

Attuning to Familiar Places

Imagining an Active Future for the Quakers of Brigflatts

Discussion and Reflection | Caroline Rosenzweig | TU Delft

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Throughout this graduation project I have explored methods for attuning architecture to a location and its inhabitants, beginning with research that developed productive methods to attune the architect to the affective qualities of a place. The following design project explored how these identified qualities could influence future architecture, either in preserving the local atmosphere or creating new spatial conditions and experiences.

I came across the term 'attunement' when exploring the intersection of architecture and the cognitive sciences. For several decades, architectural theorists have argued that there is a loss of meaning in architecture, caused by an over-emphasis on scientific thinking and devaluing of poetic practices. Some theorists have presented ways to return meaning to architecture: Juhani Pallasmaa has called for empathic imagination and Alberto Perez-Gomez for attuned architecture. However, neither has offered methods for how to achieve those ends. My research aimed to bridge theory and practice by developing methods for attuning to a location and its inhabitants. It focussed on ways to become attuned to a place and people, to imagine spaces empathically and tailor architecture to the affective qualities of a place.

To best develop methods that identify these qualities, my research looked at familiar places, that is, places we assume to know well and therefore may overlook distinctive features. Accordingly, I focussed on Brigflatts, my childhood neighbourhood in rural England. I developed methods for attuning in two ways. First, by drawing upon three fields and their related methods: cognitive science and sensory mapping; anthropology and collaborative design ethnography; and architecture and reflections on atmospheres. Second, by creating physical objects that translate qualities and experiences of place into an interactive form.

My exploration of Brigflatts culminated in four large-format paintings that express what I became attuned to. (Figure 1) I deconstructed and analysed these paintings to indicate how the on-site activities provided insights into the affective qualities of the location and these findings have fed into my design project that is also set at Brigflatts. My goal to design an attuned architecture informed the research focus of my graduation, and in turn the research findings informed the design project: I identified a need for a new space through conversations with neighbours, defined which local bodies I could design with, and uncovered social behaviours to design for.

In addition to the findings of my research, so too have my own fascinations with Brigflatts shaped the design project. Having grown up in its rainy climate and seen how a grey day can lower everyone's mood, I set myself the challenge to design a structure that comes alive in the rain and creates new, attractive qualities even on dreary days.

My design project set at Brigflatts draws on my research findings to attune a new space to an existing place and people. It does so in the context of imagining a future for the Quakers of Brigflatts, a shrinking rural faith community in need of a secure future to keep their historically and spiritually significant Meeting House open and active. This project explores how architecture can re-active such a site while balancing the needs of a Quaker community, the Yorkshire Dales National Park, and the locals who value the peace and quiet of their neighbourhood. It is a sensitive project set in a peaceful place through which I navigate several frictions between the stakeholders all the while aiming to produce a valued, attractive, and attuned architecture.



Figure 1 – The four paintings in the collection *Life at Brigflatts*, a product of my research project.

Preliminary Results

The product of my research is twofold: a set of guiding principles for how to develop methods of attunement, and a series of large-format paintings designed to translate the embodied experience of Brigflatts. (I discuss the transferability of these results below, under *Reflection Questions*.) The paintings depicted the affective qualities of Brigflatts that I attuned to. During the design process, they brought my attention to these qualities, grounding my design in the local atmosphere and reminding me of local bodies to include in my design. This was a useful anchor, as my planning during this phase of the project was less strict than the research phase. During my research project, I prepared and tested three methods, adapted them as I felt necessary, and reflected upon their efficacy in uncovering affective qualities of place. As I was unsure of what I would uncover, I left the last part of the research open so I could explore new methods to express these findings. The paintings were a result of this latter part. Once the design stage began, I did not have a set method to go forward with, however the paintings inspired me to practice new ways of imagining spaces while also drawing on my habitual design process. To stay on track, I revisited the questions I set myself in my graduation plan. I have provided a brief run through of these question in the next section, *Research Questions*.

Assessing My Approach

My approach to understanding the experience of a place was to identify the qualities and aspects of atmosphere that shape our impression of it. By drawing methods from other fields, I was able to define how material bodies, sensory stimuli, and aspects of atmosphere produced an overall sense of place, and by including methods for collaborating with other people I was able to explore the same place from different perspectives. Importantly, to remain attuned to what I had discovered about the experience of Brigflatts, I expressed these findings in

physical objects that I and others could engage with. By re-experiencing these objects, I was continually reminded of the affective qualities of my site and throughout the design process referred to what I had uncovered.

My approach to understanding the experience of a place remained in the design process too, as I imagined how spaces and surfaces would be interacted with and react in different conditions. I referred to Zumthor's aspects of atmospheres which had helped me to define the local atmosphere during my research and used this framework to analyse my proposed designs through different lenses.

I am satisfied with how my research project took shape and the resulting products and principles that I concluded from it. So too do I see the value in the process – taking time to understand the experience of place from another perspective can bring richness and sensitivity to a project. However, while I was able to draw conclusions about the qualities of what exists now, I have found it challenging to justify why, when, and how these qualities can or should inform future spaces. I suspect that how a design integrates with the existing site is always a balance in any project, and because I focussed so deeply on understanding the affective qualities of my site during my research it was of particular concern for me. Although I found it hard to know when to let go of the desire to integrate the new with the old, I see the value in trying to find the balance and hope to become more confident with experience.

Integrating Feedback

I discussed this connection to the research with my tutors throughout the design process. I was cautious and wanted to make it clear how my findings influenced my design, resulting in either too much complexity of parts and no unifying whole, or becoming so attentive to fitting my project into the existing place that I ended up adopting many features from the current buildings instead of offering new details and spatial qualities. With their feedback, I made it clear what I was taking from the research and took the opportunity to introduce my own ideas to the project and site.

I embraced their feedback about exploring ideas I was hesitant towards. I found my familiarity with the site to be a blessing and a curse, as I could fully imagine the place but could also imagine the resistance from neighbours and Quakers. At first, this prevented me from exploring ideas as I could more easily find reasons why they wouldn't work than imagine how they could. The advice of all three tutors, especially during my P3, helped me reframe my approach and saw that the challenges could be overcome through design choices. For example, at first, I didn't want to build at the highest part of the plot as the building would become more prominent in the landscape and not meet the criteria of the national park to be subtle. However, this spot had the best views of the landscape, so I addressed this by receding the glass in the façade so it wouldn't be as reflective and visible from afar, measured the roof overhang to add extra shading and blend in better with nearby slate roofs, and used landscaping features to blend certain parts of the building in with the surrounding nature.

Lastly, I found their feedback helpful when I was spending too much time working within one drawing scale, perspective, or design focus. I found it challenging to see where the gaps in my design development were, but with our weekly meetings I could keep on track and move more smoothly from one aspect to another. When I

became aware of this, I was better able to shift focus myself and confidently explore a different scale or perspective when another wasn't working for me.

Learning From My Own Work

My favourite takeaway from this project is a newfound confidence for using different media to explore spatial aspects, in particular painting fragments of space to understand atmospheric qualities, proportions, and relationships between materials. As mentioned above, I also learnt how to overcome hesitations with certain ideas by exploring how I could employ design tools to make them achievable. It is a lesson I will remind myself of going forward. Lastly, and something that I am still working on, is finding a balance that I am comfortable with when adding something new to a sensitive rural environment. Though this is an imagined project and I have spoken for the imagined stakeholders, I have been careful not to create too much friction with my proposed designs. I think the confidence to suggest something different than expected will come with time and may be easier to navigate when I am working with real clients, but I have practiced that in this project and am more familiar with what I as the designer feel appropriate and exciting to propose for a new design

Looking Forward

At this stage of the project, I am confident with several aspects of the design and how it links to my research. It is clear to me how and why I have chosen the function, form, materials, and which local bodies I have tailored the building to react with. I still see room for improvement regarding the connection and harmony between the buildings, both old and new. I will explore how to unify the spaces and expect to make some changes with the landscaping between the structures.

Further, I will explore how to represent the designs in terms of the imagined embodied experience and hope to add another painting to the collection from my research at Brigflatts.

Research Questions

How do the quaker testimonies of integrity, equality, simplicity, community, stewardship of the Earth, and peace manifest in aesthetic and spatial qualities?

I defined a design position to each of the testimonies based on my research of Brigflatts, wider readings about the Quaker faith and finding references of modern meeting houses.

- Integrity: using materials for their material properties and leaving materials with a natural finish.
- Equality: designing accessible spaces.
- Simplicity: creating affective qualities with simple gestures and details.
- Community: creating spaces for group activities, adding forms for drawing people to come together and focus on shared experiences, and using some low-tech construction methods so people could donate their labour and build the new spaces together.
- Stewardship of the Earth: reducing the environmental impact by sourcing local materials, providing habitats for wildlife, and designing an easily maintainable structure.
- Peace: protecting the local character of Brigflatts by minimizing sound and light pollution, creating spaces for stillness, and connecting the interior to the peaceful surroundings through large openings and removable walls.

How can new architectural qualities be introduced to the Yorkshire Dales National Park envisioning a contemporary style for the park while protecting the existing character?

In addition to studying the orientation, circulation, and form of the current buildings, I focussed on the experience of Brigflatts when determining new architectural qualities to protect the existing character. I sought new construction methods to achieve similar qualities while reducing environmental impact and improving indoor climate conditions, such as using hempcrete to create thick walls with a higher insulation value.

How can the needs of a faith group, a national park, and the residents be balanced in a new building that aims to attract visitors while maintaining the peaceful character of a country lane?

After defining the needs of each stakeholder, I outlined several frictions to overcome with the design. I was able to balance them with different tactics, such as orienting spaces of higher action away from the neighbour's view, setting the buildings into the ground and keeping them at one-story to reduce the height and visual impact on the landscape, and using local materials to meet sustainable requirements from the park. Fortunately, the stakeholders were often in agreement, such as keeping the peaceful character of Brigflatts. This influenced the

suggested programs of the new spaces to keep the number of visitors to a satisfactory level – low traffic for the neighbours, high foot traffic for the Quakers by designing attractions for walkers.

How can spatial design and technical solutions create warm, dry, and light spaces in a dim, cold, and rainy environment?

From the beginning I sought a clean energy generation that could provide warm interiors, opting for a ground source heat pump and underfloor heating. The high insulation hempcrete walls keeps the interior spaces warm and is also breathable, removing problems with moisture that are typical for the climate. In contrast to the existing Quaker buildings, the new structures have large and triple paned windows, bringing in light and reducing heat loss. I explored innovative designs of skylights to bring more light into north-facing rooms.

How can material and spatial qualities support social gathering, whether for silent worship, stillness, and spirituality, or for education and activism?

The set of buildings provide several ways to gather and offer the space for independent and group activism:

- There is a workshop and lodging for a resident artist, supporting the work of an activist for 3-6 months at a time.
- There is a gallery space with a central display table to convene around and discuss the exhibited artefacts.
- There is a reading room with seating around all four walls to support quiet reflection. It is set into the ground and large windows connect visitors to the surrounding nature.
- Lastly, there is a bunk barn adjacent to the existing Meeting House, offering visitors a place to stay as well as an event space for Quaker gatherings, such as a wedding or funeral service. The walls of the bunk barn can be opened, turning the barn into a pavilion on warm days.

How can we best deal with listed buildings in protected rural areas, when minimal alterations can be made to existing structures, but new builds require extensive planning permission and have the potential to disrupt a peaceful area?

I approached this question with a sensitivity to the existing functions, careful to not make them obsolete while still creating new spaces with all necessary functions. I made sure to protect the qualities of the existing buildings and connect to them through the orientation of new buildings and connections between them. The proposed structures are lower in height and reflect the form of the existing, while offering new spatial qualities.

How can a new public building in a rural location be accessible to visitors while limiting the need for parking and bringing increased traffic to the area?

This question posed a challenge when defining what the program and intended use of the new buildings would be. While I want to be conscious that some visitors need easy access to buildings, I refrained from giving space

for too many cars, and instead oriented the entrance of buildings to the existing walking trails. I also added sheltered bike storage to promote sustainable forms of transportation.

How can I remain attuned to the project location throughout the design process despite designing from a different location?

I drew a set of material bodies to design with and a selection of social behaviours to design for based on my research findings. I was reminded of these when I looked at my paintings of Brigflatts, which I pinned up next to my desk and printed out on cards.

Reflection Questions

1. What is the relation between your graduation project topic, your master track (A) and your master program (MSc AUBS)?

This graduation project explores the intersection of a faith group's ethos, the conservation goals of a national park service, and the preservation of a local neighbourhood's 'sense of place,' presenting the challenge to balance various needs while imagining a creative, spatial solution to secure an active and profitable future for the Friends of Brigflatts. The project looks at social, environmental, and economic forces as well as material and experiential conditions – continuing the exploration of topics that have been discussed throughout the MSc AUBS and Architecture master track.

2. How did your research influence your design and how did the design influence your research?

(discussed above)

3. How do you assess the value of your way of working?

(discussed above)

4. How do you assess the academic and societal value, scope, and implication of your graduation project, including ethical aspects?

Following my research into methods for attuning to familiar places, the design project translates the findings into a meaningful architecture that is attuned to its location and inhabitants. It challenges the current state of

architecture practice that often produces neutral and decontextualized environments by positioning local qualities and embodied experience at the centre of design decisions. Through this lens, issues of sustainability, community, and spirituality are addressed. For example, sustainability was addressed through material choices, construction techniques, and form so that the community could donate their labour and help build low-tech parts of the structure, such as the hempcrete walls, rubble trenches, and flagstone floors. I sourced local materials to cut down on transportation emissions, and included elements made from local heritage craft such as dry-stone walls and carved stone elements. The project therefore becomes an example of sustainable building for the national park, a promoter of local heritage, and a way to bring people together in the creation of new spaces.

Positioned at the intersection of a faith group's desire for a secured future and national parks aim for limited development, both sharing a goal of sustainable practices, this project explores and offers solutions to ethical issues of new developments in conserved areas.

5. How do you assess the value of the transferability of your project results?

The outcome of my research is two-fold. First is the collection of large-format paintings which depict the affective qualities I attuned to during my on-site visits. These qualities inform many design decisions for my design project that is situated in the same location, and due to how localised these qualities are, are not intended to be transferrable. However, the second result of my research, a set of guiding principles for methods of attunement, is intended to be transferred to future studies in other locations. I reflect upon this in my research report:

“While these findings come from my research at Brigflatts, a rural and familiar setting, they apply equally well to other settings, such as an urban or unfamiliar setting. Following these principles, researchers can gain an awareness of the affective qualities of place through an embodied experience and directed attention, a focus on the local bodies and on-going dynamics, and an engagement in reflective and productive activities. Just as I adapted methods to my case study, I advise researchers to tailor theirs by considering necessary safety precautions for exploring unfamiliar places, the quantity, proximity, and culture of inhabitants, and how comfortable they are with different media.”

Finally, the design project at Brigflatts is an example of how attuning oneself to a place uncovers existing qualities and dynamics to design with. This project is therefore an example for how an architect could respond to Perez-Gomez's call for an attuned architecture.

(My own reflection questions)

6. How can I assess whether my design is attuned to its location and inhabitants?

My exploration of ‘attunement’ opened a highly subjective way of investigation and designing. Even Perez-Gomez’s definition of attunement, as “the condition that evokes interiority – the human search for lost integrity, health, wholeness, and holiness,” is dependent on aspects that are difficult to measure objectively. While at first, I found this uncomfortable, it freed me from having to ‘prove’ that my design was attuned to people and place and instead I was able to explore ways of communicating the experience of it. In centring embodied experience in my design process, both in how I imagined new spaces and how I presented them, I remained attuned to the affective qualities I had uncovered during my research. This influenced the design in several ways: working with existing materials or introducing contrasting ones; creating similar visual, haptic, and motor interactions; and imagining their influence on the local atmosphere. Further, I drew out several behaviours of inhabitants to design around, ensuring the spaces met the expectations of local people.

As the condition of attunement is subjective, I assess how well my design is attuned to its location and inhabitants through the reaction to the design materials that I produce. I assess my own reaction by how I interpret the depicted atmosphere and where I find gaps in my imagination of the space. I assess the reaction of others by how comfortable they are imagining the new architecture based on both the existing large-scale paintings and the new visual material.

7. How did empathic imagination influence my design process?

Being able to imagine a space in use and through time broadened the situations that I designed for. From a material perspective, I considered how surfaces would react in different conditions and how they would weather over time, informing decisions such as how to expose them to the outdoors or how to finish them and maintain them. From a social perspective, I imagined my building in use and particularly on a rainy day when visitors are drawn to warm and dry spaces. From the point of view of the user, I paid attention to touch interactions and provided space to place items such as wet raincoats, backpacks, walking sticks, and muddy boots. Imagining these moments helped me to ground the design in the small and habitual interactions between body and space.