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Main topics of research: aesthetics in theoretical and practical perspective, methodology in architectural research, rhetoric and philosophy of culture.

Title of the paper:

The Elements of Persuasio in Atmosphere

Abstract:

The key issue in the following is to consider an approach to the creation of atmosphere. I will suggest this approach to be through a parallel found in rhetoric when the focus is on how the orator influences the audience through his/her physical presence and use of language. This physical presence is the key issue of atmosphere, and at this point I will suggest drawing a parallel between some aspects of rhetoric and atmosphere as it lately has been introduced into the philosophical aesthetics. Though there is no talk of atmosphere in rhetoric, I believe it is worth considering if not the persuasio of the rhetoric are dealing with matters similar to the creation of atmospheres.

C'est l'ambition de ce travail de réfléchir sur la création d'ambiance. Je propose un parallèle à la rhétorique, de manière que le rhéteur influence son publique par sa présence physique et son usage de langage. Présence physique, c'est le point central de l'ambiance, est c'est là, que je propose un parallélisme entre certains aspects de la rhétorique et de l'ambiance, qui ont été introduit dans l'aesthétique philosophique ces dernières années. Même si on ne parle normalement pas d'ambiance dans la rhétorique, je vais examiner si le persuasio de la rhétorique porte sur des conditions, qui s'apparentent à la création d'ambiance.

My overall interest concerns strategies for creating atmospheres i.e. questions about how and where to begin the work with atmospheres. I believe we can profit from a parallel to rhetoric. There are two reasons for this: Rhetoric is concerned with 1) how we become affected in specific situations, and 2) with strategic guidelines for working with them. I will begin with briefly elaborating on the concept of atmosphere, secondly introduce my parallel to rhetoric, and finally reflect on how this contributes to questions about creating an atmosphere.

1. My approach to atmosphere is from philosophical aesthetics, in particular in relation to the works of Gernot Böhme. An atmosphere is construed as something quasi-objective, something we sense or feel in any room and place we are present in. We are affected by different physical elements – the arrangement and proportion of the place, the physical objects, the people, thus it has an important affinity with the concept of 'affectedness' (*Befindlichkeit*) known from the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger (*Sein und Zeit* § 29) but one important difference is the bodily presence which becomes a key issue for characterizing atmospheres. While the Heideggerian concept is primarily drawing attention to the importance of the different affects and emotionally states we find ourselves in because they strongly influence how we are confronting our surroundings, atmosphere is adding a further perspective to this by focusing on the physical presence of ourselves constituted by physical elements and the people we are among. Atmosphere goes more into how specific elements have an influence on us – into how a specific perception is influenced by e.g. the proportions and materials of the place I find myself in.

The feeling of presence as a key issue of atmosphere is a state of being; it is not a matter of a surplus or in any way something besides our perceptions and interpretations. Böhme describes it as the first moment in our perception when we feel the presence of something yet not identified. A perception is always about something, and the focus on atmosphere makes clear that we are present *in* the perception and not a subject establishing a relation to an object *by means of* the perception. Perception is not only an act of identifying something but it involves the perceiving subject as emotionally affected by something bringing the subject into a certain relation to the object.

I will not go more into detail about atmospheres; this has been elaborated in Böhme's writings. I will only emphasize two important aspects: One is the constantly ongoing influences we are subjects to; the other is the physical/material fundament of atmospheres. Though we should also be aware of interpretation as an aspect of atmosphere having importance for the way we feel and react to a place, we can maintain that the interpretation is inherent in physical matter. When we perform in a certain way at e.g. the church it is because we understand the room to be of a certain kind. We cannot call any building a church and have the same bodily reaction without the physical presence of elements like proportions, arrangement, light etc. An important parallel is here 'staging' or 'mise en scène'. The stage design and props have an effect on how we feel, perceive and understand what is performed before us and this is done by means of the physical elements at hand.

2. At this point, I believe it is worth drawing a parallel to rhetoric: The situation in which we speak of atmosphere is similar to how we are affected by the rhetor's physical appearance and verbal speech. The tone of the voice, the bodily presence and movements etc. constitute the atmosphere of the rhetor like the proportions, materials, light, acoustics etc. of a building are responsible for the atmosphere we feel and are affected by.

The parallel is not without difficulties. We cannot simply say the architect is a rhetor and architecture is the mean of communication as if the architect use buildings instead of text and words, nor can we say that architecture is basically conveying messages. On the other hand, it is not falsely to insist on architecture as communicating. The building gives us information intended for the user and we can think of this as an act of communication. My intention is not to investigate into how far we can draw parallels between the traditional rhetorical communication and architecture but only to look into rhetoric for a certain parallel, namely concerning the situation created by the communication and, to be more precise, how the atmosphere of the communication is established.

The atmosphere is created by different elements like the presence of the rhetor, tone of voice, bodylanguage, choice of words, content of the speech etc. These examples are concerning the oral speech – I will not consider in what way we could perhaps also talk about an atmosphere created by the text – and the effects are of interest in relation to the three forms of appeal: logos, ethos and pathos. They categorize the kind of impact the rhetor leaves on us and, presumably also the architecture by means of different physical elements. The impact architecture has on the users is intended to do something specific to the user. Even if it is not intended as being argumentative or persuasive concerning specific topics it does give form to intentions: the building and its rooms are for a specific use and the users are expected to have certain desires and intentions that the architecture has to answer and correspond to.

Perhaps we should notice that not any form of communication is rhetorical – the answer to a question in an ordinary situation will usually not count as the answer to a rhetorical situation, but even in that situation will elements from the true rhetorical speech be present and of importance. Again, my intention of drawing the parallel is not because architecture is thought to be a piece of rhetoric responding to a rhetorical situation but only to borrow from rhetoric the attention given to elements constituting the different emotionally responses to a speech. I believe it is useful to be aware of some basic differentiations between situations created by the way the architecture affects us because it – intended or not – appeals in these ways. We feel the presence of the architecture like we feel the presence of another person, and we are not indifferent to what we feel, at least not when we are stepping into some kind of direct relation to the architecture like entering the building or approaching it and staying in it.

We are familiar with descriptions of how architecture provokes sensations and emotions especially in terms of beauty, but introducing atmosphere is also to introduce an approach to a more detailed characterization of the different aspects of these emotions – whether they belong to a feeling of awe, efficiency, confidence etc. These three examples also reflect the three kinds of persuasio: pathos, logos and ethos; one could be tempted to say they reflect the Vitruvian *venustas*, *utilitas* and *firmitas*: in a very crude form the answers to: “am I impressed?”, “can I use it?”, “do I trust it?”

My intention is not to go into how these forms appear within the context of architecture nor is it to indicate ways of constructing persuasive strategies of argumentation by means of architecture. The focus is on one aspect of the act of persuasion: the physical elements responsible for creating the sensuous and emotional impact on us which is the central aspect of atmosphere. The parallel is intended as a help to focus on specific elements and to borrow a strategy from a discipline that seems to have an important affinity with architecture in some aspects.

To sum up: Architecture produces different effects on people emotionally responding to it.

To find a starting point for characterising the elements at work we can think of them in terms of how they appeal: do they affect us in a way that we believe the architecture to fulfill its

function, do they induce confidence or provoke emotions. The second step is to approach the physical elements constituting the atmosphere.

3. The intention with this last section is to make explicit and through a systematic characterisation to make operational the knowledge of creating atmospheres already present in practice. Creating an atmosphere is to a large extent a central issue already in aesthetic practice. It is important to emphasize that when we talk of aesthetics in this context the focus is on the effects of physical elements and not on artistic or interpretative strategies; and also to repeat that atmosphere is related to every place – from the supermarket and fitness center to the church and concert hall.

We can easily name many kinds of atmospheres like an intimate and warm atmosphere or a hectic and tense atmosphere. Less easy is it to point to what elements constitute the atmosphere at a specific place. The intimate and warm atmosphere in the bar may have to do with the proportions of the room, the materials, the light and sound. It also has to do with the people present. They may be responsible for the warm and friendly atmosphere and a later change in guests may change the intimacy to e.g. something nervous and unfriendly. The atmosphere depends on different circumstances all very much related to the specific place and situation.

To work with the creation of atmospheres is very much dependent on being sensible towards the context, it will not be possible to give exact prescriptions for how different elements work like saying the colour red gives a warm atmosphere or large proportions are not of a human scale and oppose intimacy. What I believe we can do is to outline a strategy for approaching the creation of atmosphere in terms of a very loose sketch.

Reflecting on doing workshops on atmosphere at the Aarhus School of Architecture I suggest to make a rough division between people, relations and sensuous elements. By people I mean to focus on the context of activities and the patterns of movements; relations is a matter of proportions and arrangements; and sensuous elements is a matter of giving attention to the senses and the different materials.

Within this sketch we should consider the different elements whether they are of any importance in our context and in what way. Like the senses, it would be worth considering how and what to do with the tactile, acoustics and odours in order to contribute to how we feel a certain place. We may visit places of great visual appeal but find them disturbingly or somehow not to function the way they are intended. We may clearly see how well the place is and at first hand be impressed because the visual impression is strong and dominates over the other senses, but later we do not feel the place to be that successful. A reason for this could be the lack of attention given to e.g. acoustics and odours.

This brings me to a last comment on the connection to rhetoric. The intentions we have for creating an atmosphere are for the users to feel something specific. In e.g. the school it should not only be a concern for successful architectural principles but also to create a place that invite to and sustains the desired educational principles as well as a being the best frame for work and play of the users; perhaps also to influence them to a change of habits in terms of sustainability or another present agenda. For this it is important to be aware of the different elements used for communicating and influencing, and we need to reflect on how we appeal to the users and what elements that will be of the best use. For this a strategy is needed; a strategy that can guide us in order to bring the right experiences and knowledge in use in the right context.