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Individual atmospheres

A pedagogic experience of design and communication

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Abstract. *The sensations and the meanings rendered from the experience of an architectural atmosphere depend directly on the inhabitant. The architect, helped on multiple disciplines, lay out a wide palette of resources to characterize an abstract space and turn it into a singular one. Normally, the architect works with all the sensory possibilities that can interact between the architecture and the inhabitant. In consequence, the architectural atmosphere turns into something special with the power to influence his user. Nevertheless, the capacity to be moved by an architectural atmosphere also depends on the cultural, perceptive and psychological capacities of the individuals. The architecture research group “Atmospheres”, from the Universitat Politècnica de Valencia, Spain (UPV), deals with how to design and communicate specific architectural atmospheres, and, at once, to frame both activities in the architectural pedagogic field (International Workshops: Atmospheres, 2010; Alter+Actions, 2011... Teaching experiences in interdisciplinary courses in the E.T.S. Arquitectura, UPV). The authors want to offer the result of this pedagogic experience centred on the individual definition of architectural atmospheres from different and autonomous working parameters, which can operate together: Psychological profile of the hypothetical inhabitant. Place where the atmosphere is located: from the sociocultural to the physical one. Natural element (alive or inert). Movements. Clothing. Objects placed in the atmosphere. Light (natural or artificial). Sound... The results obtained have stated that the thinking and the architectural design of different atmospheres hold in their capacity to interact with the individual who experiences them, reinforcing or altering his habits. At the same time, according to this way of education, an effort for communicating every design alternative is developed. As a result, a new holistic way open up for the expression of the architecture. Indeed, most of them use the new media technologies (graphical design, audio, video, happenings, snigglings).*

Keywords: *architecture, pedagogy, natural, objects, place, sound, inhabitant*

The pedagogic experience “Alter-atmospheres” has been undertaken in the School of Architecture of the Universitat Politècnica de Valencia (Spain). This experience aimed two goals: The definition of architectural ambiances from unusual parameters which enrich the spatial experience and the association of these parameters with the inhabitant profile.

Definitively, the experience has been approached to a concrete design situation: the design of individual atmospheres. On the one hand the pedagogic experience fixed an individual human type who established the start-up information to the designer. On the other hand there were fixed a few parameters on which to work with. These parameters defined the tangible ambiance: the place, the natural element, the movement, the object, the light, the

sound, the taste, the clothes... Some of them are complementary parameters in the architectural design world. Nevertheless, they are key elements for the ambiance definition.

The inhabitant profile

It is the essential in the opening phase of the design. The pedagogic experience departs from profiles defined in advance. They are human universal types extracted from the literature. This puts to our disposition an exhaustive description of human behaviours. The literature provides examples of the physical and psychological characteristics of the inhabitant. The literature also describes how these characteristics are altered by historical events: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Ana Karenina, Julian Sorel, Jean Valjean, Raskolnikov, Winston Smith, Harry Haller, Madame Bovary, Werther, Rayuela, Fortunata and Jacinta, Ana Ozores, Hans Castorp, Alice (in Wonderland), Tom Sawyer, Gregor Samsa... Not all the literary sources are valid. It is necessary that the literary source supplies sufficient information about the inhabitant. In this respect, the literature of the Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism and Modernism period is appropriately descriptive for the aim of the pedagogic experience. In the work of authors like Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Zola, Clarín, Pérez Galdós, Blasco Ibáñez, Pardo Bazán, Baroja, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Twain, Poe, Joyce, James, Woolf... are presented exhaustively many of the mentioned human archetypes. The knowledge of the character is transcendental. For that reason the design decisions about defining the concrete atmosphere can be only come up by the meaningful knowledge of the inhabitant. The designer usually works to satisfy the pleasures and apprehensions of the inhabitant. The decisions taken in the definition of the atmosphere contribute to the alteration or intensification of the inhabitant habits. In this early stage of the pedagogical experience the purpose is to fulfil an educational aim: promoting the reading of good literature as a source to begin the knowledge of the different human behaviors in the architecture.

The place

An atmosphere does not constitute a place, but it is located in a place. The choice of the place in relation with the inhabitant and the tensions generated between the indoor and outdoor was very fascinating for this pedagogic experience. In this respect it is essential to emphasize the wide significance of the concept of the place. "Place" is related to physical questions like a country, a city, a plot... But the concept also is related to a temporary context and a cultural context where all the senses of the individual and all its meanings operate. Hans Castorp, a Thomas Mann's character, apparently lives in Davos's Sanatorium. His atmosphere is located in a space limited by this emplacement. What should characterize the mentioned atmosphere to reproduce faithfully the space narrated by Thomas Mann? What should characterize the atmosphere if we are designing a pleasant atmosphere for the inhabitant? The relationship of that place with nature, light, temperature, colours, textures, furniture, sounds or fragrances – that Mann (2008) describes across his own character's perception – reveals the key factors of a special atmosphere. However we should not forget that it is the result of the subjective interpretation of the inhabitant, plunged in an emotional condition and in a concrete moment of his life. The place, in addition to this, reveals limits. It makes easier the understanding of the necessity to define properly the emotional and perceptive limits of the atmosphere. Therefore, the place of a romantic poet, G. A. Bécquer, should not be much distant from the banks of the river Duero. It must be probably linked to Veruela's Monastery and immersed in an exuberant nature with exceptional qualities: black poplars forest, mossy walls of granite and, certainly, the nearby presence of some ruins. This one is a place with diverse fragrances, with changing temperatures as the seasons go by, with alternative and mixed colors. It is a place where the sounds of nature resound and is even possible to feel a high degree of dampness (Bécquer, 2004: 155).

Natural element (alive or inert)

The pedagogic experience fixed the natural element as a parameter of the ambiance design. It is necessary to value the role of the natural element in the architecture because the architect has been habituated to elude it for its changeable characteristics.

It is not easy to work with live elements. But plant life elements, for example, are indispensable for the planet conservation. The building activity is one of the most destructive actions made by the humans but, currently, it must work on the way of the sustainability. The integration of the natural element can contribute to the previous mentioned aim. The natural element offers the architect multiple possibilities in turn from which he can benefit: chromatic, tactile, thermal, olfactory, energetic, kinetic... All of them enrich the ambiance experience. The architect should be able to define the natural element technically to guarantee its integration, maintenance and survival. The pedagogic experience claims the utilization of certain natural elements and the study of the effects of his use in the ambiance definition, as well as its technical formalization.

The young woman protagonist of *The lover* of Marguerite Duras (1984) has a rooted out life. She will find his place evoking the waters of the Mekong River. If we want to design an ambiance where the water evokes the river and its nenuphars, we should know the properties of these natural sites: species, coloration, flowering, temperature, plantation, environment characteristics, nutrients, presence of light... But the natural element cannot be a solely vegetable element. Moreover it is possible to work with natural inert elements in order to define more qualities of the atmosphere. Firewood fascies in gabions can contribute to the definition of architectural elements with textural and aromatic properties. A storm can be a natural element of design. The Argentinian *Pampero*, which identifies Juan Pablo Castel's instantaneous atmosphere (Sábato, 1984), can be used also to design an alternating atmosphere. This atmosphere only will be present when the climatical phenomenon occurs. The rock in which the architecture is excavated, or the starry sky, could constitute natural limits with changeable properties of a designed atmosphere.

Movements and circulation

The ambiance is defined by the movements which happen in it. The architect must foresee these movements because many of them are dependent on the characteristics of the inhabitant. What would happen in case of a disable inhabitant? It is fundamental to define the circulations, the way of travelling or acting in the atmosphere. It is the key factor for achieve an architecture without barriers. But at the same time it is interesting to foresee how the most diverse movements contribute to the perception of the atmosphere. A relaxing space needs the existence of a few concrete movements. These movements are completely different from the movements of an interchange transportation station. It is necessary to find new means to define or communicate the movement. The traditional systems of representation are not adequate. The pedagogic experience has promoted and developed technologies to depict sequences across maps of movements, produce sequential drawings or combine complementary ways of expression like the filming, the happening or the snigging. Some students used the movie to evocate the state of mind of the inhabitant. Others produced metaphors associated with the movements to characterize the atmosphere. Nevertheless, most of them simulated and performed the real movements and introduce them in the film to transmit the sensation of movement across the visual showing.

In this part of the pedagogical practice there was expected that the students understand the role that the movements play in the definition of the atmospheres. And in addition, the students should find a way of registering and representing these movements. There is an intention in characterizing an atmosphere across the movement of the trees swayed by the breeze. The light movement also contributes to a singular perception. And for example, the

mysterious world of the historical garden instructs how to use the different water movements. Also contemporary architecture examples have been used to evaluate how user flowing movements differentiate the atmosphere, as FOA's Yokohama International Ferry Terminal demonstrates.

Objects

The form of objects, its disposition plus quantity and meanings characterize the atmospheres. The choice of an object rests on very diverse intentions: utilitarian or symbolic ones but both of them define, in addition, the architectural space. The conception and definition of the object should bear in mind the complexity of the present moment where the act of its design and its interpretation cannot diminish to a technical or scientific act. We are immersed in a Consumer Society that works with a complex and changeable codes. It seems fundamental to extend the meaning of the function to take into account the totality of the functions associated with the product, that is to say, with the object. Besides the practical functions it is necessary bear in mind other functions of the language (Bürdeck, 1999). These functions are related to the perception of the form (aesthetic-formal functions), to the semiotic issues, to the understanding of the object as an indicative sign (indicative functions), or a sign that symbolizes (symbolic functions). For example, a chair located in a concrete place of an atmosphere, not only serves to sit down, it informs us about this possible use. Nonetheless, its concrete location can satisfy other missions like block the traffic. In the moment in which the visualization of the chair informs us unconsciously about the denial of traffic, an indicative function is satisfied.

The language used in his design will throw in turn messages of cultural type. If it is a question of a royal throne – using the example which Umberto Eco (1989) resorts to approach the concept of connotation – we will understand a message that speaks to us about hierarchy while we are entering in the area of the symbolic functions. Possibly Umberto Eco synthesizes the existence of a compendium of symbols associated with the objects. There exists a code that allows the understanding of the object. A code that must be assimilated for anyone that have to decode it. Clearly, the form denotes a function but not only to make possible the utilization of the product, but also to make it desirable. We are speaking about the evidence of a system of expectations and acquired customs that it is necessary to bear in mind. The large barrels of French oak piled up in an atmosphere constitute objects that characterize the atmosphere of a wine cellar. These large barrels define the space, allowing the alteration of the dividing element depending on their distribution. Finally, a barrel is a utilitarian object that provides to the space unmistakable qualities associated with its aroma, and, even, with its taste.

The light

The light, natural or artificial, is a key factor in the definition of atmospheres. The light can acquire materiality as a one more architectural element. Although the light can be also used for emphasizing the materiality of other elements or, on the contrary, it can make them disappear. The light, at the same time, can be "died", as it enters in direct relation with the architecture colors. Being able to manipulate the light in the design phase as well as construct it and communicate it, it is necessary in the definition of the ambiances. The pedagogic experience asked the students to experiment with the light from the requirements of the atmosphere and its inhabitant. Diverse results were obtained. An interesting example was the intention of cancelling the effect of the light, obtaining an aseptic light. The natural light, in this exercise, generated the same effect that the artificial light. In both cases the light, with the same direction, was sifted and inked of color. Other examples resorted to the natural element to filter the light and to color it. The pedagogic experience demonstrates the

validity of the effects of focusing the light to take the attention on certain areas of the atmosphere. The diffuse light, coming from all directions, allows putting in value the set of an atmosphere. Finally, the use of the resources of the sparkle light by means of making small size luminous points showed sumptuousness, wealth and festivity. The students could understand the different light scales in design: functional, social, informative, architectural and decorative. In many cases the students defined technically the lighting from the commercial information. In other cases, especially in the case of sun light, the students chose the execution of models or film making.



Figure 1. Light proposal in the Winston Smith's Atmosphere (Alter-atmospheres, 2011. Student: Romo Jordá)

The sounds

Speaking about atmosphere is to speak about the sounds in it. The sounds can be produced because of the inhabitants. It can be produced because of the construction materials and other agents too. These agents also produce sounds in the ambiance work inside or outside the atmosphere limits. It is usual to work the atmosphere acoustics in a technical way from a functional point of view: isolating acoustics, reverberation level control, echo effects annulation... But the atmosphere also demands sounds that enrich its experience. The fall of the water can be relaxing, in the same way that the warble of the birds, or the sound of an old locomotive that remembers the ambiances of the childhood... Many of these sounds can be considered troublesome or desirable. In the sound experience it is necessary to include also the musical experience. The architecture can receive a specific type of music, in which it is necessary not to forget its atmospheric character. In a vital ambiance the music shouldn't acquire a protagonist role. Though, in certain occasions, the presence of music contributes to a concrete experience of the space. Without this meditation probably we might not understand the existence of the piped music or the traditional radio in some typical atmospheres. An atmosphere is characterized by its melodies, noises, voices and silences. What sounds are adapted for an individual atmosphere if we do not look for the neutrality of this atmosphere? The architect, in a second level of analysis, can control also the sounds produced by the own architecture materials. Atmospheres conditioned for the music exist. But also exist musics conditioned for the architecture. The Gabrielli's compositions in Saint Mark in Venice are an example. Other examples are Bach's fugues in Saint Thomas of Leipzig, or the Varese's music for the Philips pavilion of Le Corbusier and Xenakis (Arnau, 2005). The music and the sounds can reach very much in the characterization of atmospheres. In this sense the pedagogic experience claims that the students study the sounds and musics that they can reproduce in an atmosphere. The experience has offered unavoidable sounds that come from the place in which the atmosphere is located. The experience has offered also atmospheric melodies whose meanings are in relation with the ambiance. In general the sounds of the nature have been defined as desirable sounds (the warble of birds, the sounds of the sea, the wind, the foliage sounds with the wind...). Other wished sounds, always with the attenuating effect of the distance, are some artificial sounds that evoke nostalgic situations: bells of the church, ringing of bells, creaks of the wood structures, sounds of certain type of steps... In some occasions someone had resorted to theatrical sounds to characterize very particular atmospheres: the storm, the creak of the door, sporadic laughs, sound of a radio with a concrete emission... The Penelope's atmosphere (Homero, 2010), for example,

cannot exist without the distant rumor of the Mediterranean Sea, the breeze sounds in relation with the impelled candle that will favor the return of the beloved husband, or the characteristic sound of the ancient loom... It is the sonorous atmosphere that facilitates the emotional evasion of a nostalgic wife. There should be eliminated in this atmosphere those disagreeable sounds that come from other palatial rooms, where the claimants amuse themselves.

Expression of the individual atmosphere

As a conclusion, it is remarkable to discover how only with an inhabitant, with his clothes and his movements, a place, a natural element, an object, sounds and light effects, we can perceive the individual atmosphere. It has been necessary that some parameters assume the definition of the physical limit of the atmosphere. Definitely we are presenting a pedagogic limited experience. Unfortunately many indispensable parameters in the architectural design have been eliminated in this experience. Nevertheless the parameters used have allowed perceiving the atmosphere. We can feel the atmosphere only using immaterial, natural or inert elements imported (as the objects). The particularity of every atmosphere designed by the students depended in turn on the starting condition: the physical and psychological characteristics of the inhabitant.



Figure 2. Modelling proposals and happenings in the pedagogic experience (Atmospheres workshop, 2010. Picture: Guimaraens)

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