

# Affect, Mood, & Architectural Meaning

Atmosphere as a Form of  
Architectural Communication

Isabelle Jones - Arch 530 - Winter 2026 - Final Paper



## **Atmosphere as a Form of Architectural Communication**

Architecture is often described as a language, one in which buildings function as symbols communicating cultural values, political power, or stylistic identity. Classical forms may evoke stability and authority, while the clean geometries of modernism are frequently read as expressions of technological progress and rational order. These interpretive frameworks are valuable, but they account for only part of how architecture operates in everyday life, because much of our experience of buildings unfolds before conscious interpretation ever begins. A space can feel calming, oppressive, intimate, or expansive long before a person pauses to analyze what it formally means.

What produces these reactions is not representation but atmosphere, the sensory field generated by light filtering through a narrow opening, the texture of stone underfoot, the sound of footsteps resonating in a corridor, the felt compression of a low ceiling. Taken together, these conditions shape how the body encounters an environment, which is why architecture communicates not only through visual form but through sensation, memory, and mood.

This essay explores how architectural meaning can be understood through the concepts of affect and atmosphere. Affect refers to the pre-reflective, bodily responses that arise when people encounter built environments, produced through the orchestration of light, material, proportion, and spatial sequence. While these experiences may feel purely personal, they are also structured by design decisions and cultural contexts. Reading architecture through the lens of atmosphere reveals how built environments quietly organize social interaction, behavior, and well-being in ways that symbolic analysis alone cannot account for.

## **Atmosphere and Embodied Experience**

Among the theorists who have explored how architecture produces meaning through sensory experience, Gernot Bohme offers one of the most developed accounts. Bohme describes atmosphere as something that emerges between subject and environment rather than residing wholly within either one; it is not a property of objects, nor simply a subjective feeling, but arises through spatial qualities such as lighting, acoustics, and material presence that together form a perceptual field shaping how a place is experienced. What makes his account particularly useful for architectural thinking is his insistence that atmosphere is designable, that architects do not merely build spaces but construct emotional climates through deliberate choices about material, light, and enclosure.

Juhani Pallasmaa arrives at a related position from a different direction. In *The Eyes of the Skin*, he argues that contemporary architectural culture has become excessively focused on the visual, and that this emphasis on the retinal has come at the cost of deeper sensory engagement. For Pallasmaa, architecture becomes meaningful only when it engages the full sensory life of the human body, drawing on touch, sound, and spatial depth alongside sight. A building experienced solely through photographs is therefore only partially known, a point that has particular resonance given how much architectural culture now circulates through screens.

Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space offers a complementary framework. Where architects work through conceived space, the plans, drawings, and representations that precede construction, what Lefebvre calls lived space refers to how people actually experience and navigate environments through use, habit, and bodily routine. The true meaning of a building, on this account, unfolds not in the architect's intentions but in the accumulated texture of everyday life, and atmosphere plays a crucial role in that process by shaping how space is felt, remembered, and attached to identity over time.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that architecture cannot be adequately understood through visual analysis or stylistic interpretation alone, and that buildings must also be examined as environments that influence perception, emotion, and social behavior in ways that are neither incidental nor easily visible.



*Figure 1 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, interior bathing chamber*



*Figure 2 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, corridor sequence*

## **Architecture and the Politics of Mood**

If architecture produces emotional atmospheres, then mood carries implications that extend well beyond aesthetics into the social and political. Sara Ahmed's work on the circulation of emotion is useful here. Ahmed argues that feelings are not simply internal states but move through environments, institutions, and bodies, shaping how people orient themselves in relation to others and to the spaces they inhabit. Spatial atmospheres can therefore influence patterns of movement, interaction, and belonging, and since not everybody feels equally welcome in a given space, architecture plays a role in producing that unevenness even when it does so without explicit intent.

What is striking about this process is how rarely it operates through legible messages. Enclosed environments may generate a sense of privacy or introspection, while open, permeable spaces tend to encourage interaction and collective activity. Monumental architecture can reinforce institutional authority, while informal or fragmented arrangements foster improvisation and exchange. These emotional registers are absorbed through scale, material, threshold, and sequence, conditions that most occupants register without naming, which is what makes them so effective as instruments of spatial organization.

Understanding architecture in these terms shifts critical attention away from symbolism and toward experience, suggesting that alongside asking what a building represents, we should also ask how it produces the emotional and social conditions in which everyday life unfolds.



*Figure 3 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, interior landscape*



*Figure 4 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, study space*

## **Two Atmospheric Architectures**

Peter Zumthor's *Therme Vals* offers one of the most sustained examples of architecture conceived explicitly through sensory experience. Constructed from layers of local quartzite stone, the building appears embedded in the surrounding Alpine landscape, as though excavated rather than erected, while narrow slot openings admit light in controlled, almost theatrical ways, casting shifting patterns across the surfaces of the bathing chambers as the day progresses. The gradual unfolding of spaces through corridors and pools produces a slow, deliberate rhythm of discovery and compression that



gives the building much of its distinctive character.

The atmosphere that results is quiet and inward-turning, with stone absorbing sound and water softening movement so that the overall effect is one of heightened bodily awareness rather than visual spectacle. Visitors frequently describe a sense of time slowing and perception sharpening, an experience that is inseparable from the building's material logic. Zumthor has written at length about his intention to produce architecture that can be felt before it is understood, and Therme Vals is perhaps the most fully realized expression of that ambition, a building whose meaning depends entirely on the act of moving through it.

The Rolex Learning Center by SANAA, completed in 2010 on the EPFL campus in Lausanne, generates a strikingly different kind of atmosphere. Rather than enclosure and compression, the building offers continuity and openness, organized as a single interior landscape shaped by gentle topographic slopes instead of walls or partitions, with large glass facades allowing daylight to move freely through the space. The absence of fixed edges or clear thresholds creates an environment that invites constant renegotiation of where study ends and conversation begins, making social interaction feel like a natural byproduct of spatial form rather than a programmatic directive.

Where Therme Vals turns the body inward toward stillness and self-awareness, the Rolex Learning Center orients it outward toward encounter and exchange, with students moving through the building in informal, often unpredictable ways that the architecture enables rather than prescribes. The contrast between the two projects is instructive because it shows how differently atmosphere can be orchestrated. Material weight, controlled light, and spatial compression produce contemplation in one case, while structural openness, transparency, and continuous floor planes produce something more dynamic and socially oriented in the other, with meaning in both emerging through the body's encounter with light, surface, sound, and sequence.



*Figure 5 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, exterior view*



*Figure 6 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, bathing pools*



*Figure 7 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, exterior view*





*Figure 8 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, interior wide view*

### **Re-centering Atmosphere in Architectural Thinking**

A striking feature of contemporary architectural culture is that buildings are now most often encountered through images rather than through direct bodily experience with projects circulating through digital media, professional publications, and social platforms long before most people have any opportunity to enter them. The result is that visual impact has become one of the dominant criteria by which architectural work is evaluated and remembered. A situation that shapes not only how buildings are received but how they are designed.

Photography is a genuinely powerful tool for communication, and it has expanded architecture's cultural reach in important ways, but photographs capture form and composition while leaving out much of what shapes lived experience. The sound of a space, the changing quality of light across a day, the resistance of a material underfoot, the felt sense of scale that comes only from being physically present. These are precisely the qualities that determine how a space actually feels to inhabit, and they are also the ones that resist photographic capture most stubbornly.

Recognizing these limits encourages a renewed focus on atmosphere as a primary concern of design, not as an alternative to formal or technical ambition, but as a way of insisting that architecture is ultimately judged by how it feels to move through, to inhabit, and to remember. Buildings that generate powerful sensory atmospheres often elude easy photographic reduction because their impact is distributed across time and sensation rather than concentrated in a single image, which is one reason the discipline's increasing reliance on visual media can obscure what is most significant about built work.

Understanding architecture through affect and atmosphere ultimately expands how the discipline is practiced and evaluated, shifting attention toward the sensory and emotional dimensions of space that shape everyday life in ways that are difficult to represent but impossible to ignore. Buildings do not simply stand for ideas; they condition how people feel, how they interact, and what they remember, making architecture an active participant in the formation of social experience rather than a backdrop to it.



*Figure 9 – Bjarke Ingels Group, architectural rendering comparison.*



*Figure 10 – Tadao Ando, Church of the Light, interior.*



## **List of Figures**

Figure 1 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, interior bathing chamber.

Figure 2 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, corridor sequence.

Figure 3 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, interior landscape.

Figure 4 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, study space.

Figure 5 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, exterior view.

Figure 6 – Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals, bathing pools.

Figure 7 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, exterior view.

Figure 8 – SANAA, Rolex Learning Center, interior wide view.

Figure 9 – Bjarke Ingels Group, architectural rendering comparison.

Figure 10 – Tadao Ando, Church of the Light, interior.

## **Bibliography**

**Ahmed, Sara.** *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.

Ahmed examines how emotions circulate through social environments and institutions rather than existing purely within individuals. Her work helps explain how architectural atmospheres shape patterns of interaction and collective experience. In this paper, Ahmed's framework supports the argument that spatial environments influence how people orient themselves socially and emotionally.

**Bachelard, Gaston.** *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Bachelard explores how architectural spaces shape imagination, memory, and emotional experience. Through phenomenological analysis of everyday spaces such as rooms and houses, he demonstrates how architecture can evoke intimate psychological responses. His work provides an early theoretical foundation for understanding architecture as an emotional and experiential environment.

**Böhme, Gernot.** "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics." *Thesis Eleven* 36, no. 1 (1993): 113–126.

Böhme introduces the concept of atmosphere as a central element of aesthetic experience. He argues that atmosphere arises between the built environment and the perceiving subject through qualities such as light, sound, and material presence. This article provides the conceptual framework for analyzing architecture through mood and affect.

**Böhme, Gernot.** *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

In this work, Böhme expands his theory of atmosphere and applies it specifically to architecture and urban environments. He explains how designers intentionally shape emotional environments through spatial and material decisions.



**Lefebvre, Henri.** *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Lefebvre examines how space is socially produced through political and cultural processes. His distinction between conceived space and lived space helps explain how architectural meaning emerges through everyday experience rather than design intention alone.

**Pallasmaa, Juhani.** *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley, 2012.

Pallasmaa argues for a multisensory understanding of architecture that extends beyond visual representation. His work emphasizes the importance of tactile, acoustic, and spatial perception in shaping meaningful architectural experience.

**Wigley, Mark.** "The Architecture of Atmosphere." *Daedalus* 145, no. 2 (2016): 48–61.

Wigley explores the growing interest in atmosphere within contemporary architectural theory. He traces how architects and theorists have increasingly focused on sensory and experiential aspects of space.

**Wigley, Mark.** "Whatever Happened to Total Design?" *Harvard Design Magazine* 5 (1998).

Wigley examines the modernist ambition of "total design," in which architects attempted to control every aspect of the built environment. His analysis highlights tensions between architecture as an immersive spatial experience and architecture as a visual product circulating through media culture.

**Zumthor, Peter.** *Atmospheres*. Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006.

Zumthor reflects on how architects can intentionally create emotional environments through light, material, and spatial sequence. Drawing from his own projects, he demonstrates how architecture can produce powerful sensory experiences.



Isabelle Jones  
Arch 530  
Winter 2026  
Final Paper