

Perceiving the Form & Seeing the Atmosphere of Sacred Places

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Introduction

It has been topical for some years within philosophical circles and some architectural schools to discuss the character of architectural and other places as that most seductive topic—'atmosphere'.¹ So what is 'atmosphere' and how does it differ from the intelligibility of architecture and its symbolism?

To understand the difference between 'intelligibility' and 'atmosphere' it is most helpful, if not essential, to reflect on the 'Platonic Theory of Forms' and more particularly to distinguish what was traditionally conceived in almost all sacred traditions as *forma* and *materia* or more generally as the essential 'eidic form' and 'substances' of its presentation. Form relates to the intelligibility of architecture and symbolism while the atmosphere relates to the materiality and is intimately connected to its place and mode of manifestation and what is seen. Underlined here is the difference between 'perceiving' and 'seeing'.

The traditional view of Platonic forms

Of course, I am discussing the Ancient Greek classical doctrine of *hylomorphism* in which *hyle* is related to *materia secunda* and *morphē* is related to the Platonic eidic forms. For the Christian West, and much of the traditional Islamic world, this is most succinctly framed by Plato and his cave analogy.² This remarkable parable is an arresting metaphor for the relative and illusory nature of ordinary human experience. The analogy is explained as the prisoners perceive only shadows of the eidic forms outside the cave.³

The formal domain

Form is what we perceive as the 'is-ness', of an entity, that is its quiddity or essence. The word 'essence' is from the Latin *essentia*, from *esse* 'be'. It is the essential being of a thing. For example, we see and perceive the form of a cup or 'cupness' which affords portable containment, generally of liquids. We then move onto 'the cup' which is an embodiment of the form in a material presentation. As Plato writes in the *Timaeus*:

... it must be agreed that there exists, first, the unchanging form, uncreated and indestructible, admitting no modification and entering no combination, imperceptible

¹ 'Atmosphere' in architecture is topical thanks to the writing of Juhani Pallasma, Peter Zumthor, and the comprehensive work of Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, ed. and trans. A. -Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018) among many others.

² *Republic* (514a–520a, Book VII), trans. by Desmond Lee (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974).

³ There are many works that expand on Plato's doctrine of eidetic form as elucidated in the cave analogy. Refer to F. C. Cornford, *Timaeus*, translated with running commentary (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997). Also J. N. Findlay, *Plato*, in particular Chapter II, 'General Sketch of the Eidetic Theory and its Arithmetized Version', 122-158. L. P. Kollar, *Form*, Sydney: Self-published, 1980) has been my first and formative introduction.

*to sight or the other senses, the object of thought: second, that which bears the same name as the form and resembles it, but is sensible, has come into existence, is in constant motion, comes into existence and vanishes from a particular place, and is apprehended by opinion with the aid of sensation.*⁴

Plato states forms 'are the subject of thought', and the embodied form is apprehended by 'opinion with the aid of sensation', that is subject to the senses in the corporeal world.

What then is the Substance that allows Essential form to be revealed in a material corporeal mode in our world? The word 'substance' is via the Latin *substantia* as *sub* + *stare* 'to stand' or rather 'to stand under' and support and this is precisely its action to be the 'support' for all forms. This substance is known as *materia* and 'allows' the presencing of form in an individual mode. *Materia* in its role of 'supporting forms' is devoid of any identifiable quality in its own right which as Porphyry states is:

*always becoming, without ever persisting.*⁵

To take an architectural example, we could say the form of the Christian place of worship historically takes several distinct forms. In the times of the Old Testament, Moses originally constructed the portable desert tabernacle, closely corresponding to the revealed archetype which subsequently became the locus of the abiding home of the invisible God.⁶ Later, in the New Testament, the Temple as the 'City of God' combined with the 'Body of Christ'⁷ expressed another such form, as did the 'body of the congregation' as the Temple.

All these can be seen as so many 'nested forms' determining the eventual configuration of the Christian temple and all contribute to the form of the great Gothic cathedrals. The built configurations respond to and reflect the forms as individual corporeal modalities which can be further defined geographically as England and historically as the Medieval Gothic Period (Figure 3 (a)-(h)).

⁴ Plato, *Timaeus*, 52, in *Timaeus & Critias*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin Books, 1971).

⁵ Porphyry, *Launching-Points to the Realm of the Mind*, 2.4.10., 37.

⁶ Exodus 26:1-37.

⁷ '... He was talking about the temple of his body'. John 2.19-21.

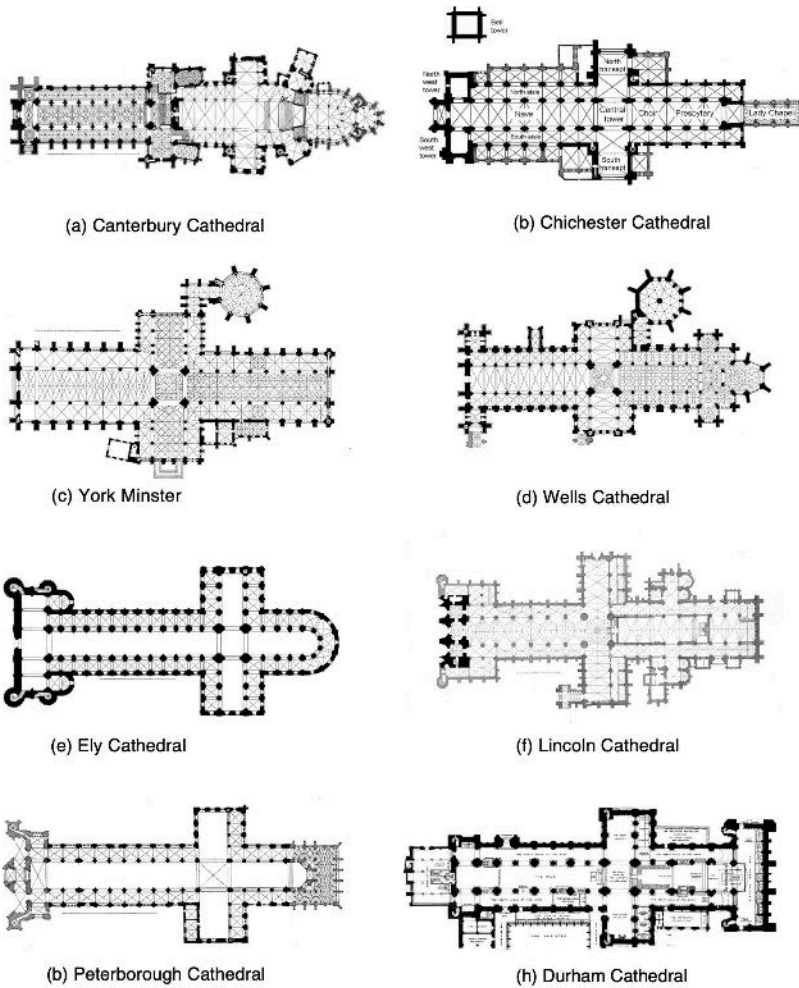


Figure 1: The cruciform cathedral plan during the English Gothic period. (From Georg Dehio and Gustav von Bezold, *Kirchliche Baukunst des Abendlandes* (Stuttgart, Verlag der Cotta'schen Buchhandlung 1887-1901).

James J Gibson and his 'ecological approach to visual perception'

I wish now to suggest that the Platonic view of forms in more recent times has been restated for contemporary theory by the environmental psychologist James J. Gibson with Gibson's 'ecological approach to visual perception'.⁸ In this view of perception, Gibson says we see the world as 'what things are' in terms of utility and 'affordance' to us. This could be Heidegger's 'ready-to-hand' but it may be far from it.

Gibson's 'ecological approach to visual perception' has been reframed into the traditional understanding of forms by Wolfgang Smith stating Gibson's 'affordances' and 'invariants' as

⁸ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1986).

exactly the intelligible forms of Plato—less the metaphysical background and consequences.⁹ Forms as Plato's 'objects of thought' are the very same as Gibson's 'affordances' in how we perceive the world simultaneously as seen with the eyes. Seeing is the sensorial uptake of stimuli and data via the eyes. 'Perceiving' is the recognition of the formal content.

So what is atmosphere?

I could quote various thinkers on the topic of atmosphere but for me Gernot Böhme's discussion is the one that could have an opening into a traditional view. Böhme states that there are two forms of presence; firstly there is the Platonic eidetic presence of a thing manifesting 'what a thing is'; secondly there is the undeniable spatial locality of the thing as it 'presents itself', that is, in its appearance to us as opposed to that form of 'what it is'.¹⁰ While the eidetic form is singular and intrinsically a unity of identity, this second mode is linked to its corporeal identity. Böhme states:

*it is (its) materiality as it emerges and shows itself.*¹¹

And:

*the mode in which things are palpably present in space ... is this palpable presence of something or someone in space.*¹²

Böhme summarises:

*... atmospheres are neither something objective, that is, qualities possessed by things, and yet they are something thing like, belonging to the thing in that things articulate their presence through qualities—conceived as ecstasies. Nor are atmospheres something subjective, for example, determinations of a psychic state. And yet they are subject-like, belong to subjects in that they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings and this is at the same time a bodily state of being of subjects in space.*¹³

Returning to Gibson, he uses the term 'pick-up' and this includes data other than the formal 'affordance' with characteristics like textures, shading, shadows, overlapping, transparency, colour and other characteristics of the sensed world. These are all phenomena that could be considered as characteristics of 'atmosphere'.

While form gives meaning to manifestation, it is the 'perceiving' of that form that deals with the 'what is'. However, there remains a myriad of other particulars in the Gibsonian 'pick up'. What I am suggesting is that this peripheral non-formal information can be considered characteristics of atmosphere. The notion of atmosphere brings with it something of the substantiality of *materia* in place and time while form remains timeless. This raises the question can we separate the form from the atmosphere? I believe we can but this is not an easy nor immediate task.

⁹ Wolfgang Smith, 'The Enigma of Visual Perception', in *Science & Myth: What We are Never Told* (San Rafael: Sophia Perennis, 2010), 69-98. Such is the natural clarity of 'the obvious truth' when one reads it and encounters it. There is a strong parallel here with Al-Ghazali's *Mishkat Al-Anwar: The Niche for Lights*.

¹⁰ *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, ed. by A. -Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), 46-47.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹² *Ibid.*, 163.

¹³ Hermann Schmitz quoted by Böhme, 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of the New Aesthetic' in *Thesis Eleven*, 36 (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1993), 122.

Nature provides interesting examples in this regard. One has a glimpse of this when looking at an unfamiliar object or phenomena for the first time but cannot make out 'what it is': the event is present, but what is it? It appears as a mirage, a phantasm or apparition until the mind scrutinizes it and the intellect can link it to a particular form, a use or a thing.



Figure 2: Bark and trunk of an ancient Bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*). (Ray Stevens)

Returning to architectural examples, the purity of form can be overwhelmed by the materiality of its presentation. In this example the form of the church is overwhelmed by the tactile materiality of finishes embodied in walls and ceiling in *The Rock Church*, Helsinki, Finland. The 'atmosphere' of the place can be discerned from its form.

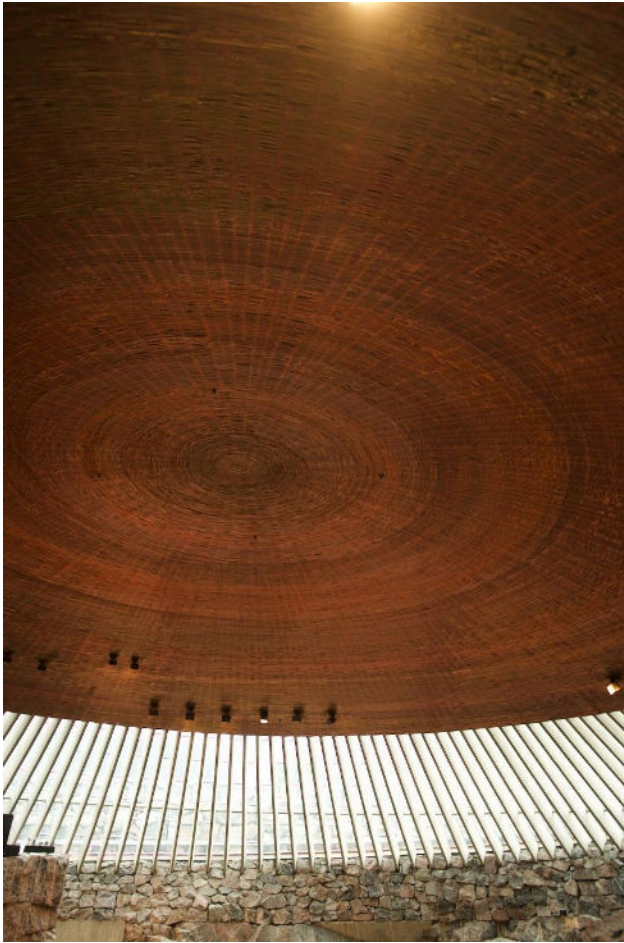


Figure 3: The tactile and materiality of finishes embodied in The Rock Church, (Tempeliahkion Kirk) Helsinki Finland by Timo & Tuomo Suomalainen architects (1969). (Ray Stevens).

All materiality is subject to change and is subjected to transformation to a baser state. Chemical processes change the materiality of surface, as do biological agents, causing decay; repetitive human contact causes wear and patina; the weather elements erode and the sun bleaches. Buildings erode to become ruins. Ruins express an indefinite temporal tangibility as atmospheric place in which time is read into the material in the catastrophe of the ruin.

Ruins take in the ambient environment, not just chromatically but also in the nuanced patina of weathered staining of dust and biological overlay of lichens and creeping growth. The ruin struggles between form and its materiality but in the end sees the absenting of the intelligible form and reduction to the potentiality of *materia prima*. The formal becoming of the building degenerates to absence and the means for symbolism and intellectualisation of the timeless form departs.



Figure 4: Eroding walls of Ayaz Qala, Karakalpakistan returning to the earth from which they were constructed. (Ray Stevens).

The atmosphere of the Sublime

So, I would like to conclude with a proposition that the sublime is an extreme presentation of atmosphere that is overwhelming of the senses but has no intelligible form. What overwhelms is the lack of formal perception. The presentation is incomprehensible as form — yet it is undeniably in the 'here and now'. The sublime confounds and is devoid of intelligible quality in the sense of its identity, yet this in itself is an approachable knowing but is related more to the Substance of Being rather than Essence of Being. As Jean-François Lyotard formulated so exactly:

'Now the Sublime is Like This'.¹⁴

The Sublime is not a thing it can only be compared too.....



Figure 5: Sea spume being blown through Merlin's Cave, Tintagel, Cornwall. (Ray Stevens).

¹⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 75.