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What is an Urban Atmosphere?

Adam Andrzejewski, Mateusz Salwa

Abstract

Atmosphere is one of the key ideas in contemporary aesthetics. The concept proves to be exceptionally useful whenever particular spaces, including interiors or urban spaces, are discussed regarding their unique features. The goal of the paper is to reconsider how an urban atmosphere may be understood. In order to do that, we will shed light on the ontological nature of atmospheres, by revisiting the concept as it recently was presented by some influential proponents of the aesthetics of atmospheres. Contrary to the widespread view, we argue that an atmosphere is not an entity itself. It is not a “quasi-thing” or “half-thing,” as usually stated, but rather a relational feature of a given site that exists only when it is experienced by someone. At the same time, our discussion of the metaphysics of atmospheres will provide us with a better understanding of the idea of urban atmosphere as characteristic of a particular site. Moreover, the ontology we will sketch allows us to consider the idea of an atmosphere of a whole city.

Key Words

atmosphere; city; ontology; urban aesthetics

1. Introduction

The tendency of aestheticians to go back to the roots of their field and conceive of the realm of *aisthesis* in a way that transcends the approaches that have dominated the field since Kant and Hegel is well known.^[1] In the past decade or two, issues such as environmental aesthetics or the significance of one's sensory contact with everyday objects or spaces have

been discussed more and more and with a renewed vigor. One of the key ideas that these discussions are centered on is the concept of atmosphere. Atmospherology drives aesthetics beyond its traditional borders, in the sense that, without much exaggeration, it may be seen as a branch of applied aesthetics, as it turns out to be interesting not only for academics but also professionals representing different practices. For example, atmospheres are discussed and, more importantly, created by architects, urban planners, and designers.

Undoubtedly, the concept of atmosphere proves to be exceptionally useful whenever particular spaces, such as interiors or urban spaces, are concerned. It comes then as no surprise that although it is possible to think of and feel atmospheres of natural landscapes— the sublime atmosphere of high mountains or of a sea in a storm—it is in the context of urban or human environments that atmospheres are usually discussed.

When one thinks of an urban atmosphere, at least two meanings come to mind. It may refer either to the atmosphere of a particular urban space, for example, a street, square, park, and so on, or to the atmosphere of a whole city. Yet, the latter sense is hardly ever discussed since the theorists' and practitioners' attention is focused on atmospheres of particular sites. Nevertheless, one may ask, is it not reasonable to ruminate on whether a city as a whole has a distinct atmosphere? Is the idea of an urban atmosphere not equally thought-provoking? On the one hand, the concept of atmosphere may be associated with a widely shared way of experiencing cities—we quite often, especially while on holiday, enjoy a city's distinct atmosphere—or rhetorical tricks involved in city marketing strategies, for example, advertising a town as having a creative atmosphere. ^[2] On the other hand, the constant growth of highly populated urban areas will inevitably make the Earth more and more urbanized, which makes one wonder whether the concept of atmosphere should not have a broader meaning than the present one, if it is to preserve its theoretical and practical usefulness.

The goal of this paper, then, is to reconsider how an urban atmosphere may be understood. In order to do that, we would like to shed light on the ontological nature of atmospheres, by revisiting the concept of atmosphere as recently presented by some influential proponents of the aesthetics of atmospheres. At the same time, our discussion of the metaphysics of atmospheres will provide us with a better understanding of the idea of an urban atmosphere as characteristic of a particular

site. However, the ontology we will sketch also allows us to consider the idea of an atmosphere of a whole city.

The paper has the following structure. We start with a short overview of the contemporary aesthetic discourse on atmospheres, in order to reconstruct the ontology implied by it. Then, we would like to suggest a new view of the metaphysics of atmospheres that follows the agenda defined by the above-mentioned theories but also tries to explain what they tend to hide behind a veil of elusiveness, namely the most pivotal aspect of atmospheres: their ambiguous character that impairs any attempt at discussing them in purely objective or subjective terms. We claim that it is possible to avoid this dichotomy by conceiving of atmospheres as relational features. What is more, we show that when we reconsider what the objective and subjective aspects of atmospheres are and how they relate to each other, we may understand how it is possible that even though *de atmosphaeribus disputandum est*, as is generally claimed, it is a mistake to judge an atmosphere or someone's experience of it as wrong. By doing so, we go beyond contemporary theories that do not pay much attention to this critical aspect. Finally, the reformulated metaphysics of atmospheres, illustrated by examples of urban sites, allows us to discuss, in turn, the concept of the atmosphere of a whole city, pushing discussions of urban aesthetics forward.

2. The metaphysics of atmospheres: a reconstruction

Even though the concept of atmosphere is sometimes criticized for its elusiveness verging on incomprehensibility, those who admit their existence, as we do, share a number of intuitions. First, some things or sites have atmospheres.^[3] The claim that a given entity has an atmosphere can be interpreted as an alternative way of saying that it has a distinct character. What is more, atmospheres are understood quite like moods. They may be felt but hardly ever pointed out or fully described to the same extent as, for instance, visual properties. As Juhani Pallasmaa writes, an atmosphere is “the quality of a space or place [that] is not merely a visual perceptual quality as it is usually assumed.”^[4] One reason why they are compared to moods is that when we perceive an atmosphere, we grasp its essence, not its elements.^[5] In other words, atmospheres are totalities. To put it differently, when we are in an atmosphere, we perceive it as a whole from the first moment, similarly to how we perceive *Gestalten*. This means that when we react to atmospheres in our everyday practices, we do not need to identify their elements. It is worth noting, however, that this fact does not mean per se that atmospheres, metaphysically

speaking, *do not* have elements. It only means that we do not perceive these elements as separate from an object, in this case, an atmosphere.

Second, it is easy to enumerate a number of kinds of atmospheres: environmental, social, cultural, or interpersonal. Despite their different “content,” all are perceived by our emotional sensibility^[6] that makes them firstly and primarily experienced as something genuinely emotional.^[7] Hence, it is highly unlikely that there are atmosphere-blind people unable to perceive them altogether. Given the undeniable influence of atmospheres, it is understandable that more often than not we make decisions based on them, even inadvertently.^[8] For example, if we find ourselves in a place that strikes us as hostile, we might try to get away from it, even though we may not be fully aware of the reason why we are feeling this way. In the history of architecture, one may find innumerable examples of designs that looked quite fine on paper but, once they were built, they proved unsuccessful, as they did not have the desired effect on their public or their effect was opposite to the intended one. An example is the huge blocks of flats built during the communist era across Eastern Europe that are nowadays, at least in Poland, not held in high esteem because of their block atmosphere.

What is more— and this speaks volumes about atmospheres— even though our vocabularies are rich in terms allowing us to assess atmospheres, the atmospheres themselves remain ontologically indeterminate, as they elude any attempt to state what they are per se, since they seem to be “everything and nothing.”^[9] But does their fugitive, ethereal, or aural character really make them so hard to explain in more analytical terms than those offered by atmospherology?

All these intuitions serve as a ground for the more explicit metaphysics of atmospheres. One of the very first things that may be said of atmospheres is that they are spatial “things.” According to the influential proponent of the aesthetics of atmospheres, Gernot Böhme, atmospheres are *tinctured spaces*: spaces that are given a certain *character* through the presence of things.^[10] It is possible, then, to think of atmospheres as “clouds of feeling, spreading out from objects and infecting those who walk into them.”^[11] That is, for Böhme, atmospheres are spatially extended things. It is important to bear in mind that atmospheres are not understood here as mere metaphors since they exist, to some extent, as concrete

things. They are real elements of the world and may be the subject of scientific and philosophical inquiry.^[12]

The following passages from Böhme's *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres: Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces* (2016) instructively highlights atmospheres' metaphysical features:

Atmosphere is what relates objective factors and constellations of the environment with my bodily feeling in that environment. This means: atmosphere is what is in between, what mediates the two sides. Two main traits of the theory of atmospheres arise from this. Namely, first, that atmosphere is something in between subject and object and can therefore be approached in two different ways: either from a perception aesthetics or a production aesthetics viewpoint. Atmospheres are quasi-objective, namely they are out there; you can enter an atmosphere and you can be surprisingly caught by an atmosphere.

The individual as a recipient can happen upon them, be assailed by them; we experience them, in other words, as something quasi-objective, whose existence we can also communicate with others.^[13]

Thus, atmospheres enjoy a peculiar ontological status: being *in-between* makes them quasi-objective entities. On the one hand, atmospheres are personal phenomena, as we experience them through all our senses, and, on the other hand, it seems that we are able to share atmospheres with others, where sharing is taken to mean an ability to communicate one's feelings about the atmosphere of a place to other individuals, in addition to understanding these feelings based on being in that spot.^[14]

Whereas the subjective side of atmospheres is quite intuitive, the objective side seems to be more theoretically appealing and more problematic, although both sides are equally important for practical reasons. It is stated that the objective side of atmospheres stems from things/sites/objects that cast them, and, hence, the characters of atmospheres are determined by the properties of the objects in the spaces they tincture. Böhme refers to that phenomenon, using the term 'ecstasies.' Whereas properties are bound to things, as Ashley Watkins points out, "ecstasies radiate out from a thing: they are an object's way of being in space."^[15] Tonino Griffero similarly argues that atmospheres are then seen as "quasi-things whose ecstasies are expressive characters or qualities [of things]."^[16]

As the main proponents of the aesthetics of atmospheres (Böhme, Griffero, Pallasmaa) rightly observe, the fact that the

concept of atmosphere is supposed to account for something that is neither a thing nor a subjective reaction is the reason why it is so hard to legitimize it both in aesthetics and philosophy.

Lastly, it needs to be said that, despite their ephemerality, atmospheres may be intentionally constructed. That is, apart from natural atmospheres that are a by-product of natural processes or of human history, for example, the atmosphere of a natural spot in an ancient forest or the atmosphere of a city like Rome, it is possible for people to create a space in order to cast a desired atmosphere. Böhme writes:

This knowledge [of making atmospheres] must be able to give us insight into the connection between the concrete properties of objects (everyday objects, artworks, natural elements) and the atmosphere which they radiate. This perspective corresponds approximately with the question in classical aesthetics as to how the concrete properties of a thing are connected with its beauty, except that now the concrete properties are read as the ecstasies of the thing and beauty as the manner of its presence. [17]

Classic examples of such creations are architectural pieces, gardens, or theatrical venues (mostly stages). One of the best examples of intentionally created atmospheres are sacred spaces. Think of a medieval church. It is designed in a certain style, with a clearly defined purpose, through well-established means. The church, as a building created for worship, can also have an atmosphere that it is intentionally designed to express, for example, the almightiness of God, the vanity of humankind, and the like.

In short, the metaphysics of atmospheres, as reconstructed based on the aesthetics of atmospheres, is quite peculiar. First, atmospheres are quasi-objective quasi-things that are bodily and emotionally experienced by humans.^[18] Furthermore, as quasi-things, they are also spatially extended, which means that they fill spaces and have boundaries, although these boundaries remain vague. Second, the expressive power of atmospheres stems from the ecstasies of the things that cast them. Third, atmospheres are totalities, that is, when someone is immersed in an atmosphere, she or he grasps its essence, not its elements. Lastly, atmospheres can be created, in that it is possible to construct an arrangement of things and/or textures and/or materials to bring a certain kind of atmosphere into existence.

3. The atmosphere of a site: the metaphysics of atmospheres revisited

The undoubted merit of the approaches briefly reconstructed above lies in the fact that they prove that such ephemeral phenomena as atmospheres may be treated not only as aesthetic literary *topoi* largely inspired by the post-romantic concept of *Stimmung* but also as objects of inquiry focused on how people experience their real surroundings. And yet, to a great extent, these views seem to inherit the ephemerality of atmospheres, which makes any more precise discussion of the epistemology or ontology of atmospheres rather difficult. With that in mind, we shall argue that it is possible to preserve what has been said about atmospheres—we do agree with the intuitions shared by atmospherologists—and, at the same time, to add more precision to it by shifting the approach.

Even though the objective/subjective dichotomy seems to have been largely overcome by a number of contemporary approaches in aesthetics, it still seems to be crucial in atmospherology and is responsible for its elusive character. [19] We claim, however, that it is possible to discuss the particular character of atmospheres that are supposed to be “subjective-and-objective” or “neither-subjective-nor-objective” in a way that avoids this dichotomy.

We would like to suggest that we should think of an atmosphere as a relational feature of a site, that is, as a feature that is ascribed to it on the basis of its empirically accessible objective characteristics and comes into being (appears) only when people sensorially experience the site. It is thus rooted in their reaction involving body and emotion. As such, an atmosphere cannot be reduced merely to the features of a site that may be identified irrespective of how it is experienced by someone. Nor can it be interpreted to be solely someone’s experience, that is, merely how one reacts to certain empirical characteristics of a site. It rather *results from* an experience of a site, which is a bodily and emotional reaction to it. Or, to put it differently, by virtue of someone’s experience of a site, an atmosphere comes into being as something that is not their projection unmotivated by the experienced site but instead is a feature of the site as experienced by that person.

An atmosphere is thus experienced as itself a feature of a site, and therefore one should distinguish an atmospheric experience that is related to, yet different from, a sheer experience of the site. One may experience a site without experiencing its atmosphere but not the other way around, as an atmospheric experience is just an experience of a site. At the same time, when someone is having an atmospheric experience, they are experiencing the site in a different way

than they would have had their experience been a sheer one, that is, non-atmospheric. In other words, when we have an atmospheric experience, we experience a site together with an additional relational feature that we call atmosphere, akin to what may be called “emotional coloring” that, in turn, may be and, in fact, always is, whenever it appears, experienced as something distinct from the site.^[20]

Let us take the example of a dirty, shabby street in order to illustrate the above intuition. It is possible to consider filth an objective quality of the street, that is, irrespective of someone’s experience of it but according to certain criteria allowing one to decide whether a place is dirty or not—for example, quantity of visible trash, intensity of odor, and so on—no matter whether there is anyone actually in the street experiencing it.^[21]

However, in order to claim that there is a filthy atmosphere to the street, there must be someone who actually experiences the street and the dirt and does this in such a way that they claim that there is a filthy atmosphere to this particular street, in its present condition.^[22] At the same time, the filthy atmosphere (all-embracing filthiness) may be experienced as something distinct from and additional to the filth of the street. For example, one may just notice the garbage, and the like, as nothing more than a nuisance.

We shall thus argue that it is possible to distinguish: (1) the objective features of a site that may be experienced by someone and classified in a particular manner, for example, as dirt; (2) someone’s sensory experience of the site and its features that offer a background for ascribing certain features to the site, for example, the site is experienced or qualified as dirty; and (3) an atmosphere, that is, a relational feature of the site that (a) comes into being when the site is being experienced by someone and (b) is determined by the qualities of the site as well as by the way they are experienced. Hence, an atmosphere may be said to be a relative feature insofar as it is related to the objective features of a site in addition to the subject’s experience of them. Finally, given that the relativity of atmosphere does not change the fact that it is experienced as a feature of a site, it is therefore possible to think of (4) an atmospheric experience that is different from the mere experience of the site itself. Moreover, an atmospheric experience is not limited to the experience of one single feature (an atmosphere). Rather, it is an experience of the whole site that is emotionally and sensorially colored by that feature. And the site is primarily experienced here *through* the perspective of its atmosphere.

Taken together, the above claims are major points on which we differ from the metaphysics of atmospheres as reconstructed in the previous section. This is because it is not clear in Böhme and Griffero whether ecstasies of objects exist independently of humans. For us, they are relational: They come into existence because of us but are also the subject of our experience as particular features of a site.

This reconsidered metaphysics of atmospheres, as sketched above, invites rethinking a number of issues regarding how atmospheres function in everyday life. Because of limited space, we shall focus on just two questions. First, is it possible to be wrong in experiencing a site as having a given atmosphere, for example, as having an atmosphere of joy, whereas our fellows perceive it as rather frightening? Secondly, what are the non-sensory objective factors determining an atmosphere? Answering these questions will help us develop our proposal further and also provide an opportunity to neutralize some potential challenges to our reformulated metaphysics of atmospheres.

First of all, we contend that it is highly unlikely, or even impossible, for the atmosphere of a given site to be wrongly experienced by the subject; that is, for a site to be experienced as having an atmosphere that it does not really have.^[23] The claim that it is impossible that someone could incorrectly register the atmosphere of a site may, however, sound counterintuitive. One could state that the atmosphere resulting from an experience that misrepresented a site, for example, an experience that does not take into account the site's objective features, must be *eo ipso* inadequate. Yet, we shall propose to think of this sort of case differently: Even if some experiences stem from someone's misrepresentation of the site, these experiences are still responsible (partly) for an atmosphere coming into existence.

Imagine a narrow, dark lane located, according to police statistics, in an objectively dangerous part of a city. You experience its narrowness and darkness as tinted with its disrepute; they make you experience it in such a way that you feel its dangerous atmosphere. But try to imagine the same narrow, dark lane objectively turned into an exceptionally secure place. For example, it is now a part of a Hollywood film set and you know it. It is quite probable that its look will still make you feel its dangerous atmosphere despite not experiencing it as a threatening environment. In other words, we would like to stress that it is reasonable to debate whether a place is actually adequately experienced by someone but hardly

possible to claim that an atmosphere resulting from an experience is inadequate, that is, falsely received, wrongly experienced, and the like. If someone feels the frightening atmosphere of a dark street, we simply do not have the means to deny that. However, it is possible to argue over the other features of the site, and through that we might influence them to change the way they experience the atmosphere.

What we claim here is that unlike the main proponents of the aesthetics of atmospheres, there is room for a judgment-oriented aspect in the aesthetic theory of atmospheres. Nontrivial judgments (not only aesthetic ones) that are part and parcel of any serious disagreement can be made at the level of the objective features of an environment and not at the level of atmospheres or atmospheric experiences. This move allows us to keep together the possibility of formulating a critical judgement with the claim that atmospheres are not subject to certain kinds of critical discourse. That is, if, for some reason, we think that someone incorrectly perceives the atmosphere of a given site, we might argue with that person over the objective and non-relational features of the site and, with arguments, persuade him or her to experience the site in a way that takes into account the features we are pointing to and, hence, experience the site as having such-and-such an atmosphere; or, to put it in another way, to make him or her have such-and-such an atmospheric experience.^[24]

Second, our claim that it is not possible for an atmosphere to be inadequate does not amount to the contention that atmospheres are arbitrary projections that do not take into account the objective properties of sites. That means that places are experienced, in certain ways, as having certain features, but these ways may differ and are determined not only by the experienced features but also by such factors as associations, beliefs, emotions, intentions, and so on. In other words, an atmosphere is a relational feature that is determined by the objective, sensory qualities of a place in addition to psychological and cultural factors. Hence, if we wanted to persuade someone to experience a different atmosphere of a given site, we could also do it by influencing that person's mindset or emotional state.

The above statement necessitates reconsidering the widely held belief that atmospheres may be designed. We agree that it is possible, yet, contrary to the prevailing approach, we claim that it is not possible to think of their design and creation causally. Despite one's efforts, whether or not an atmosphere resulting from a design will be experienced as intended cannot be

predicted with certainty. The ultimate test of whether a place has an atmosphere is people's experiences.

4. The atmosphere of a city: going beyond a site

As we pointed out at the beginning, the concept of atmosphere is usually associated with architecture or, broadly speaking, with the urban environment. It may be characteristic for an interior and also an outdoor site. It is in the latter case that the term 'urban atmosphere' usually appears, meaning an atmosphere of a square, a street, a park, and so on, that is, of a distinct spatial unit of the city containing everything therein.

However, taken alone, it turns out to be somewhat ambiguous, as it may, in fact, mean either an atmosphere of a particular site (we shall call it UA-1) or an atmosphere of a city conceived of as a whole (we shall call it UA-2). It seems that the vast majority, if not all, of the discussions within philosophy and also urban design theory are exclusively focused on the former (UA-1), disregarding the latter (UA-2). We are taking a slightly different route here and propose to focus more on UA-2. Our intuition is that this revised metaphysics of atmospheres is not only useful for explaining the atmospheres of particular urban sites, as we saw in the paragraph above, but also can be used to shed some light on the urban atmospheres of whole cities. We also suggest that acknowledging UA-2 is useful, as it may influence analyses of UA-1. We shall argue that even if we usually think that the term atmosphere should only be used to denote the atmosphere of a particular site (UA-1), it is also possible to think of UA-2 as a fully legitimate sort of atmosphere.

Let us think of sunny and welcoming Barcelona, silent Helsinki, tolerant Amsterdam, or hipsterish Berlin! On many occasions, people say that a particular city, say Dubrovnik, has a really distinct atmosphere. We just feel good about being in that city; we understand and enjoy it in a way that we find unique. Of course, we may well feel just as good in Barcelona, yet this feeling is somehow different. On the other hand, some cities can be very hostile and hard to live in. For example, the third biggest town in Poland, Lodz, is generally perceived by Poles as a city of unemployment, poverty, and social decline, and that reputation is not only a consequence of sociological diagnoses but, more importantly, of a particular ubiquitous mood that the town exudes.

The intuition that guides us here is that we may say that the atmosphere of Kruununhaka in Helsinki, a neighborhood in the city center, is imperial and also claim that the atmosphere of Helsinki, as a city, is Nordic, and in both cases we shall be

perfectly well understood, as both usages of the term atmosphere are correct, acceptable, and commonsensical, especially for those who have visited the city. Yet, there is a clear difference in the meaning of the two sentiments, as the atmospheres referred to come into being by virtue of different experiences. In the former case, it is an experience of a particular site or area (UA-1), while in the latter, of a whole city (UA-2).

The main difference between UA-1 and UA-2 is the fact that a city is hardly ever experienced the way a site may be. Contrary to any city, an urban site, or a site in general, has relatively fewer dimensions, allowing one to experience it as “something” that is experienceable as having its identity defined by its components and boundaries. This fact, however, does not prevent us from claiming that UA-2s exist. We would like to suggest making a semantic and philosophical modification, namely, to replace the term ‘site’ with the similar yet distinct concept of ‘place.’ Such a change will allow us to speak of UA-2.

Places are not mere sites. Whereas site refers to a geographically and geometrically understood space, place is characterized by an existential dimension that is important to given individuals.^[25] Hence, even though a place has a spatial dimension and has objective features that make it geographical, it has also a decisive experiential aspect. Risking an oversimplification, one may state that a site turns into a place when it is experienced as a space in which one is bodily and emotionally engaged and with which one interacts, in one way or another. Having much more to do with someone’s identity, beliefs, emotions, expectations, desires, and so on than with actual geographical conditions, places are rather indeterminate in terms of the limits of the space they cover. As places are person-related, what is a place for one person is not necessarily a place for others; for someone a place is a square, for another a whole district, yet for others a whole town.

Three things should be mentioned here. First, an urban site may become a place but it does not have to be one. There are many spaces that are existentially indifferent to us and may remain such; we just pass through them and they have no particular meaning for us. If, however, such a change does occur, it does not have to involve an atmosphere, as a place may very well be experienced as devoid of atmosphere. This means that, secondly, even though atmospheres are very often important features of places, they are not conditions *sine qua non*. Finally, it seems reasonable to claim that atmospheres play a conspicuous role in the transformation of sites into places. If in

one's opinion a certain site has a distinctive atmosphere that is positive in one way or another, in all likelihood that site will become a place for that person. On the other hand, a place can also have a certain atmosphere because of its existential nature. This is often the case when we travel back home after a long trip. Our house surely has an atmosphere, thanks to the qualities resulting from its location, design, lighting, and the like. But it also has relational—in this case, existential—features as our home: It brings a sense of familiarity and safety.^[26] Places then have their atmospheres but not every atmosphere is connected with a place. That is, it is easy to think of a site that has a distinct, powerful atmosphere without it being a place for us in the technical sense we are using.

In light of what has been said above, it may be claimed that it is hardly possible to experience a city, strictly speaking, as a site. Nevertheless, it is possible to experience it as a place; it is then more like an imaginary *topos*, as when people identify themselves with their hometowns—for example, when answering questions like, where are you from?—or when they think of cities as their holiday destinations. We contend that if it is possible to think of an urban atmosphere as a UA-2, a city is to be understood as a place in the above sense, that is, as a whole that owes its distinctiveness to the way it is experienced by someone who treats it as a distinct whole and not a mere composition of geographically located sites.

Treating a city in such a manner does not amount to treating it as a homogenous entity whose parts (sites or places) do not have their own particular, very often contrasting atmospheres. On the contrary, it may be said that just as a city consists of particular sites, its overall atmosphere (UA-2) consists of local atmospheres (UA-1s). Consequently, someone's atmospheric experience of a city is an experience built on his or her atmospheric experiences of atmospheres of sites and places in that city. The experience corresponding to a UA-2 includes direct and sensory experiences corresponding to atmospheres of particular sites/places (UA-1s), yet it is different in character, it is more imaginary, yet no less real or affective. Moreover, a UA-2 is constituted by UA-1s. This means that the constellation and co-existence of different atmospheres—of streets, parks, districts and the like—in a city is something that gives a unique character or atmosphere to that city. On the other hand, the atmospheric experience of the whole city has an impact on how we experience particular places. We may, for example, claim that Lodz has a derelict atmosphere because there are so many sites/places characterized by shabby atmospheres. We may

perceive Lodz in this manner either as its present or former inhabitants who have warm or hostile feelings towards it or as people who go there attracted by what they have heard about its supposed general poverty. At the same time, the doomed atmosphere of the whole city may make one feel the shabbiness of particular places to an even greater extent and, hence, may intensify their derelict atmosphere.

In other words, we contend that there is a feedback loop between UA-2s and UA-1s. We always experience UA-1s through a UA-2 that, in turn, is based on UA-1s. We tend to experience a city as a place in one way or another—it may be familiar to us but it may be so strange as to provoke in us a sense of existential disorientation—whenever we consider ourselves as being not only at a particular site, for example, on a square or street, but also in a particular city. It follows that the more sites/places we get to know in a city, the more UA-1s we experience, with consequent changes to the UA-2. This relation goes in the other direction as well. Whenever the UA-2 changes, then many, or maybe even all, of its corresponding UA-1s change. For example, when a whole city becomes more cosmopolitan, we might notice that the seemingly unspoiled atmosphere of a local market has changed as well.^[27]

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have shed light on the metaphysical nature of atmospheres and, in particular, aimed at making the concept of urban atmosphere clearer. First, we defined an atmosphere as a relational feature of the environment determined by the features of the site ascribed to it, on the basis of its empirically accessible objective characteristics and how the person sensorially experiences this site. That is, contrary to the widespread view within the aesthetics of atmospheres, we claim that an atmosphere is not an entity itself—nor is it a “quasi-thing” or “half-thing,” as usually stated—but rather a relational feature of a given site that exists only when we experience it. However, that does not make it any less real than the other features of the space of which it is an atmosphere. Also, we distinguished an atmosphere (as a feature) from an atmospheric experience (as a way of experiencing that feature). Thus, we proposed to think that humans perceive the site as possessing an atmosphere via atmospheric experiences. In this experience, we perceive the atmosphere as a foreground and the site as a background, by which we mean that we perceive the site through or by means of an atmosphere. We also claimed that atmospheres cannot be wrongly experienced by the subject, that is, that a site is experienced as having an atmosphere that it

does not really have, but, at the same time, we make room for critical discourse within the aesthetics of atmospheres. Judgments and arguments can be had over the objective features of the environment, without which an atmosphere as a relational feature cannot be experienced. Hence, one may be persuaded to change his or her view and to experience a different atmosphere, or one may at least understand why other people claim that a site has an atmosphere that he or she does not personally experience. Moreover, two meanings of urban atmosphere have been specified and explained. Thus, the double meaning of the expression 'urban atmosphere' mentioned at the outset turns out to be well grounded in the ontology of urban atmospheres.

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Endnotes

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[1] A return to the origins of aesthetics as an established field of philosophy amounts to reconsidering the sensory aspect of aesthetic experience according to the etymology of the term *aisthesis*. This line of thought stresses the appreciative or judgmental aspect of an aesthetic experience and, hence, its (in)adequacy to a much lesser degree than the standard approach of analytic aesthetics. The aesthetic of atmospheres seems to belong to the former, and we shall follow it while trying to combine these two perspectives, trying to, among other things, ruminate on whether an atmosphere may be inadequate. See Arnold Berleant, *Re-thinking Aesthetics: Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Yuriko Saito, *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[2] See Andreas Reckwitz, *The Invention of Creativity: Modern Society and the Culture of the New* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

[3] For the sake of simplicity, we omit the question of whether persons' or artworks' atmospheres are different, at some point, from that of sites or things.

[4] Juhani Pallasmaa, "Space, Place and Atmosphere. Emotion and Peripheral Perception in Architectural Experience," *Lebenswelt*, 4, 1 (2014), 230-245, p. 230.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 232.

[6] Peter Zumthor, *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments: Surrounding Objects* (Bazel: Birkhäuser, 2006), p. 13.

[7] It does not simply imply sentimentalism. We believe that atmospheres are related to humans' emotional reactions and not humans' intellectual powers. Any discursive grasp of an atmosphere is only secondary; even an intellectual atmosphere has nothing or very little to do with reason and reasoning.

[8] Stuart Grant, "Performing an Aesthetics of Atmospheres," *Aesthetics*, 23, 1 (2013), 12-32, p. 19.

[9] Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, trans. by S. de Sanctis (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), p. 3.

[10] Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. by Jean-Paul Thibaud (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 19.

[11] Ashley Watkins, "Gone but Not Forgotten: Atmospheres, Death, and Aesthetics of Goth," *Popular Inquiry: The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture*, 2, 4 (2018), 39-61, p. 41.

[12] Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, p. 109.

[13] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, p. 68.

[14] Naturally, being in the same spot is *not* enough to share the atmosphere of that spot with other people.

[15] Watkins, "Gone but Not Forgotten: Atmospheres, Death, and Aesthetics of Goth," p. 42.

[16] Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, p. 109.

[17] Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, p. 58.

[18] For the sake of simplicity, we omit the issue of whether other species are able to experience atmospheres.

[19] See, for example, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, "Objectivity and subjectivity in the history of aesthetics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 24, 2 (1963), 157-173; Roman Ingarden, *The Ontology of the Work of Art*, trans. by Raymond Meyer with John T. Goldthwait (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989). See also James Shelley, "The Concept of the Aesthetic," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009/2017), ed. Edward Zalta, online.

[20] The expression, "emotional coloring," comes from Henryk Elzenberg, "Zabarwienie uczuciowe jako zjawisko estetyczne," [Emotional Colouring as an Aesthetic Phenomenon] in Henryk

Elzenberg, *Pisma estetyczne*, ed. Lesław Hostyński (Lublin: UMCS, 1999), pp. 45-51.

[21] The criteria imply a certain notion of normativity, while such features as dirtiness, chaos or ordered structure are highly context-dependent; see, for example, Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). So, the poor state of a street may be judged differently by people from different cultures. However, once we accept such context-dependency as often rooted in cultural background, the mentioned features may be said to be objective.

[22] N.B. not every sensory experience has to result in an atmosphere; for example, one may experience a place as dirty without experiencing a filthy atmosphere at the same time.

[23] According to Böhme, the aesthetics of atmospheres should be a new aesthetics that is: (1) not object-oriented; (2) not judgment-oriented; (3) not artwork-oriented; and (4) not semiotic (*Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, chapters 1 & 2). Such an aesthetics needs to be focused on human experiences, rather than on constructing criteria or rules to be followed, if we want to experience something correctly or adequately.

[24] N.B. it is implausible to claim that a given site has such-and-such an atmosphere without actually experiencing it. That is – even though it may sound tautological – if you are in the cemetery, you cannot say that the atmosphere *is* dark and depressing without admitting that you *actually* experience as having this particular atmosphere. However, it is possible to say that a given site *could have* such-and-such an atmosphere, according to our knowledge of the objective features of the site, or claim that we understand *that other people would* experience the site as having such-and-such an atmosphere.

[25] See, for example, Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perceptions, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press 1990), Edward Casey, *Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: Harvard University Press, 2013), Tim Cresswell, *Place: a Short Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011).

[26] Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, eds. Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press 2005), pp. 39-55.

[27] Naturally, it may not change at all. It is very difficult to predict whether a given atmosphere will change or not.

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