

Attuning to Familiar Places

Practicing Ethnographic Methods for Imagining Past, Present, and Future Atmospheres

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Introduction

In his most recent book, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning After the Crisis of Modern Science*, architecture historian and theorist Alberto Perez-Gomez calls for “an architecture that can enhance our human values and capacities, an architecture that is connected - attuned - to its location and its inhabitants.”¹

Since the 1980s Perez-Gomez has explored how to restore meaning in architecture. His work claims that there is a loss of poetics in architecture theory and practice, a consequence of the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution, when scientific thinking, mathematical reasoning, and formalism became valued above the arts. Deemed to be less productive, poetic and artistic practices in architecture were lost and as a result architecture was designed without thought for human experience. To restore meaning in architecture, Perez-Gomez turned first to contemporary phenomenology and its rediscovery on perception as the core of experience, and more recently called attention to attunement, which he defines as the condition that evokes interiority – the human search for lost integrity, health, wholeness, and holiness.²

I share Alberto Perez-Gomez’s concern for the loss of poetics and meaning in architecture. This research project responds to his call for an architecture attuned to its location and its inhabitants by exploring methods for attuning both architecture and the architect to familiar places. I have included the architect in this response as I believe in order to achieve an attuned architecture, the architect must herself be attuned to the location and its inhabitants. Consequently, I explore two definitions of attunement:

- Attunement of architecture refers to the condition that evokes interiority – the affective quality of place.
- Attunement of the architect refers to the act of becoming aware of the affective quality of place.

This research project will serve as the basis for a following design project. As such, the primary focus of this research is methods for attuning the architect to a place. Reflections on research methods will guide future research practices, while the expected design outcomes (elaborated on in the following section) will inform the attunement of architecture during the design project.

In addition, I have focussed on attuning to *familiar places* as it asks for a conscious effort to attune to that which is ‘normal’ for the architect – bringing to light unexamined assumptions and expectations of a place. This research project explores methods for uncovering the qualities of a place that are rarely given conscious attention and is a practice of attuning oneself to an environment, starting with the place where we are least aware of our surroundings because they are so familiar.

¹ Perez-Gomez, Alberto. *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*, MIT Press, 2016

² Robinson, Sarah, and Juhani Pallasmaa, editors. *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design*. MIT Press, 2015.

Theoretical Framework

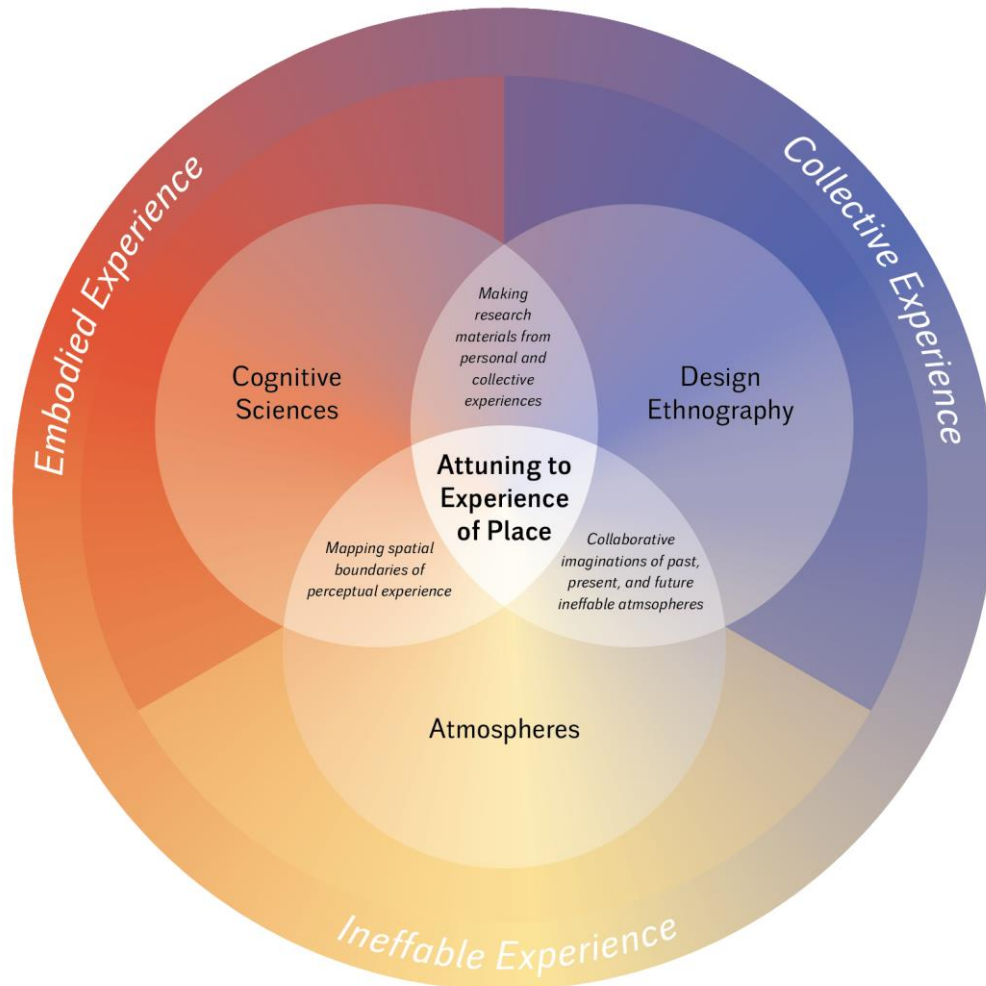


Figure 1: Diagram of Theoretical Framework, Attuning to Familiar Places

To practice attuning to a location and its inhabitants, I have chosen methods of analysis from three disciplines studying human experience from different angles. Figure 1 visualises these angles, selected methods of analysis, and the ways in which their focus overlaps.

First of all, I am drawn to the discussion of atmospheres in architecture as it aims to explain the often ineffable qualities of our existential, poetic, and emotional experiences. Atmospheres have been explored theoretically and reflectively in architecture discourse, such as in Peter Zumthor's reflections on the topic which provide a framework from which to understand "the magic of the real". He names this quality of architecture, "that which moves us", as atmosphere, and in his lecture on the topic offers 12 aspects of architectural atmospheres, including: how the light falls, the ways materials react to one another, the intimacy of spaces, and how it

responds to its surrounding environment³. Zumthor breaks down the ineffable experience of architecture into spatial qualities and shows that each element of a space has an affective force on our experience. I will use his framework to guide my attention during my site visit as a way to open up my awareness to previously unthought of spatial qualities.

Second, from a more scientific approach, the cognitive sciences explore human experience by studying the brain, body, and nervous system. In contrast to the previous theory that the brain and body were separate, recent advances in the cognitive sciences support an embodied theory of cognition; our experience is a result of our physical interactions with an environment. Furthermore, the recent discovery of the mirror neuron supports a theory of embodied simulation, which suggests that our perception is synaesthetic, meaning our experiences, memories, and imaginations are multisensory, and cannot be reduced to a single sense.⁴ This theory shows that our neural systems are linked – such as the visual, motor, and emotional systems, and our experience is therefore entangled with our environment.

Alberto Perez-Gomez and several other architecture theorists have turned to the cognitive sciences in recent years to study how our environment influences our experience.⁵ Moreover, Finnish architect and phenomenologist Juhani Pallasmaa suggests that this field can ‘valorise the poetic’ in architecture. One such way is by offering empirical methods to analyse the previously theoretically studied ineffable qualities of environments. In the past two decades architects and cognitive scientists have collaborated on a range of studies, one such interdisciplinary group has turned its attention to atmospheres. In a recent study, neuroscientist Sergei Gepshtein developed a tool for mapping the spatial boundaries of perceptual fields in order to identify where fields overlap and generate novel atmospheric conditions (Figure 2). While the paper studies spatial boundaries of visual perception, I aim to explore how this tool can be used for mapping multiple layers of embodied experience.⁷

Third, my methodology is informed by Design Ethnography, an interdisciplinary field connecting architecture and anthropology. Design Ethnography studies the experience of people in their environment. Shanti Sumartojo, researcher and co-author of *Design Ethnography: Research, Responsibilities, and Futures*, defines design ethnography as a participatory and collaborative practice to bring new information into existence through interventional and imaginative method.⁸ Sumartojo uses ethnographic methodologies to study how people experience their spatial surroundings, in particular studying the experience of ineffable atmospheres. Her methods prioritize the act of making materials through which to think, discuss, and imagine.

Inspired by Sumartojo’s work and informed by her workshop that I attended⁹, I will use ethnographic methods to understand the experience of other people, using research materials as interventions to promote discussion and collective imaginations, and will follow her advice to use an iterative, open, and collaborative practice.

³ Zumthor, Peter. *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments - Surrounding Objects*. Birkhäuser, 2006.

⁴ Robinson, Sarah, and Vittorio Gallese. “Interview on Architecture and Neuroscience with Sarah Robinson.” 2018.

⁵ *Mind in Architecture: Neuroscience, Embodiment, and the Future of Design*

⁶ Ritchie, Ian. “Special Issue: Neuroarchitecture.” *Architectural Design*, vol. 90, no. 6, 2020.

⁷ Proietti, Tiziana, and Sergei Gepshtein. “Locating Architectural Atmosphere.” *Generators of Architectural Atmosphere*, edited by Elisabetta Canepa and Bob Condia, New Prairie Press, 2022.

⁸ Advanced Research Workshop on Architecture Ethnography, with Prof. Shanti Sumartojo., TU Delft Theory of Architecture Fellowship Workshop, November 2023

⁹ Sumartojo Workshop

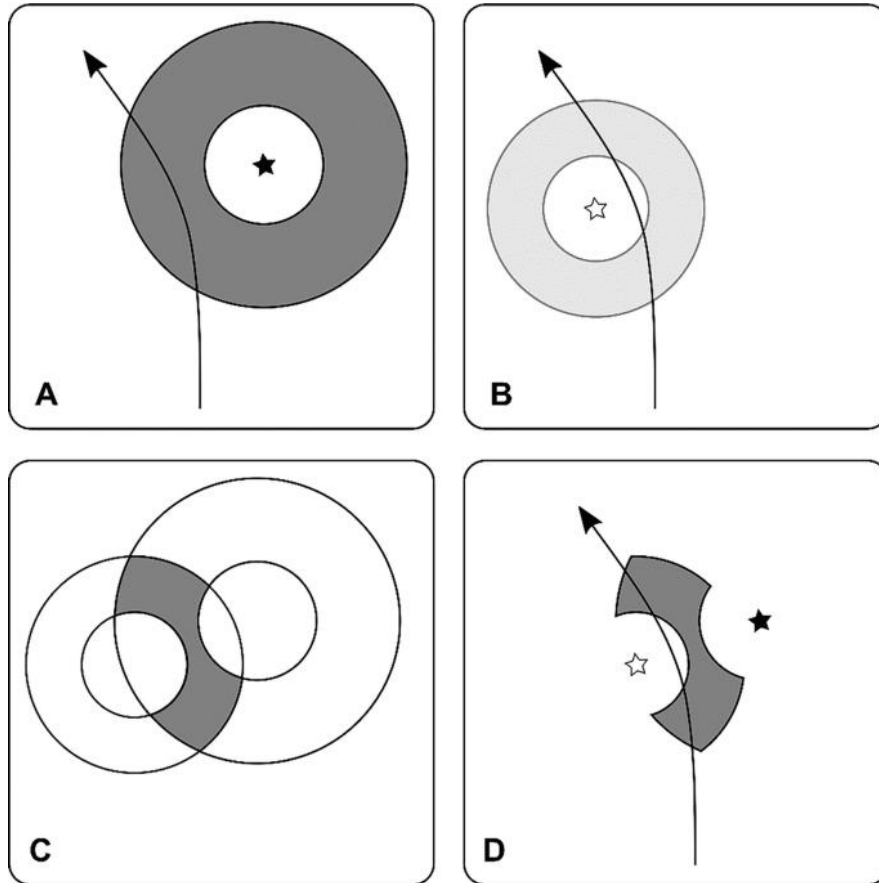


Figure 2: The ring model of visibility, Perceptual Space as a Well of Possibilities, Sergei Gepshtein

Methodology

The research method I will use in this project is informed by Peter Zumthor's reflections on atmospheres, Sergei Gepshtein's tools for modelling perceptual spaces, and Shanti Sumartojo's ethnographic methods of generating collective imaginations through research materials. These research methods overlap in their investigation of human experience of spatial surroundings, examining material, sensory, and affective aspects of atmosphere. Used in combination, I aim to develop a practice of attunement to a location and its inhabitant, and explore a space through personal and collective experience, both in the present and in memories of the past.

The methods are as follows:

1. I will select sites within the familiar place to encounter and choose a selection that I feel represents the location, based on my prior experiences there. Since experience is embodied, I will visit, walk through, and spend time sitting in these sites. These encounters will be performed alone, starting the investigation from a personal perspective. In order to interrogate my assumptions and move towards an open and observational mindset, I will direct my attention to a single affective spatial quality using one of Zumthor's aspects of atmosphere. I will visit the sites multiple times, each time with a different spatial quality as my focus. By revisiting and refocusing, I hope to become attuned to multiple layers of my sensory experience and the site's affective qualities.
2. During each site visit I will create a series of research materials. Before my encounter, I will note down my mental state, the time of day, and weather conditions, as well as any expectations I have going in. During the encounter, I will write about my experience in objective and subjective terms, such as the names of materials and the distance between objects, as well as my feelings and any memories or future imaginations that come up. These notes will serve as a reminder of the experience for later review, as well as aid in the next exercise of mapping the affective spatial qualities of the site. Elaborating on Gepshtein's mapping tool, I will identify the material, sensory, and affective aspects of my experience and map them in terms of bodies, spatial limits of their affects, and the ways in which they interact. By repeating this exercise during multiple visits, each time focusing on a different aspect of atmosphere, I hope to produce a multi-layered, multi-sensory mapping of the site. Informed by Sumartojo's approach to ethnography, I will keep an open and iterative approach to this mapping technique and test different mediums gathering and materializing information. These exercises of producing materials will enhance my attunement to the place by forcing me to externalizing my internal experience and the external qualities – engaging my imagination and body in the act of making.
3. I will reach out to the inhabitants of the place, and aim to collaborate with at least three people. The first collaborative method I will use will be a photography exercise in which I will give each participant a prompt, such as "Take 5 pictures of things that you like about the site." The prompt will be clear but open, giving the inhabitants a focus and freedom in what they choose to photograph. I will then discuss their photographs with them in a place both of us feel comfortable to meet. Using Sumartojo's sensory ethnography method, I will ask each participant the same questions: What is this picture of? Why did you take it? What does it make you feel? The questions allow for a personal and reflective response with the goal of gaining insights into the value they assign to their environment. Following their answers, I will continue asking questions to gain deeper understanding about their thoughts and feelings. To record the discussion, I will record the audio and together we will sketch over the printed photographs, calling out objects of importance and feelings associated with them. The photographs will serve as

materials for reflection and imagination, and provide additional objects and sites that I can visit and repeat steps 1 and 2.

4. The last method is also collaborative. I will share the research materials I made during my site visits and ask for their reflections. These materials will serve as interventions to trigger a shared imagination of the location. I will repeat this step three times, re-making and refining the research materials based on our discussions. This iterative process of prototyping and reflecting will open up new imaginations for myself, as the maker, and for the collaborators. My continually reflecting, making, and listening, I will practice attuning myself to the location and the inhabitants, deepening my embodied knowledge of the affective and meaningful qualities of the place.

The aim of this methodology is to become attuned to a familiar place and bring this attunement to physical research materials that can be tools for reflection. Through embodied encounters, directed attention, externalizing experience into physical materials, and collaborative discussions and shared imaginations, I will practice attuning myself to a location and develop an embodied knowing of its atmosphere.

Case Study

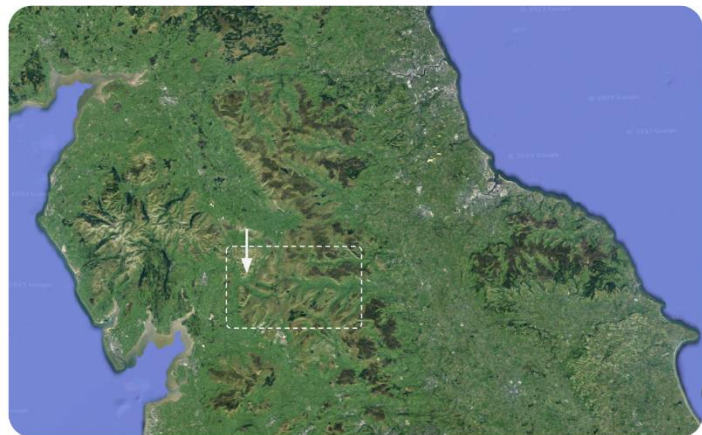
This project responds to Perez-Gomez's call for an attuned architecture. I have narrowed my investigation methods that attune the architect to familiar places. As the researcher of this project and the architect of the following design project, I will practice these methods in the familiar place of my childhood neighbourhood.

Given my knowledge of the site I have tailored the research methods to the scale, climate, built environment, and culture of the chosen location. I have also tailored my research to work with the time frame of this research project and site visits

The site of this research is my childhood neighborhood, Brigflatts Lane. From ages 5-18, I lived down a narrow lane a mile from the small town of Sedbergh in North-West England, an historic market town in the Yorkshire Dales. I lived down Brigflatts Lane, a car-wide, winding road lined with hedgerows and wide gates leading to the fields of sheep on either side. A hundred meters down the lane are a handful of buildings that are in keeping with the vernacular architecture of the area; thick stone walls, pitched slate roofs, and small windows with white frames. Each building has a different history. There is a farm house and several converted barns. A group of smaller family homes towards the end of the land, where the road meets the river that carved the valley in which Sedbergh is nested. The house I grew up in, a 4-bedroom house built in 1743, used to be a home for flax weavers. And across the lane from my childhood home is the first Quaker Meeting House, built in 1675. Accompanying it is a home for the warden of the Meeting House, some outhouses and a small quaker burial ground. Many of the buildings associated with the Quakers are listed heritage sites.



Left: Map of National Parks in Great Britain, Printable Maps



Top Right: Sedbergh marked on aerial photograph of the North England, Google Maps



Bottom Right: Brigflatts Lane marked on aerial photograph of Sedbergh, Google Maps

My experience of Brigflatts Lane has changed over the years. As a child, my neighbourhood was my playground. I played with other neighbourhood children on the lane, in the hedgerows, on hay bales, in the fields, and in each other's living rooms and bedrooms when it was raining outside (which it often was). In the north of England, days in summer are long, stretching towards midnight, and in the winter, they end before you are home from school.

As a teenager, my attitude towards my home changed. The fields I once played in symbolised the distance between me and my schoolfriends who lived in town. I didn't play in the hedgerows or in the fields or on the lane – neighbours moved and children grew up. I was apathetic to the landscape that my Mum spoke so fondly of. I resisted walking my dog through muddy fields and flocks of sheep guarding their lambs. I wanted stimulus, activity, social connection and disliked the peace and quiet of Brigflatts Lane.

At 18, I moved away and have since lived in cities in the US and the Netherlands. Now, when I am home, I experience it as a homesick child, teenager, and adult. My experience is multi-layered and contradictory, and very much weather dependant. During sunny summer visits I marvel at the beauty of the landscape and reminisce about the peace and solitude missing from my city apartment. During the rainy days, especially during the dark winter months, I barely leave the house. I sit within the cold stone walls, under a woollen blanket and under the blanket of the grey sky and live slowly and quietly. Our house has privacy from the lane, and the lane is a dead-end path from a quiet winding road leaving a small sleepy town surrounded by fields and farms and fells. I sit in the disconnection from the rest of the world and wait for blue sky days to reconnect with it.

My description of my childhood home is only one perspective, and while I can remember details from different stages of my life, these details come from my memories as I write from my present home in a different country. Therefore during this research I will focus on my personal experience as well as that of my parents, neighbours, and members of the Quaker Meeting House. I will explore the experience of Brigflatts Lane in the present and in our memories of the past.

Based on my own knowledge of the place, I have selected several sites along the lane (see Figure 3) to visit and carry out steps 1 and 2.

These sites are:

- A. the end of the land, where it meets the main road
- B. the section of the land lined with hedgerows and gates to adjacent fields
- C. the listed Quaker burial ground and outhouses
- D. the Quaker meeting house and garden
- E. my home and garden
- F. and the unexplored woodland behind my house
- G. the sites of photographs taken by research participants (which I expect to be in residential areas that I will ask for their permission to visit)



Figure 3: Annotated Research Sites, Brigflatts Lane, Google Maps

For the participant photography exercise I will use the prompt “Take 5 photographs along Brigflatts Lane that remind you of home”, as I am interested in what inhabitants of the neighbourhood value as familiar and meaningful.

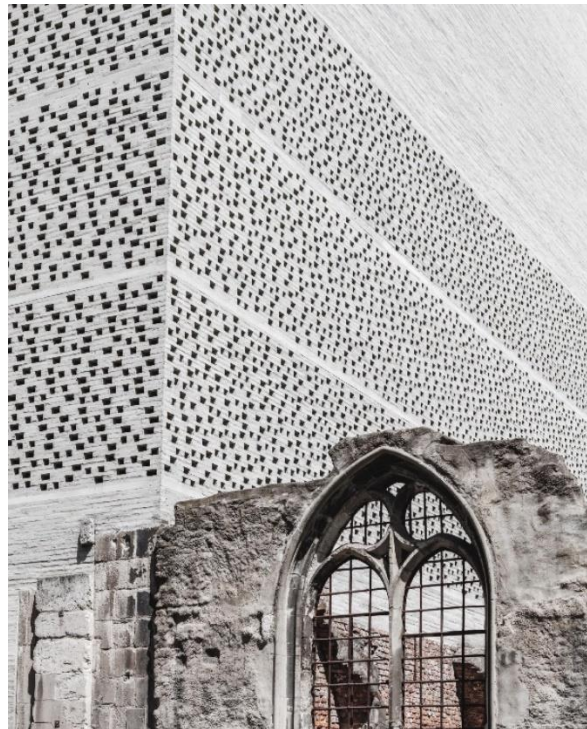
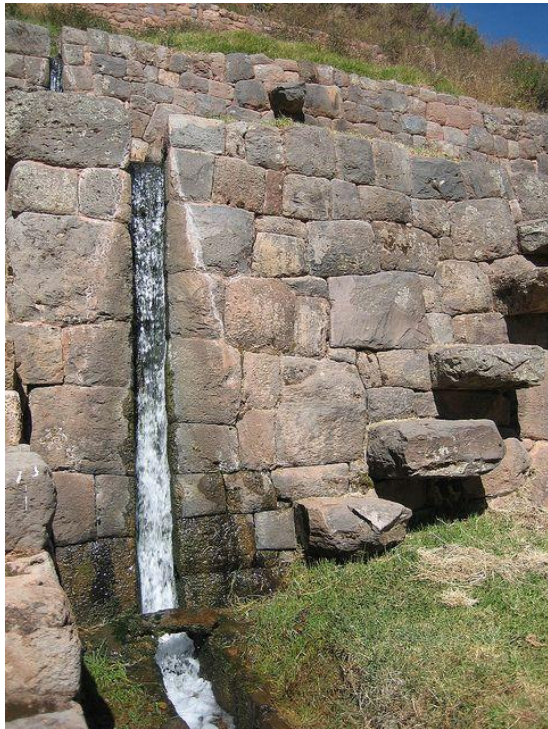
I will be spending 10 days in November and 10 days in December visiting Brigflatts Lane. Based on experience, I expect that the atmosphere will be greatly affected by the seasonal climate. The end of Autumn and start of Winter is often cold (between 0-10 degrees), has many rain showers and windy days, and the sky is usually grey. However, I will visit the sites at different times of the day to experience different lighting (dawn, daytime, dusk, and night), and if there is a drastic change in weather, such as a blue sky day, I will take the opportunity to re-visit sites and produce additional materials.

I intend to use each of Zumthor’s nine aspects of atmosphere twice – once in November and once in December. However, I remain open to filtering which aspects are used during my second visit based on the outcome of my research materials from the first.

Expected Outcomes

Based on my memories of Brigflatts Lane, I expect that the research project will attune myself and participating inhabitants to the affective qualities of repeating bodies and interactions. These include: the atmospheric quality of rain, as experienced from inside stone houses, inside cars, or while outside; the experience of living within stone houses and among stone walls lining boundaries outside; the way in which gates mediate experience of private and public spaces; as well as certain feelings – of time, connection to people and to nature, and of privacy.

I expect that this practice of attunement using methods of embodied experience, iterative making of materials, and collective imaginations will create a deep knowing of the place. When moving to the following design project, I will define which materials, sensory, and affective qualities I aim to create in order to attune the architecture to the place and inhabitants – selecting these qualities will be supported by my research. I will be able to design with a particular atmosphere in mind and understand how bodies must interact in order to produce a meaningful affect, such as manipulating the flow of rainwater. Following Zumthor's practice of designing atmospheric architecture, I expect to conduct material studies on the local materials to uncover further possibilities for their interaction and affects.



Left: Interacting bodies of water and stone walls. Tipon Inca Ruins, Cusco, Peru, Photo by Bencito the Traveller
Right: Material Mediations. Kolumba Museum. Cologne, Peter Zumthor, Photos by Rasmus Hjortshøj - Coast

In addition, having experienced the place with an attention to my perceptions and feelings, and through iterative making and collaborative reflections, I will be able to imagine the material, sensory, and affective experience of my design. This ability achieves what architect and phenomenologist Juhani Pallasmaa calls ‘empathic imagination’, and returns the attention of architecture to the human experience. Having attuned myself to the location and the inhabitants, I will be better equipped to attune the architecture and answer Perez-Gomez’s call.



Empathic Imagination. Farmers repair a gap in a wall, *Documentary: Farming Through The Seasons*, BBC News

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