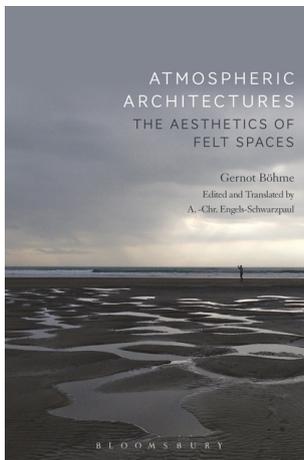


review / JONATHAN HALE

Atmospheric architectures: The aesthetics of felt spaces

**Gernot Böhme. Edited/translated
by A-C. Engels-Schwarzpaul.**
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This is a fascinating collection of essays by the German philosopher Gernot Böhme, who was a professor of philosophy at Darmstadt Technical University from 1977 until his retirement in 2002. The book focuses on his understanding of atmosphere as “a basic concept of a new aesthetic”—the means by which the world appears to us in experience, and thereby challenges the age-old philosophical schism between experienced objects and experiencing subjects. Drawing on a range of classical sources in philosophy from Aristotle and Plato to Kant and Hegel, he also takes inspiration from J. W. Goethe’s writings on light and colour, as exemplified in Goethe’s description of scientific experiments as mediators between subjects and objects.

For architects frustrated by the traditional fixation on buildings as static objects, there is an obvious advantage to this renewed emphasis on how designed environments are experienced by their users. But there remains in Böhme’s writing a lingering tension between the more-or-less “objective” qualities of “things-in-themselves” and those “subjective” responses that—at least partly—result from their users’ own unique perspectives. In several places Böhme suggests that atmospheres may in fact possess “quasi-objective” qualities, while at the same time he also acknowledges the influence of contextual factors such as social and political conditions. Disappointingly, at least for this reader, the issue is never properly elaborated here, and is perhaps an unfortunate consequence of the book’s “collected essay” format.

As the book brings together a collection of separately published writings, most of which are no longer than typical journal papers (between 12 and 20 pages), the effect is rather like reading a series of short summaries of—or introductions to—some much larger works. There are several repetitions of the same summary definitions, and the arguments circle around without ever quite pinning down some tantalisingly suggestive concepts.

One of the most interesting—and timely given the current fashion for so-called Object Oriented Ontology—is the questioning of the nature of surfaces of things as constituting fixed and determinate boundaries. Böhme instead proposes a definition of things based on what he calls their “ecstasies”, or emanations—the effects that they have on the objects and spaces around them.

This idea of a fundamental continuity in the fabric of things around us is strongly reminiscent of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "flesh of the world", that shared primal fabric of materiality out of which what we later call subjects and objects gradually emerge. While Böhme does refer several times to Phenomenology as a relevant philosophical framework, it is curious that he makes only passing reference to the work of Martin Heidegger, and (apart from the Ancient Greeks) makes no reference to any non-German thinkers. This is a pity because it misses an important strand of thinking on the social and political contexts of "atmospheric experience" in post-war French thought, perhaps most vividly exemplified in Jean Baudrillard's seminal 1968 text *Le système des objets* [1].

One theme that does come through strongly in Böhme's work—and chimes well with other recent writers—is the effect of so-called non-material phenomena on the experience of built forms and spaces. I am referring here to work by David Leatherbarrow, Peter Zumthor, Jonathan Hill and others on the "agency" of environmental conditions such as local climate and weathering processes, although Böhme casts a wider net to include factors such as lighting, acoustics, colour and music. He also credits the initial idea of designing atmospheres to the English landscape garden, specifically as described and theorised at great length by the German historian C. C. L. Hirschfeld in the late eighteenth century.

Overall, the essays are thoughtfully translated, and usefully introduced, in a way that will make Bohme's work accessible and engaging to a wide audience. The message of the book is inspirational in its shift from the study of objects toward experience, and it will sit nicely among similarly motivated titles in Bloomsbury Academic's impressively burgeoning architecture library.

REFERENCES

[1] Baudrillard, J. (2005). *The system of objects* (J. Benedict, Trans.). London, England: Verso.