Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Architectural Education

ISSN: 1046-4883 (Print) 1531-314X (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjae20

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To cite this article: Mark Dorrian (2013) Atmosphere and Distance, Journal of Architectural Education, 67:2, 283-284, DOI: 10.1080/10464883.2013.817176

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10464883.2013.817176

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Atmosphere and Distance

Because atmosphere is the thing whose role is always to come between or to surround other things, it appears as the fundamental and ineluctable terrestrial medium, that within which emissions of objects are born and through which they must pass. As such, the experience of atmosphere also inevitably implies questions of distance—and perhaps its peculiar attendant anxieties, whether spatial, emotional or epistemological. Distance may be a precondition for the emergence of atmosphere, but the relation between the two has been thought of in very different ways. On one hand, as haunted air, atmosphere has been the classic site of ontological uncertainty, a shifting space of hallucinatory appearances, of phantasms, imaginings and dissimulation. So, for example, Thomas Aquinas speculated that it was by molding the air that the Devil, himself without a physical body, might fashion himself an apparent one; or that—by enveloping other beings in manipulated air—he might confer a false form upon them.[1] The particular veridical status that touch has in the Western tradition—of putting one's finger upon something—thus becomes grounded in its status as a point of immediacy that evacuates everything airy and literally substantializes the visions conveyed to the eyes. Yet on the other hand, as medium—and more specifically as the medium within which we are immersed as a collectivity and which we internalize through respiration—atmosphere can seem to be an agent of distance's overcoming and hence of connection. When the writer Lion Feuchtwanger visited Moscow in 1937 he characterized what he saw as its vital collective morale in this way, figuring the air as a unifying *pneuma* or spirit: "The air which one breathes in the West is stale and foul. In the Western civilization there is no longer clarity and resolution.… One breathes again when one comes … into the invigorating atmosphere of the Soviet Union."[2] And although articulated in an entirely different way, this sense of the connective agency of atmosphere is equally present in Gernot Böhme's characterization of it in relation to what he describes as the "ecstasies" of things, whereby they go outward from themselves, taking leave of their formal limits in such a way as to generate spatial ambiences.[3]

Given this, it is not surprising that attempts to overcome distance—whether it be that between people (alienated social relations) or between people and objects (such as the visitors to a museum and the artifacts on display)—have often concerned themselves with atmosphere, motivated by the utopic dream that, through its renovation or remediation, what is broken, disparate or estranged might be reintegrated.[4] If atmosphere can be thought of as a totality within which we are immersed and thus potentially unified, then becoming whole might crucially involve getting it right. So the glasshouse-like Phalansteries of the utopian socialist Charles Fourier, which housed his ideal community knit together through forces of "passionate attraction," emerged as anticipations of his vision of remediating the atmosphere of the planet through the melting of the polar ice—a kind of divinely-ordained act of geo-engineering that would, he insisted, inaugurate a new epoch of harmony. A similar preoccupation is evident in the debate that developed around how Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace should be used following the closure of the 1851 Great Exhibition. It was a building that had from the start been itself characterized as an atmospheric phenomenon: William Whewell described it as appearing to "rise out of the ground like an exhalation," while Lothar Bucher, a German exile resident in London, reported that as the building receded into the distance "all materiality is blended into the atmosphere."[5]

In her remarkable study of nineteenth-century glass culture, *Victorian Glassworlds*, Isobel Armstrong has examined the politics of the urban conservatory. Closely affiliated to botanical glasshouses, with their connotations of nurture, its microclimate promised pleasure and regeneration amidst the exotica assembled within it. Thus, of the early Pantheon Arcade (1832) in London by Sydney Smirke (which contained tropical birds, fish, Moorish statues, etc.), she writes that it urbanized and commercialized the principle of the conservatory as Winter Garden: in it "historical times and tropical spaces converge[d] under glass, simultaneously transcendentalizing purchase and promising transformation in a new world of pleasure."[6] Against this background, Armstrong explicates the opposed glasshouse ideologies of Joseph Paxton and John Claudius Loudon, the landscape gardener, republican, and follower of Jeremy Bentham. In her telling, the preoccupation of the royalist Paxton, Head Gardener at Chatsworth, was with the conservatory as a space of mass visual consumption, a unified scopic field within which time and space collapsed in extraordinary spectacle (exemplified by his own virtuosic cultivation and display of the massive water-lily *Victoria Regia*). For Loudon, however, the import of the conservatory, its promise as a non-hierarchical, egalitarian–democratic space, was not as a topos of scopic, but rather of meteorological—or perhaps even pneumatic—unification. Armstrong writes: "A truly civic achievement, it [was] the epitome of the humanly made transformative space of nurture. It [was] literally a breathing space, a place for therapy, respiration, and creative reverie."[7]

In July 1851 the Benthamite journal *The Westminster Review*, with which Loudon was associated, published a long polemical essay that advocated a very particular future for the Crystal Palace. Describing it as "a great metropolitan Conservatory, or winter garden,"[8] the article argued that it heralded a future of emancipated social relations, in which the full potential of each individual might be realized. Thus the Palace foretold "what will be possible in wintry lands, when progressive human cultivation shall have obviated the necessity of guarding against acts of violence or of unjust appropriation."[9] For our author, however—as we might anticipate from the reference to "wintry lands"—this future turned out to be less founded in and enabled by Benthamite transparency, whether material or social, than in a new meteorological condition in which free social relations would be recovered and would flourish in remediated air. Consequently, in its utopic condition as metropolitan conservatory, the future of the Exhibition Hall could not lie with commerce.

Instead, the article concluded, it should become a "metropolitan college" for those "original minded men" on whose activities national progress depends. Such individuals are, the author emphasized, "the reverse of accumulative." "They discover and give continually, to all mankind, whether in philosophy, literature, art, chemistry, or mechanics."[10] It was as if the renovation of atmosphere was the necessary prelude to social renovation, whereby everything restricted, locked up, and frozen by the profit motive became thawed and put into free circulation, as free—indeed—as the air itself. Remediation through the technology of glass architecture opened onto the return of a dreamt-of pre-technological state: "The groves of Academus might be revived … Socrates and Plato might reappear."[11]

According to Gottfried Korff, the institutional function of the museum as a place of encounter with the unfamiliar—with what is distant in time or culture—is to facilitate a "brokering service" that "regulates the distance between the experience of visitors and the displayed objects or documented cultures."[12] In his discussion Korff affirms the specific relevance to this of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, insofar as the aura of an object is understood to arise out of an interplay of proximity and distance. The affiliation between, and even identity of, aura and atmosphere is clear: Benjamin himself articulated it in his writing on Baudelaire, while Gernot Böhme has noted that "aura is something which flows forth spatially, almost something like a breath or a haze—precisely an atmosphere."[13] In Benjamin's formulation, the aura might flow from the thing, but the source of its radiation resides in a depth that remains unapproachable. Commenting on Benjamin's idea, Adorno characterized it as "the more of the phenomenon," a surplus that extends beyond its mere facticity and consequently provides "a rudimentary model of the distancing of natural objects—as potential means—for practical aims."[14]

If one accepts this idea of the atmospherics of distant objects that are brought into proximity for the purpose of contemplation, then the traditional understanding of museums as peculiarly "atmospheric" environments comes as no surprise. Part and parcel of this is undoubtedly the museum's status as, in Susan Stewart's words, an empire of sight structured through an "elaborately ritualized practice of refraining from touch."[15] This then gives us a vantage point on another of our anxieties of distance, namely that between the museum artifact and its observer. Curatorial approaches that seek to reduce this, typically through strategies of immersion, might be said—at least from the perspective that we have developed—to aim at the moderation of the atmospherics that emanate from the alterity of the objects themselves by the manipulation of the larger atmospheric conditions within which they are situated. A striking example of this is the Hall of the Pacific Peoples developed in honor of the anthropologist Margaret Mead and opened in the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1971. Mead's stated objective in the design of the hall was to "heighten and purify the encounter between object and observer through the reduction in the number of design elements that interfered with this communication."[16] This was hardly a case, however, of the purging of "design elements" in order to do away with any kind of stagecraft or mediation of the encounter. Instead, it had more to do with a redirection of design, which now took as its object the generalized atmospherics of the space in order to construct an ambience—through a new kind of intensified technological mediation—which was intended, however paradoxically, to foster the visitor's feeling of immediacy. This would involve, as Mead wrote in her 1960 document *Outline Plans of Ideas to Be Emphasized and Cultures to Be Included*, the stimulation of impressions of islands and sea "with a feeling of lightness and distance, and the occasional density of the deep bush," and the sounds of the sea "in all its moods."[17] Practically, this involved devices such as a diffusive lighting rig intended to reproduce the specific character of shaded tropical sunlight and a terrazzo floor of oceanic turquoise.[18] Visitors found themselves within a space that attempted to realize an encapsulated ambience, a set-up that perhaps recalled the earlier constructed models at the AMNH for which Mead apparently displayed great enthusiasm. Built to show native environments and rituals, these were displayed below domes that suggested nothing so much as miniature captive atmospheres.

Notes

1. Caroline Oates, "Metamorphosis and Lycanthropy in Franche-Comté, 1521–1643," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part One*, edited by Michel Feher, with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tadzi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), 305–363 at 318.
2. Lion Feuchtwanger, *Moscow 1937* (New York: Viking Press, 1937), 149–150.
3. Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 120–122; Gernot Böhme, *The Art of the Stage Set as a Paradigm for an Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, www.cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMB8-confGBohme-eng.pdf (accessed July 17, 2012), 7–8.
4. See Mark Dorrian, "Utopia on Ice: The Sunny Mountain Ski-Dome as an Allegory of the Future", *Cabinet: A Quarterly of Art and Culture* 47 (2012): 25–32.
5. Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142, 152.
6. Ibid., 140.
7. Ibid., 179.
8. "Art. IV – *Official Catalogues of the Industrial Exhibition.* Spicer and Co., 29 New Bridge-street, Blackfriars," *Westminster Review* 55 (July 1951): 178–204 at 179.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 184.
11. Ibid., 185.
12. Gottfried Korff, "Reflections on the Museum," *Journal of Folklore Research* 36, no. 2/3 (1999): 269.
13. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt (London: Fontana, 1992), 152–96 at 190; Böhme (note 2), 117.
14. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 79, 275.
15. Susan Stewart, "Prologue: From the Museum of Touch," in *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, edited by Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward, and Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 17–36 at 28.
16. Diane Losch, "The Fate of the Senses in Ethnographic Modernity: The Margaret Mead Hall of the Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History," in *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*, edited by Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gordon, and Ruth B Phillips (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 223–244 at 236.
17. Cited in Ibid., 232.
18. Ibid., 236–237.