THE SIXTH SENSE
- diffuse perception, mood and embodied wisdom

"Whether people are fully conscious of this or not, they actually derive countenance and sustenance from the atmosphere of things they live in and with".¹

Frank Lloyd Wright

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Why do certain spaces and places make us feel a strong affinity and emotional identification, while others leave us cold, or even frighten us? Why do we feel as insiders and participants in some spaces, whereas others make us experience alienation and "existential outsideness", to use a notion of Edward Relph?² Isn't it because the settings of the first type embrace and stimulate us, make us willingly surrender ourselves to them, and feel protected and sensually nourished? These spaces, places and environments strengthen our sense of reality and self, whereas disturbing and alienating settings weaken our sense of identity and reality.

Resonance with the cosmos and a distinct harmonious tuning were essential qualities of architecture since the Antiquity until the instrumentalized and aestheticized construction of the industrial era. Historically, the fundamental task of architecture was to create a harmonic resonance between the microcosm of the human realm and the macrocosm of the Universe. This harmony was sought through proportionality based on small natural numbers following Pythagorean harmonics, on which the harmony of the Universe was understood to be based. The Renaissance era also introduced the competing proportional ideal of the Golden Section. It is disappointing to realize that only a few modern scholars and architects, such as Hans Kayser, R.M. Schindler, Le Corbusier and Aulis Blomstedt, were interested in proportional harmony as a means of assuring an experiential tuning of their works, internally and contextually, similarly to musical tuning. In our utilitarian and Consumerist era, architects have entirely abandoned the
aspiration for harmonic attunement with the larger context, as well as the inner harmonic cohesion of the work itself. Architecture has lost its cosmic echo and turned into mere utility, technique and visual aesthetics.

Since the beginning of modernity, architectural theory, education and practice have primarily been concerned with the expressive qualities of form and space. Autonomous form and formal expression have even become synonymous with modernity. This orientation has favoured focused vision and the Gestalt principles as described in psychological literature. Le Corbusier’s credo, “Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light”, illustrates this obsessive visual and formal orientation. The psychology of vision has been primarily interested in focused vision and static gaze, which however, are exceptional conditions in the reality of life. It is evident that focused vision necessarily implies experiential outsideness in relation to what is being seen. Thus, the experience of being embraced by space calls for diffuse and peripheral perception. This is an omnidirectional, multi-sensory, embodied and emotive encounter with space and place, which makes us insiders and participants. In fact, in true spatial experience a fusion takes place; I enter the space and the space enters me. “The world is wholly inside, and I am wholly outside myself”, as Merleau-Ponty writes. I suggest that the biased focusing on visual form is the main reason for the weak atmospheric quality and feeling of interiority in much of contemporary architecture and urbanity. Besides, architects of the modern era have considered atmospheres, ambiances and feelings as something naïve, romantic, and entertaining, instead of regarding them as necessary constituents of environmental quality. As a matter of fact, atmosphere, mood and attunement have not been part of modern architectural theory and discourse at all until recently.

Altogether, the modern attitude has been interested in phenomena that can be consciously and rationally understood and measured, but the experience of mood and feeling does not arise from directed, focused and conscious observation, and it can only be sensed, not measured. Mood seeps into our mental constitution in an unnoticed and unstructured manner, in the way that we feel temperature, humidity or the smell of the air, unavoidable and unintentionally, in an embodied manner. Altogether, mood is closer to a haptic and embodied sensation than an external visual percut. We do not observe an atmosphere, as it embraces us and guides our senses and feelings.

The atmospheric paintings of J.M.W. Turner, Claude Monet, the Impressionist as well as Abstract Expressionists and Colour Field painters evoke strong sensations of interiority, immersion, tactility and the touch of the skin. Other art forms, such as painting, cinema, literature and theater, and especially music, are certainly more aware of the significance of atmosphere, feeling and mood than architects. Some time ago I asked a Finnish composer and a pianist about the role of atmosphere in their music making, and they both answered, “Music is
all atmosphere" smiling enigmatically. That is why music is used in films to create and heighten moods, or to evoke tunings and desires in commercial settings. It is sad, indeed, to acknowledge that decorators of department stores, shops and restaurants are more aware of the significance of mood and tuning than architects. A novelist's skill, as well as that of the film or theater director, is also to evoke, articulate, and sustain specific moods in order to create the dramatic flow and continuum of the narrative.

Modernism has favoured an elementalist and additive view, in which entities are assumed to arise from elementary units or percepts. However, when we study critically our perceptions and experiences, we seem to be able to perceive essences of complex multi-sensory entities, such as the characteristics of spaces, places, landscapes and urban settings, immediately, in an instant. This takes place even quicker than we become conscious of any details, or of our own active attention; we sense the atmosphere and attunement outside of our consciousness. We gaze intentionally at visual objects and events, whereas atmospheres come to us omni-directionally, similarly to acoustic and olfactory sensations. We sense the overall mood, tuning, feeling, ambience and atmosphere of a setting before we have become conscious of it, or have identified any of its constituent features. This argument certainly casts a shadow of doubt on the still prevailing elementalist approach in education. The entire idea of teaching entities through their elements seems to be psychologically fundamentally misguided. There are no "elements" in real life. The tacit and embodied knowledge and skills exemplify such mostly unconscious capabilities that are embedded directly in our life situations. Also in the process of architectural design, atmospheric qualities arise in an embodied and haptic manner rather than through conscious attention. They arise from the designer's personality, life experience and sense of self rather than any conscious aims. The sense of a coherent experiential entity arises from one's sense of existence and body more than from deliberate design intentions.

Atmosphere is closely related to the spirit of place, Genius Loci, as well as our empathic and affective capacities. In the same way that music can charge a spatial or social situation with a particular mood, the ambience of a landscape, townscape or interior space, can project similar containing and encompassing feelings. Our emotional reactions usually arise vaguely, without any distinct focused object, or namable cause. Love, happiness and hate, for instance, are not objects; they are relationships, moods and states of mind. Similarly, we may never intellectually "understand" a work of art, but it can convey an ineffable influence and meaning that may continue to affect us through our entire lives. "Understanding is not a quality coming to human reality from the outside; it is its characteristic way of existing", as Jean-Paul Sartre argues. This implies that, contrary to our accepted beliefs, we grasp entities before details, singularities before their components, multi-sensory syntheses before individual sensory features, and emotive or
existential meanings before intellectual explanations. We grasp embodied and existential meanings outside of our conscious cognitive channels directly from the life-situations. This exemplifies embodied and tacit knowledge, which is the most essential knowledge in creative work. Yet, these processes are in evident conflict with the established perceptual assumptions, as well as the unquestioned priority given to formal and focused vision, cognitive understanding and conscious intentionality. Since the Greek philosophers, focused vision has been regarded as synonymous to knowledge, truth and wisdom. I venture to suggest that this primacy should be given to peripheral and unfocused perception as well as to diffuse and formless processes of thought, to "vague predicates", to use a notion of Juliette in one of her letters to me. Indeed, neuroscience lends strong support to the view that we experience entities before elements, and we grasp lived meanings without conceptual or verbal signification. Our atmospheric sense is clearly an evolutionary priority and a consequence of the activities of our right brain hemisphere.²

I suggest that we have developed the capacity of judging entities at the edge of our awareness through the evolutionary process. This point is also made by Iain McGilchrist, the British therapist-philosopher.³ It has obviously been advantageous for humans to grasp the meaning of settings and places in terms of their existential and survival qualities, in an instant. We have developed, as other animals in various degrees, two independent, but complementary ways of perceiving; one mode of precise focused perception and the second of diffuse and unfocused peripheral scanning.⁴ The latter has the existential priority. In fact, today's science informs us that we have two systems of perception, conscious and unconscious, and the first system is activated 20-30 milliseconds before the system of conscious perception. In accordance with scholars, such as Anton Ehrenzweig, the austrianborn pianist, singer and psychoanalytic interpreter of artistic phenomena, the unconscious scanning is also our creative mode of perception.⁵ Regrettably, this suggestion has not been taken seriously enough.

Very simply, precision needs to be suppressed for the purpose of grasping large and complex entities. Jacques Hadamar, the mathematician, suggests that even in mathematics the ultimate decision must be left to the unconsciousness, as a clear visualization of the problem is usually impossible.⁶ He states categorically that it is mandatory "to cloud one's consciousness in order to make the right judgement".⁷ Iain McGilchrist relates this divided attention with the differentiation of our two brain hemispheres. It has been biologically advantageous to be able to make precise and focused observations and general, vague peripheral observations simultaneously, but this is impossible within a single system of perception.⁸ Focused vision detaches itself from contextual interactions, whereas the peripheral and atmospheric observation fuses and unites all the sensations through the sense of being and self. The omni-directional senses of
hearing, hapticity, smell and body-sense complete the visual sensations into a full existential experience relating us fully with our setting; we are in the space, not only looking at it. Consequently, space is experienced through the body sense and sense of self, not merely vision.

The experience of the atmosphere or mood is dominantly an emotive, pre-reflective experience. One of the obvious reasons why peripheric perceptions have been undervalued, or totally neglected, is that we have not acknowledged that emotions evaluate, articulate and structure our relations with the world. Emotions have been regarded as unconscious secondary reactions, instead of possessing intentionality and direct existential meaning. Yet, emotions arise from primal levels of consciousness and, significantly, the first wave of neural signals is recorded by our unconscious systems. "There is no cognition without emotion[...] emotions are not second-rate cognitions; rather they are affective patterns of our encounter with our world, by which we take the meaning of things at a primordial level", the philosopher Mark Johnson argues. There is strong evidence that the unconscious system of perception has a higher existential priority. The superiority of the unconscious processes in comparison with our consciousness is hinted at by the neurological fact that the information handling capacity of our entire nervous system is estimated to be 10 times the capacity of our conscious system; this staggering quantity has been calculated by Matti Bergström, the Finnish neurologist, on the basis of the number of synapses.

The nature of vision itself has been grossly misunderstood as something automatic, objective and precise. Research has revealed that the process of vision is a fragmented and discontinuous mosaic that constantly fuses perceptions with memory and imagination. A visual image itself is composed of separate images of color, form and movement, received at the temporal distance of 40-60 milliseconds. We see what we want to see and have learned to see, whereas the unconscious peripheral system of perception is capable of identifying what is genuinely new. Mood tunes us emotively with our environment, and as a consequence, we do not need to continuously monitor its overwhelming medley of details.

My main argument is that we are not related with our environments only through the five Aristotelian senses. The Sixth Sense Reader, in fact, lists over thirty systems of sensing and monitoring through which we are related with the world. I suggest that the atmospheric sense could be named our sixth sense, and it is likely to be existentially the most important one of our senses. Simply, we do not stop at our skin, as we extend our bodily self by means of our senses as well as technological and constructed extensions; we extend ourselves culturally both in space and time. We are all millions of years old, and the electromagnetic waves of the human heart, which can now be
measured five meters away, in principle extend to infinity. Thus, we extend ourselves all the way into the Universe, or better to say, into the countless Multiverses of our planetary domicile.

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"The richest experiences happen long before the soul takes notice. And when we begin to open our eyes to the visible, we have already been supporters of the invisible for a long time".19

Gabriele d’Annunzio

(2601 words, 14478 signs, 17310 signs with spaces)

NOTES

1 Frank Lloyd Wright, Sarah Robinson’s information in letter to the writer, 20 January, 2012.
5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty,
6 Kalevi Aho (1949-), composer and Minna Pöllänen (1950-), pianist.
13 Ibid.,
17 Matti Bergström, Aivoten fysiologiasta ja psykyestä (On the physiology of the brain and psyche), WSOY, Helsinki, 1979, pp. 77-78.