

THE NARRATIVE AND ATMOSPHERE OF PLACE

Human feelings and behavior in architecture

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I INTRODUCTION

Architecture covers many disciplines and an architectural problem can arise from this complexity. In addition, an architect designs for society and therefore takes numerous user needs into consideration. The relevance of research-methodological awareness in relation to architectural profession, heuristic techniques, and design practices is necessary to define and address an architectural problem. The Research Methods course has given me an overview and knowledge about the various perspectives of research in relation to architecture. One of the offered lectures in this seminar series was about Investigation Spatial Narrative presented by Klaske Havik. For me, the most interesting subject in this lecture was the experience of architectural elements with all human senses and hereby the narrative of objects or places. In my entire architecture study, creating a story for a place was essential. As an architect, you do not just design a space, you imagine an atmosphere, a story, or a life. Imagination is vital but it is also important how you convey/devote this. This lecture gave me an overview of the ways in which narrative can be used for a design proposal.

In order to make a responsible design, it is significant that you analyze how you experience your environment as an architect as well as a user. In the lecture, Havik suggested that as architects we need to understand how people experience the urban territory they use or inhabit.¹ Also in the third lecture of this series, Berkers talked about the study of human action and conduct in relation to architecture, praxeology.² I agree with the statement that Havik and Berkers made during their lectures. I believe that as an architect you design for people, or society, and it is therefore important to understand the users of a place. For explaining an environment, Havik asks the philosophical question: "*What is atmosphere*" and indicates that this question can have an infinite answers. To reduce the scope of the question, it is made location and project specific. For each place and type of project, the definition of atmosphere is limited. This makes me think that each place has its own story and collective memory and that together this creates an atmosphere of a place.

In my independent graduation project within in the studio Interiors Buildings Cities I describe my location as a memory box in which many narratives are stored, many people have come and gone. This is another factor influencing the current atmosphere of the location. My project location is the historic Balat neighborhood in Istanbul/Turkey and is one of the few locations where the local architecture and lifestyle are not impaired. Whilst Balat is a historical neighborhood, it also faces current social issues such as accommodating refugees. For me, it is one of those neighborhoods where you can relive Orhan Pamuk's poetic descriptions of Istanbul. Orhan Pamuk's poetry, atmosphere, linked to the narrative of Istanbul, is described in a very special way.³ All this shows us that the narrative and collective memory are resources of defining the atmosphere of a place. It is essential to define the atmosphere not only to understand my current location, but to understand a location and the inhabitants. Through this paper, I would like to research the ways to defining atmosphere and the narrative of a place and the main question follows as "*How the atmosphere of a place / space and spatial narrative can be defined.*"

II RESEARCH THROUGH WRITING

Complex problems often occur in architecture and it is the task of the architect to solve these problems through design. Likewise, my project location Balat/Istanbul is a neighbourhood with a Long and rich history, and topographical, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity. In addition, there are also micro-scale and macro-scale forces on the neighborhood, such as political and national projects. In my opinion, all these aspects influence the experiences of the local residents and thereby also the atmosphere of the place. According to Havik, a definition of atmosphere is: aesthetics of emotional spaces.⁴ In our study, we were mainly taught to create to create imaginary users/residents or place by ourselves, rather than to empathically imagine human feelings and behavior.

This paper will explore how to define the human experience of a place and thereby their feelings, perceptions and collective memory. In this research I want to explain different research methods through reading related literary sources. This analysis of human senses and behavior situates between the epistemic framework of praxeology. As explained in the introduction, praxeology is the study of human action and conduct which is based on the thought that humans engage in specific behaviors for specific reasons. In this framework, the selected literature is based on the comprehending of buildings and places by human senses. These works are: *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* by Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto* by Klaske Havik, *Writing Atmospheres: Literary methods to investigate the thresholds of architectural experience* by Klaske Havik, and *Thinking Architecture* by Peter Zumthor.

In the foreword of *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture*, Pallasmaa describes the essence of the written approach in architecture. According to Pallasmaa, in architectural practice verbal expression has been limited to functional and technical aspects, and that the complexity of architectural tasks requires analytical and verbal skills.⁵ Furthermore, this literature interpreted that words serve as explanation, and evocatively depict the human feelings/expression of buildings and places. It also describes how different architects in literary history have used words for their impressions and literary descriptions of architecture and landscape in novels. In summary, there is a clarification is made about the fact that words can be stronger than images for the sensual depiction of the environment.

Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto is related to the previously mentioned literature. The first literature explains how words can evoke imagery into a person's imagination and in this literature Havik describes the ways of similar designs by Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto. From the designs of these two architects, it is described how architectural designs and the environment can be explained through words. The experiences of two different buildings are described from the perspective of different users.

In the literature *Writing Atmospheres: Literary methods to investigate the thresholds of architectural experience* discusses new ways to better understand the urban atmosphere. The words like *character* and *beauty* have long been absent from the modernist architecture study and it is a challenge for architects, urban planners and researchers in this field to find suitable methods to define atmosphere.⁶ It describes how the skills of literary writing can be applied as analytical methods to understand and conceptualize the complexities of architectural experience.⁷

In addition to these literary resources that provide an insight into the ways of understanding and describing architectural experiences and atmosphere, I want to explore how architects apply this in practice. In the book *Thinking Architecture*, Peter Zumthor describes his personal experiences of an atmosphere and the relationship between urban environment and human senses.

III DESCRIBING ATMOSPHERES THROUGH HUMANS SENSES

According to Pallasmaa, architectural designs are directly linked to visual media, but architects and artist are beginning to realize that this art form partly takes place in a visual context and that visual effects can be experienced unconsciously and undirected. The prejudices among visual artists and architects have led to a distrust of words, such as Henri Matisse and Alvar Aalto's negative attitude towards writing and words. This makes writing about architecture look contemptuous.⁸ Within architectural practice, verbatim expression has been limited to functional and technical descriptions of projects and the clarification of intellectual and conscious design intentions. Architecture is an impure and fused discipline where different aspects are incorporated in the design process, this complexity of architectural assignments requires analytical and verbal skills. These skills are essential for creating an empathic and narrative imagination.⁹

Places and buildings have an important position in novels, because the context of human life takes place within architecture. Through words, writers evoke architectural images and experiences in

the reader's imagination, without the use of drawings and visual images. In our experience of places or buildings, ambience, mood or atmosphere are essential and through words this can be described and made understandable for others.¹⁰ In many novels there is an interaction and integration of physical space and human character, leading to a connection between the external physical spaces and the internal mental spaces of both the characters and the readers in a dialectical continuum. These architectural spheres and interaction between space and people can be a method for describing buildings and places. According to Pallasmaa, architects should be more aware of what happens in their designs and not just see spaces as an aesthetic proposition.¹¹ Literary methods can enhance a designer's functional and spatial imagination and create a more emotional and experiential image of non-existent life.¹² Creating a non-existent imagination is a complicated task for architects and visual media is not enough to understand and feel a place. A design is made for people and society, then it is essential to experience and describe the place with human senses. For this analysis and description, literary methods are crucial to generate imaginations of life, behavior and emotions.

In *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto*, Havik analyzes several buildings by Salmona and Aalto through the writing method. With this research method, Havik shows that architectural aspects, such as embodied perception, memory and use, which are difficult to describe with factual terms, are made understandable through writing.¹³ According to Havik, the traditional tools of architectural research fail to address the fundamental ambiguities of architecture. Between these ambiguities there is a field of tension related to experience, use and imagination. To address such ambiguities, writing in a literary way can be used as a form of architectural research. Research through writing creates a balance between the reality and the imagination of possible situations. This balance gives us the opportunity to identify buildings and places with subjective experiences.¹⁴ The research of Havik is based on the social dimension of the different buildings. Here she gives a poetic approach, in which aspects such as embodied perception and memory are emphasized and this brings the sensory perception and the physical movement through space to the foreground.¹⁵ In addition, Havik analyzes the buildings from the perspective of the users. She describes different scenes of users in the building and environment and investigates the use of architectural details. In this way an interaction is created between the writer who perceives and the reader who creates an imagination while reading. With this way of architectural research, through the optimal use of human senses, a building/place is observed and the place can be better understood. This leads to a better definition of the atmosphere and narrative of the place and the place will be better understood. Also, writing observations in a literary way from a conventional perspective will give a better overview of the users of the buildings or place. This way of architectural research will contribute to the understanding of my location and the inhabitants. This allows the design proposal to match the atmosphere of the place.

The third literature *Writing Atmospheres: Literary methods to investigate the thresholds of architectural experience* describes how experiences can be studied in relation to atmospheric properties. To define atmosphere, there is a need for a sensorial approach to urbanism and to understand the relationship between inhabitants and the urban environment. To understand human behavior and emotions it is crucial to study the urban environment and its various aspects with all human senses.¹⁶ The relationship between man and architecture is complex and therefore defining atmosphere is vague and infinite. In literary methods, atmospheres are defined and this method can give architects, urban planners and researchers the possibility to focus on the atmospheric possibilities of place.¹⁷ According to Havik, poets give the ability to note how things speak to us, objects can have the skill to speak and subjects can be identified with objects.¹⁸

The following literature describes how by literary method atmospheres of a place have been described by sensual observations. According to Peter Zumthor, there is a relationship between personal memories and architectural objects. For example, he describes his different moods and smells that arise through a door handle and goes back to his aunt's house in his youth.¹⁹ Another of his personal experiences of a place is as follows:

"It is Maundy Thursday. I am sitting in the long loggia of the cloth hall. Facing the panorama of the square, its row of buildings, its church and its monuments. My back to the wall of the cafe. Just the right amount of people. Flower market. In the sun. It's 11 a.m. The wall on the opposite side of the square lies in shadow, bathed in a pleasant bluish light. Wonderful sounds: conversations close by, footsteps on the flagstones of the square, the murmuring of the crowd (no cars, no engine noise, once in a while distant sounds of construction. Birds, black dots in flight, they look eager and cheerful, a fast and jagged pattern of lines in the air..."²⁰

In this description, Zumthor indicates that in his notes on the atmosphere of the square, there is a relationship between his feelings and the atmosphere. Without the atmosphere of the square, according to him, he would never have experienced the feelings. There is an intimate relationship between human emotions and surrounding objects. According to Zumthor, as an architect he contributes to the existing physical framework and the atmosphere of places and space that arouse emotions.²¹ As an architect it is essential to experience an atmosphere through senses and feelings. Ultimately, a design influences the current urban atmosphere and experience of the users.

IV PERSONAL POSITIONING IN SOCIAL ARCHITECTURE

In my opinion, architects have a profound role in how people live. Daily life takes place in buildings and spaces that we design and people have an indirect connection to the atmosphere of these places. A place gives rise to a certain feeling, memories, emotions in its inhabitants. As mentioned in the introduction, it is important to realize that as an architect you design for people. My personal observations are that, particularly in developing countries, nowadays people are building for profit and there is a focus on building as quickly as possible. This leads to an unsustainable urban environment. It is therefore essential that architects explore a site-specific atmosphere and make ultimate use of their senses. As Havik mentioned in the lecture, we should not only analyze a space as architects, but also as a user and understand the experiences of users in their urban territory. The question "*What is atmosphere*" is crucial and this research has provided an overview of how atmosphere and narrative of a place can be defined.

The consulted literature in this study indicate that literary writing is a method of defining an atmosphere. In *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing and Writing Atmospheres: Literary methods to investigate the thresholds of architectural experience* is discussed how literary works such as poetry and novels define architectural environment and atmosphere through words. Poetry and novels enhance the image of a place by describing sensual experiences, creating an empathetic imagination. This literary method can help designers define an atmosphere and create a non-existent imagination.

Havik describes her own experiences of the various buildings in a poetic way and evokes melancholy. The focus in her experiences of the buildings is on the sensory perception and this leads her to natural movements through the place. She describes objects she sees, hears, feels and smells and also makes personal comparisons, such as "...the white church with its roof as heavy wings."²² These details strengthen my image as a reader and I can go along in the atmosphere of the place.

...

In this old world: the library.

*She enters the slender doors
in glass and steel. Her boots
leave meltwater on the floor.*

...

*Though damp and cold embraces her,
leads her eyes, her steps
to the next flights of stairs
and invites her to sit down
and read, alone.²³*

The poetry that Havik has written allows me to empathise with her feelings and through a descriptions of how the space interacts with her senses, I gain an impression of atmosphere of the place. I can also predict the spatial narrative. Peter Zumthor explains in his book how he defined the atmosphere of a place by writing his sensual experiences and feelings. He indicates that atmospheres lead to experiences of feelings and poetic writing is a way for imagining this. These literatures show how poetic writing has been applied in practice and that analyzing a site through feelings makes it possible to understand and define the atmosphere.

This research has led me to open all my senses to the utmost during my site visit and to write down everything I have seen, heard, felt and smelled. Afterwards, while reading, I was able to relive the atmosphere of the site and this contributed to the developments during the design process. I was able to better understand the inhabitants of Balat, the collective memory and the atmosphere and made a design proposal based on this. My goal with my graduation was to create a socially responsible design. This research method has made it possible for me to strengthen the social cohesion in the neighborhood through small interventions in the urban environment. I can also predict the feelings of users with every design choice and I get a strong imagination of my design proposal. The discussions in the lectures made me rethink my position as an architect and to use my human qualities when designing. We are not only architects but also human and the relationship between our human being and profession gives us the opportunity to make responsible design and add value to our existing environment.

The Narrative and Atmosphere of Place

END NOTES:

- ¹ Klaske Havik, *Lecture 4: Investigating Spatial Narratives* (Own lecture notes, 2020)
- ² Marieke Berkers, *Lecture 3: Investigating Spatial and Social Practices* (Own lecture notes, 2020)
- ³ Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. (Istanbul: Yapi Kredi Yayinlari, 2016)
- ⁴ Klaske Havik, *Lecture 4: Investigating Spatial Narratives* (Own lecture notes, 2020)
- ⁵ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), p. 7
- ⁶ Jonathan Charley, *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 271
- ⁷ Jonathan Charley, *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 271
- ⁸ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), p. 6
- ⁹ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), p. 7
- ¹⁰ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), p. 8
- ¹¹ Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), p. 11
- ¹² Klaske Havik, *Urban Literacy: Reading and Writing Architecture* (Rotterdam: nai010 publishers, 2014), p. 13
- ¹³ Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto* (Montreal Architectural Review: Vol. 4, 2017), p. 41
- ¹⁴ Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto* (Montreal Architectural Review: Vol. 4, 2017), p. 43
- ¹⁵ Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto* (Montreal Architectural Review: Vol. 4, 2017), p. 47
- ¹⁶ Jonathan Charley, *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 271
- ¹⁷ Jonathan Charley, *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 272
- ¹⁸ Jonathan Charley, *The Routledge Companion on Architecture, Literature, and the City* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 272
- ¹⁹ Peter Zumthor, *Thinking architecture* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2010), p. 7
- ²⁰ Peter Zumthor, *Thinking architecture* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2010), p. 83
- ²¹ Peter Zumthor, *Thinking architecture* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2010), p. 84
- ²² Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto* (Montreal Architectural Review: Vol. 4, 2017), p. 44
- ²³ Klaske Havik, *Acts of Symbiosis: A Literary Analysis of the Work of Rogelio Salmona and Alvar Aalto* (Montreal Architectural Review: Vol. 4, 2017), p. 45

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