

# ENVIRONMENTAL DESIGN

2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Environmental Design



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**DELETTERA WP**

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A cura di  
Mario Bisson



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# Designing Atmospheres. The Role of Aesthetics in the Requalification of Space

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## Abstract

Con i movimenti ecologisti degli anni Settanta la tematica ambientale ha acquistato nuova centralità nel dibattito artistico, architettonico e filosofico. Tuttavia quando si affronta il tema dell'ambiente e del paesaggio, la prospettiva è prevalentemente ecologica e l'approccio di tipo scientifico. Raramente si tiene in considerazione che sia lo spazio naturale sia quello edificato sono soprattutto spazi percepiti e che le qualità estetiche dei luoghi non sono accessorie rispetto ai fattori tossicologici. La riflessione sviluppatasi in ambito architettonico, pur orientandosi verso la tutela dell'ambiente e l'armonica integrazione tra aree edificate e aree naturali, considera la bellezza un fattore aggiunto e non prioritario, ma anche la cultura filosofica, che pure negli ultimi anni ha ripreso il tema da tempo trascurato dell'estetica naturale, finisce per rimanere vincolata a una prospettiva ermeneutica scientifica che subordina la bellezza a fattori fisiologici. Il presente saggio cerca di suggerire un'alternativa a questa prospettiva, esaminando la teoria delle atmosfere di Gernot Böhme. Il filosofo tedesco si è fatto promotore di un'estetica ecologica della natura che prende in considerazione oltre ai fattori fisiologici e tossicologici anche gli aspetti qualitativi degli spazi in cui viviamo. La nozione di atmosfera e la centralità conferita da Böhme al corpo e al modo di percepire e di auto-percepirsi nello spazio costituisce una chiave di lettura attraverso cui l'estetica può interagire con discipline come l'ecologia e l'architettura, offrendo inusitati punti di vista.

## 1. Introduction

With the environmental movement of the '70s, ecology issues have acquired a prominent position in art, architecture, and philosophy debates. "Sustainability" has then become a refrain of international protocols promoting a resource-aware, life-sustaining approach to development. However, discussions concerning the topics of environment and landscape are mostly led by a prevalently ecologist perspective within a scientific framework. It is hardly ever taken into account that both natural and urban spaces are above all perceived space, and that the aesthetic features of places are not accessory to the topics of environment and health protection. Drawing upon the interpretative suggestions provided by Gernot Böhme's theory of atmospheres, this essay will clarify how art and environmental design can create emotional spaces and, accordingly, how aesthetics can contribute to

the requalification of natural and urban environments.

## 2. Böhme and ecological aesthetics

Significant input to environmental aesthetics has been provided by American philosophers<sup>[1]</sup>. Arnold Berleant has, notably, brought the notion of environment into focus as a dynamic natural process in which all things participate and in which human beings are in a continuous symbiotic relationship with their surroundings<sup>[2]</sup>. Differently, those philosophers who in Europe have dealt with the qualitative features of space mostly belong to the realm of Phenomenology<sup>[3]</sup>.

Relevant contributions stem, furthermore, from German philosopher Gernot Böhme's theory. Beginning in the late 1980s, Böhme developed an "ecological aesthetics of nature" (ökologische Naturästhetik), which has already had a wide influence on current research in German-speaking countries. According to this theory, the perception of the environment relies, besides all physiological and toxicological factors, also on aesthetic qualities<sup>[4]</sup>.

While distancing himself from traditional approaches envisaging nature as a primeval stage later overcome by civilisation (see, for instance, J.J. Rousseau), or as something to be conquered and ruled by means of technique, Böhme lays the ground for a new relation to nature, where man as rational being is not set against nature, but is rather integrated in it: «Fundamentally we regard ourselves as a "rational animal" (zoon logon echon), namely as a kind of being having rationality and language. In this case, animality means something to be overcome. We currently find ourselves in a phase which demands us to integrate our natural being into the self-understanding of human beings. In this sense, natural being and rational being must first be considered as equal. This primarily concerns external nature. We are already living in a cultural and civilized nature, and it is only now that we realize that what has been carried out as the domination of nature is, in fact, a totally impossible project. On the contrary, nature must be recognized as our partner and we should gradually adapt to such a partner relationship»<sup>[5]</sup>.

This equal relation between man and nature is based upon a theory of perception allowing man to finally understand that "that body is the nature", and rediscover accordingly "its identity as natural being".

Within the framework of Böhme's argument, the aesthetic element is given a new meaning in relation to wellness and the way environment is "felt": «Nature, which is interesting for us and desirable as a human environment, should also be observed from an aesthetic point of view. Aesthetic viewpoints (ästhetische Gesichtspunkte) do not pay attention only to the issue of whether nature is beautiful or offers us beautiful scenery but also to the fact that nature influences our own feeling of being there (Befinden) through our sensibility. With the help of our own bodily feeling (Befinden), we can feel the environment in which we are located. So there exists a rela-

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[1] E. Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2003; A. Carlson, *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2008.

[2] A. Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1992; Id., *Aesthetics and Environment: Variations on a Theme*, Aldershot (U.K.), Ashgate, 2005; A. Berleant and A. Carlson (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, Peterborough, Broadview Press, 2007.

[3] See "Studia phaenomenologica", vol. XIV (2014) under the title *Place, environment, atmosphere*.

[4] G. Böhme, *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1989

[5] Z. Wang, *An Interview with Gernot Böhme*, in "Contemporary Aesthetics" vol. 12, 2014, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=713>; see also G. Böhme, *Die Natur vor uns. Naturphilosophie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Kusterdingen, SFG Servicecenter, 2002, p. 9.

tion between external conditions and our own body state (Befindlichkeit). I call this relation an aesthetic aspect under which our own environment needs to be considered»<sup>[6]</sup>.

According to this perspective, also the foul-smelling emissions of some factories, despite health safety being nowadays certified by efficient control systems and updated policies, make local inhabitants' life unfavourable, inasmuch as space is perceived by all senses, and aesthetic factors do not exclusively affect the visual evaluation of landscapes. Differently, discussions developed within the framework of architecture, although lining up towards environment conservation and the harmonious integration of man-made and natural spaces, still tend to acknowledge beauty as additional, non-primary element. Also philosophical culture, despite the recent revival of the long-neglected topic of natural aesthetics, often does not fail to display its tight bond with the scientific hermeneutical perspective, which subordinates beauty to biological factors<sup>[7]</sup>.

Within the above outlined scenario, then, the importance granted by Böhme to the sensing body, to the perception and self-perception of man in the environment, provides an interpretative key based on which aesthetics can interact with disciplines of the like of ecology and architecture, ultimately opening up new viewpoints. Consistently, his ecological aesthetics of nature investigates the relationships between explicit environmental qualities and subjectively experienced conditions, in order to integrate the natural-sciences-informed ecological approach and its still physiological viewpoint applied to man<sup>[8]</sup>.

### 3. The notion of atmosphere

Key concept of Böhme's ecological aesthetics, «the term atmosphere has its origin in the meteorological field and refers to the earth's envelope of air which carries the weather. It is only since the 18th century that it has been used metaphorically, for moods which are "in the air", for the emotional tinge of a space. Today this expression is commonly used in all European languages; it no longer seems artificial and is hardly even regarded as a metaphor. One speaks of the atmosphere of a conversation, a landscape, a house, the atmosphere of a festival, an evening, a season»<sup>[9]</sup>.

According to the German philosopher, atmospheres are "quasi-things". Although they do not exist as physical objects, they are identifiable and therefore can be produced thanks to some given natural elements (e.g. water, rocks, flowers, trees, meadows, etc.) or artificial elements (e.g. light, sound, architectural and plastic features). Böhme claims that the production of atmospheres should be a primary focus in architecture and design, as landscape viewing cannot be separated from the feeling disposition established with it. Far from pointing to Romanticism-echoing subjective self-reflection – according to which we tend to project our mood on the surrounding nature –, what is at stake here is the synaesthetic perception (hence not only the visual, but also the tactile, olfactory, and motor perception) of a "space

[6] Z. Wang, *An Interview with Gernot Böhme*, in "Contemporary Aesthetics" vol. 12, 2014, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=713>.

[7] P. D'Angelo, *Estetica della natura: bellezza naturale, paesaggio, arte ambientale*, Rome, Laterza, 20032.

[8] G. Böhme, *Asthetik. Vorlesungen über Ästhetik als allgemeine Wahrnehmungslehre*, München, Fink Verlag, 2001.

[9] Id., *The art of the stage set as a paradigm for an aesthetics of atmospheres*, in "Ambiances. International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Spaces", 2013 <https://ambiances.revues.org/315>. See also T. Griffiero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, Ashgate, Farnham (Surrey, U.K.), 2014.

attuned" (gestimmter Raum) to a given mood – for instance, the twilight landscape attuned to melancholic feelings. Once established that reference is here made not to users' mere projections, but rather to the relation between subject and object, it is still important to develop full awareness in those professionals, such as architects and designers, involved in the production of atmospheres, since misattunement can sometimes occur between the viewer's mood and the perception of landscapes, as for instance when you feel sad in a joyful day of spring.

This is why ecological aesthetics of nature is able to provide insightful contributions to current debates in sustainable architecture. This latter is called to positively impact on urban quality, not only based on the evaluation of financial and management-related parameters, but also taking into account social, cultural, and environmental factors. Sustainability should be taken mainly as the power to re-establish bonds with others, a dialogue within the community and one's own territory. What is at stake here, then, is a concept belonging to both ethics and aesthetics, which encompasses the topics of the quality of life and of the management of time and wellness.

#### 4. Designing atmospheres

Too often we only pay attention to Cartesian spatium, understood as scientifically measurable interval, and forget that we mainly live in emotional spaces. The primary content of sensing are not things and their properties (shape, colour, etc.), but rather the relationships among things themselves and to the perceiving subject. Based on this understanding, sensory perceptions, long marginalised by the prevailing rationalism, conquer the status of knowledge based on bodily presence in an atmospheric space. As a result, both natural and man-built environments can be said to lift or oppress. Buildings, public squares, shopping centres, airports, hospitals can be cold, bright, welcoming, cheerful, sober; they can convey a spurning or attractive atmosphere. Visitors, users, clients, patients, they are all hit or captured by it. But the one producing it, with varying degrees of awareness, is precisely the architect who decides about shapes, colours, lines, etc.<sup>[10]</sup>. Through different atmospheric connotations the architect can influence the viewers' emotions and set them in attuned moods. This is why in the building process not only strictly functional aspects have to be taken into account, but emotional, communicative, and symbolic ones as well, that is to say the elements defining interpersonal relations. It is about "bringing on stage" expressive features (e.g. majesty, intimacy, cold formality, efficiency, cheerfulness, warmth, calm, etc.) suitable to each place.

Much is being done today in this direction, especially while designing shopping centres or the furnishings of public establishments, where the stimulation of a given set of moods and emotions can significantly affect marketing. Urban developments, instead, have shown less interest in the topic, with few isolated exceptions. Reference can be made here to art installations in the underground, where waiting times between trains can be livened up by works of art.

Nevertheless, the aesthetics of atmospheres turns out to be even more powerful in schools and hospitals, where the conscious employment of given images and colours is able to induce calm, trust, and hope. Especially in clinics and hospitals, and all those place where a somber climate of worry and sadness prevails, use can be made of acoustic generators of atmospheres. Although it is true that music "consumption" nowadays mostly takes place individually thanks to Mp3 players, collective listening can still be an oppor-

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[10] G. Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, p. 97

tunity for socialization and reciprocal comforting. Previously understood exclusively in terms of time, music is now taken as an art form shaping how space is lived<sup>[11]</sup>. This means that today the urban or rural landscape cannot be limited to what is seen, but should rather include what is heard in it.

In the light of Raymond Murray Schafer's pioneering research on the soundscape<sup>[12]</sup>, the importance of – natural and artificial – sounds for the acoustic rendition of places has been acknowledged together with the need to rehabilitate long marginalised senses after centuries of visual perception predominance. Once again, ecological aesthetics can complement the measurement-bound scientific approach – which targets decibels to decrease noise as well as other pollution factors – with the comprehensive assessment of other features – sound, smell, and the like – of the space one inhabits<sup>[13]</sup>. In this regard, Böhme aptly emphasises the relevance of the soundscape, «which records acoustic landscapes. For one thing, such recordings preserve for us the natural environment in the form of acoustic records. For another, they remind us that we ourselves live in a natural acoustic environment that may even be the basis of our feeling at home. Yet another result of the “Soundscape” project is to create an awareness of this aspect of environment. Of course, this also concerns life in the city and actually relates to the issue of urban ecology. Environment here is not just mother nature but also urban environment. With the help of the “Soundscape” and acoustic installations, people are once again being made aware of the fact that they live in an audible environment and begin to develop an interest in it »<sup>[14]</sup>.

Another valuable resource for the production of atmospheres is lighting, which can play with different types of lights – warm or cold, natural or artificial –. Element of great symbolic value, light is a primary ingredient in order to have space “felt”. It is not by chance that several permanent or temporary artistic installations make use of this medium to add value to buildings and urban paths. As matter of fact, Public Art<sup>[15]</sup> – the placement of sculptures, fountains, murals, etc. in urban contexts – has often greatly contributed, while creating emotional connections, to changing how one relates to the environment.

Along the same lines works Land Art or Earth Art, an artistic movement originating in the US in the '70s and advocating the return to nature. Within the framework of conceptual art, this experience gives up on the production of man-made works, and adopts reality itself – duly reinterpreted by the artist's action – as its form. Those artists who act on natural landscapes break free from the traditional space of galleries and museums, and directly modify the macroscopic space of nature. However, this kind of action has no ornamental or hedonist goal, as it rather conveys the becoming aware of men's actions on spaces already endowed with their own natural order consequently modified by said actions. The ultimate aim is to establish a perfect attunement between the work of art and the surrounding environment as to provide the viewer with a more complete aesthetic experience. These are often ephemeral installations, yet of great emotional impact, which, by

[11] Cf. C. Serra, *La voce e lo spazio. Per un'estetica della voce*, Milan, Il saggiatore, 2011.

[12] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Environment and the Tuning of the World (1977)*, Destiny Books, Merrimac, MA, 1993.

[13] G. Böhme, *Atmosfere acustiche. Un contributo all'estetica ecologica*, in A. Colimberti (a cura di), *Ecologia della musica. Saggi sul paesaggio sonoro*, Rome, Donzelli, 2004, pp. 103-14.

[14] Z. Wang, *An Interview with Gernot Böhme*, in “*Contemporary Aesthetics*” vol. 12, 2014, <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=713>.

[15] The label “Public art” refers to artistic actions aiming to liven up urban areas by means of aesthetic experiences targeting mixed audience possibly with no disposition for closed exposition contexts. See L. Perelli, *Public Art. Arte, interazione e progetto urbano*, Milan, Franco Angeli, 2006.



means of chromatic contrasts or new modulations of natural forms, are able to “make us see” with new, less absent-minded eyes what is just in front of us. Among the most renowned examples of Land Art, Christo’s work should be mentioned here, in particular, his installation Valley Curtain (1970-1972), where the Bulgarian artist has spread a 400 m<sup>2</sup> orange cloth on one valley in the Colorado Rocky Mountains; or Surrounded Islands (1980-1983), where the islands of Biscayne Bay in Miami have been surrounded by a fuchsia polypropylene belt; finally, one should also mention his recent installation, The Floating Piers (2016), on Lake Iseo in Italy; here, thousands of visitors have been allowed an extraordinary experience, such as that of walking on water.

Very close to us, another example of symbiosis between art and nature is provided by Fiumara d’arte, some sort of “open air” museum between the Sicilian coast and the inland. This peculiar project, for one thing aims to add value to the natural landscape placing there selected works of art, for another it provides the possibility to discover hidden or little-known paths. Contemporary artists’ monumental works are scattered along the dry riverbeds - in Italian said “fiumare” - of Romei and Tusi within the area of several small towns - Reitano, Mistretta, Castel di Lucio, Motta d’Affermo, Castel di Tusa, Tusa - of great historical and architectural value.

The various examples of Land Art or of Public Art have “deictic”, ostensive ambitions, that is to say they aim to catch the attention of the absent-minded passer-by. In those cases where art contributes to modify space as to trigger aesthetically meaningful experiences, the traditional element of objectual consistency of the work of art is missing. Accordingly, the objects or events produced to this aim have been qualified as pseudo-works, whereas the “true” work of art is the aesthetic modification of the environment they are placed in.

## 5. Conclusive Remarks

By way of conclusion, it can be argued that art is able to contribute to environmental design inasmuch as it helps focus the attention on the user and the way both natural and urban space is felt.

Unfortunately, however, this component is still often neglected due to architecture and design’s main focus on things production. On the contrary, according to Böhme, full awareness should be acquired of the fact that architectural and design forms are like generators, in other words they are called to radiate something and contribute to the production of atmospheres. This is why the ecological aesthetics presented by Gernot Böhme is capable of complementing the approach of science and its focus on quantity-related issues, - e.g. the measurement of toxicological factors - with the assessment of the synaesthetic and quality-related aspects of the space we live in, as to ultimately retrieve the knowledge value of aisthesis in its poly-sensory integrity.

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12. G. Böhme, *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, p. 97.
13. Cf. C. Serra, *La voce e lo spazio. Per un'estetica della voce*, Milan, Il saggiatore, 2011.
14. R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Environment and the Tuning of the World (1977)*, Destiny Books, Merrimac, MA, 1993.
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