form. Integral documentation experiments in this process involved drawing the shadows as they traced the ground onto a large strip of brown paper taped directly to the floor (Fig. 3, Fig. 4). This analogue technique was selected to represent the shadows at their true scale and to embody their movement over time; with the implication of integrating bodily movement with drawing.

Figure 3. Anneke Prins, “Shadow Drawing 1”, 2018. Brown paper, sepia, brown and white pencils, soft and hard charcoal; drawing photographed in-situ. Source: Author.

The first drawing in this series used charcoal and pencil to trace the shadows at five-minute intervals; shifting from detailed shading to long, gestural strokes (Fig. 3). Drawing the shadows in this way was a full body experience; I was near to the ground, crouching and moving quickly. This method resulted in an incoherent and expressive drawing of black, white and brown marks across the page, reducing the power of the shadows to a two-dimensional representation, but elevating traces of bodily movement.

Figure 4. Anneke Prins, “Shadow Drawing 3”, 2018. Brown paper, blue, yellow, black, ochre and white acrylic, water; drawing photographed in-situ. Source: Author.

Using a similar technique and a different medium this painterly expression of the shadows created in-situ was physical but less intense on the body than the first drawing (Fig. 4). The resulting representation was an ambiguous cloud of blue and ochre paint, with few distinguishing features between each time band; which rendered the dynamic, temporal nature of the shadows but made any distinct linear elements obsolete. Rather than precisely capturing the shadows, the image became a depiction of the time period; blurring bodily movement, light, colour, time and shadows together (Fig. 4 & 5).

Reflecting critically, these drawings have an atmospheric presence beyond the space; encapsulating abstractions of bodily movement, temporality, shadow and light. This aligns with Wigley’s theories of atmospheric representation, arguing that “drawings are atmosphere simulators and even the most abstract lines produce sensuous, unpredictable effects” [13].

Figure 5. Prins, “Shadow Drawing 3”. Detail.

Digital Design

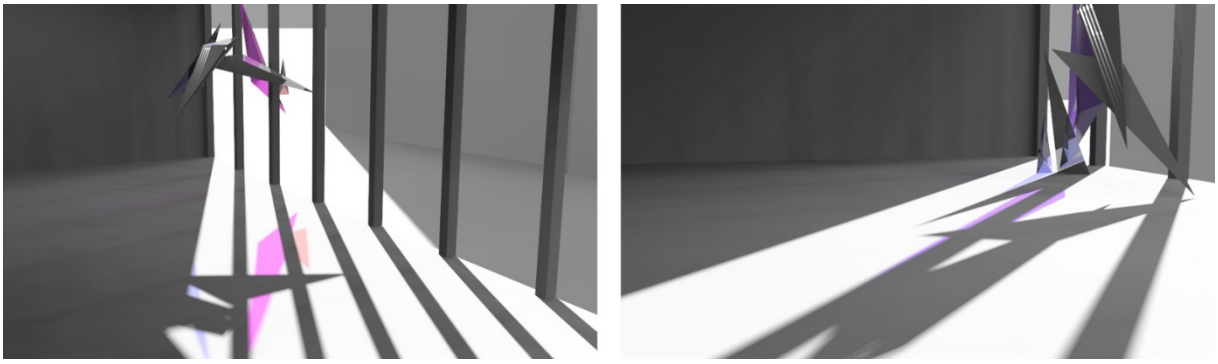

Figure 6. Digital design experiments developed in Rhinoceros 5. These sculptural works are situated in an artificial copy of the space. Source: Author.

Progressing to design generation, these sculptural pieces were designed to produce their own atmospheres to interact with the existing conditions (Fig. 6). Incorporating “generators of atmosphere” discovered within the theoretical discourse, such as light and colour, these sculptures were designed to alter and draw attention to the existing atmosphere through coloured projections and intersecting shadow forms [14].

Working within the prescribed atmosphere of Rhinoceros 5 created a distance with the space. The bodily experience of the initial investigations generated representations that arguably transmit their own atmospheres. In contrast, the digital models appear static in their homogenous environment; it is difficult to connect with this purely visual and virtual generation.

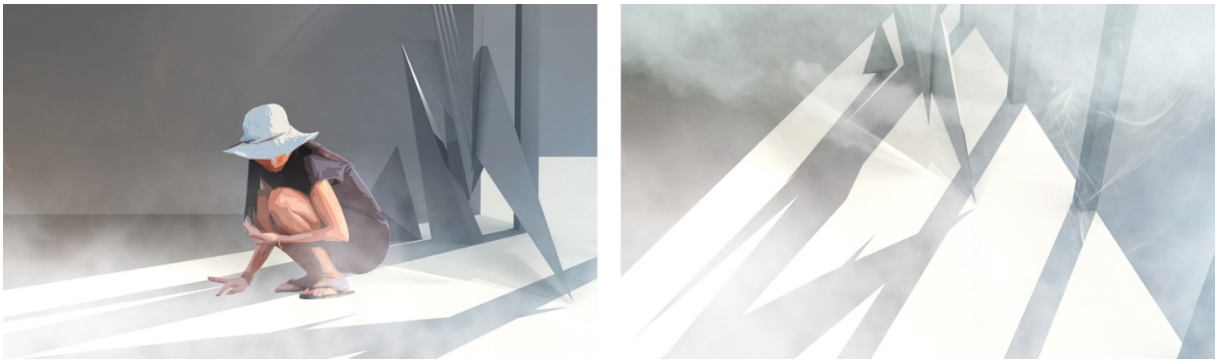

Figure 7. Digital design experiments with collaged atmosphere. Source: Author.

To mitigate this distance, textures were introduced to the renders; mist and fog (Fig. 7). The camera angles were rearranged to replicate the sensation of experiencing the sculpture in reality. Diffusing the perspectival view in this way produces an ability to engage with the imagination of the viewer [15]. While the representation is more engaging, these sculptural pieces were never actualised. However, the atmospheric technique of coloured light projection was incorporated into the final sculptural intervention.

Sculpting Colour, Light & Shadow

Figure 8. Anneke Prins, “Temporal Shadows”, 2019. Acetate, watercolour ink, acrylic, cloth tape. Source: Author.

Figure 9. Prins, “Temporal Shadows”. Sculpture detail and visual effects generated on the ground plane.

The final sculptural intervention synthesised findings from the design process. Using sheets of acetate painted in blue and green ink and white acrylic in expressive strokes and drips, the piece was sculpted into a fluid form and installed into a corner of the space (Fig. 8). As a temporary installation that existed within the space for two weeks, activated only on sunlit mornings, the ephemerality of both the sculpture and its effects harmonized with the temporal nature of the shadows.

The sculpture was light and semi-translucent, blending into the space and the window behind, ensuring it activated peripheral vision rather than purely perspectival, aligning with Pallasmaa’s theories of subverting optical bias [16]. The twists, folds and curvature suggest the activation of

bodily movement during its creation and sit in contrast with the linear forms of the room and the faceted forms of the atrium beyond.

While the object was clumsily made, crafted intuitively with speed and stuck together with tape, the assemblage of the sculpture with the climatic atmosphere had a transformative effect; producing fluid visual patterns on the ground surface and a curated spatial atmosphere through colour and light (Fig. 9). The resulting visual patterns countered the orthogonality and neutral tones of the architectural space. They had a tactility to them, a soft veil across a rough sandstone surface; activating the touch sense (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. Prins, “Temporal Shadows”. Visual pattern detail.

Through this slight augmentation of the atmosphere, the colour and light patterns drew attention to an otherwise ignored architectural and climatic phenomenon; gently encouraging users of the space to engage with the atmosphere in a peripheral visual manner.

CONCLUSION

As Juhani Pallasmaa states, “in the process of design, atmospheric qualities also arise unconsciously in an embodied and haptic manner rather than through conscious retinal strategies and intentions. The sense of a coherent experiential entity is evoked by the designer’s sense of existence and body more than conscious and deliberate visual intentionality” [17]. This body of research aligns with this statement, as the design process

addressed atmospheric effects through active bodily engagement and intuitive methods in-situ; generating outputs that emitted their own atmospheres.

Through the process of analysing, representing and augmenting a minor atmospheric moment within an existing space, a curatorial approach to designing for atmosphere was discovered. Rather than attempting to generate a new and controlled spatial atmosphere, this research through design project curated an existing atmospheric effect within a space through colour and light; guiding those sensing bodies who moved through the space to engage with it through activated peripheral vision. Attending to the sensing body and curating existing atmospheric moments through spatial and ephemeral design could form an altered spatial reality that challenges current ideas of bodily occupation and perception.

Endnotes

[1] Juhani Pallasmaa, “Space, Place and Atmosphere: Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, in *Architectural Atmospheres: On the Experience and Politics of Architecture*, ed. Christian Borch (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2014), 19.
[2]Juhani Pallasmaa. “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 20.
[3] Mark Wigley, “Die Architektur Der Atmosphär = The Architecture of Atmosphere”, *Daidalos*, no. 68 (June 1998), 27.
[4] Pallasmaa, “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 19.
[5] Pallasmaa, “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 19.
[6] Pallasmaa, “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 19.
[7] Pallasmaa, “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 20.
[8] Wigley, “The Architecture of Atmosphere”, 27.
[9] Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics”, *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1 (August 1993), 123; Gernot Böhme, “Atmosphere as Mindful Physical Presence in Space”, *OASE: Architectural Journal*, no. 91 (2013), 29; Wigley, “The Architecture of Atmosphere”, 20.
[10] Pallasmaa, “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 19.
[11] Böhme, “Atmosphere - Mindful Physical Presence”, 29.
[12] Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006).
[13] Wigley, "The Architecture of Atmosphere", 27.
[14] Böhme, "Atmosphere as Mindful Physical Presence in Space", 27.
[15] Pallasmaa, “Peripheral Perception in Existential Experience”, 29.
[16] Juhani Pallasmaa, “Space, Place and Atmosphere. Emotion and Peripheral Perception in Architectural Experience”, *Lebenswelt: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience.*, no. 4 (7 July 2014), 231.
[17] Juhani Pallasmaa, "The Sixth Sense: The Meaning of Atmosphere and Mood.", *Architectural Design* 86, no. 6 (November 2016), 130.