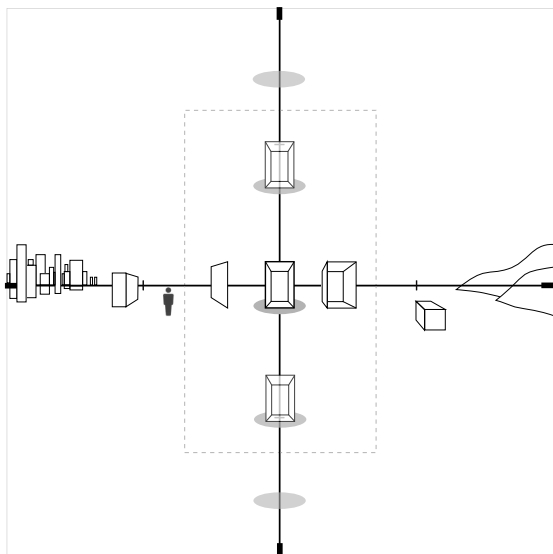


# Thoughts on



# temporal empathy

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Thoughts on temporal empathy*

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Sometimes understanding something requires more than feeling. To fully grasp the meaning of certain things they have to be described, observed and measured, its meaning and relations made clear. Thinking gives structure and clarity to the vagueness of feelings.

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# Introduction

What role does time play in our understanding of architecture?

Think of a cube. A three-dimensional object, six faces, twelve edges. The six faces are all squares of equal size, meaning, all edges are the same length and the four corners of each surface are a 90 degree angle. Though a collection of information, it is purely a geometric concept.

Now instead, think of a cube as an actual, real object. What does it look like? Does it fit in your hand, or is it big enough to sit on? Is it made of wood, steel, concrete, plastic? What colour is it? Where is it exactly, on the table, in the air? Perhaps you've already determined, either in words or as a picture, these aspects of the cube when you first imagined it as an actual object, or perhaps you filled them in as you were reading these questions. Depending on your imagination it might not have the detail or complexity it would have if it were real, but it's a pretty good replica. It contains all the information of the concept of a cube, but they have been tied to an actual thing. You can relate yourself to it, you imagine it existing somewhere. Imagining it also made you consider other relevant aspects that are necessary to do so. By considering it as a real thing, the cube has gained a weight and an immediate relevance in relation to yourself.

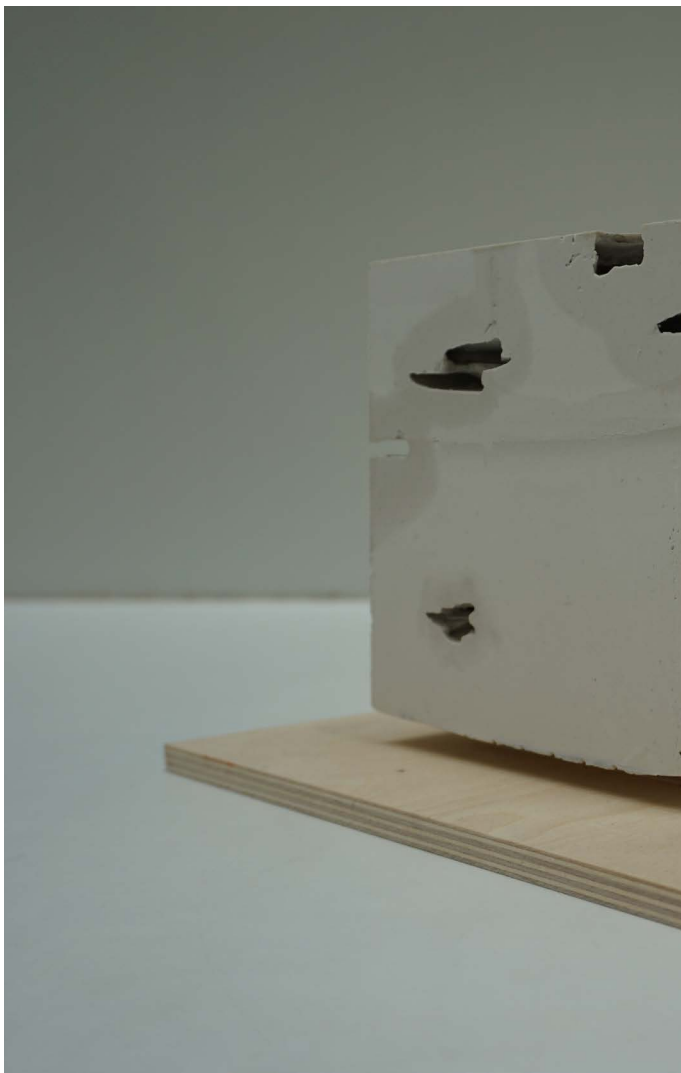
Now comes a second set of questions about the cube we're imagining. Is the cube damaged in any way,

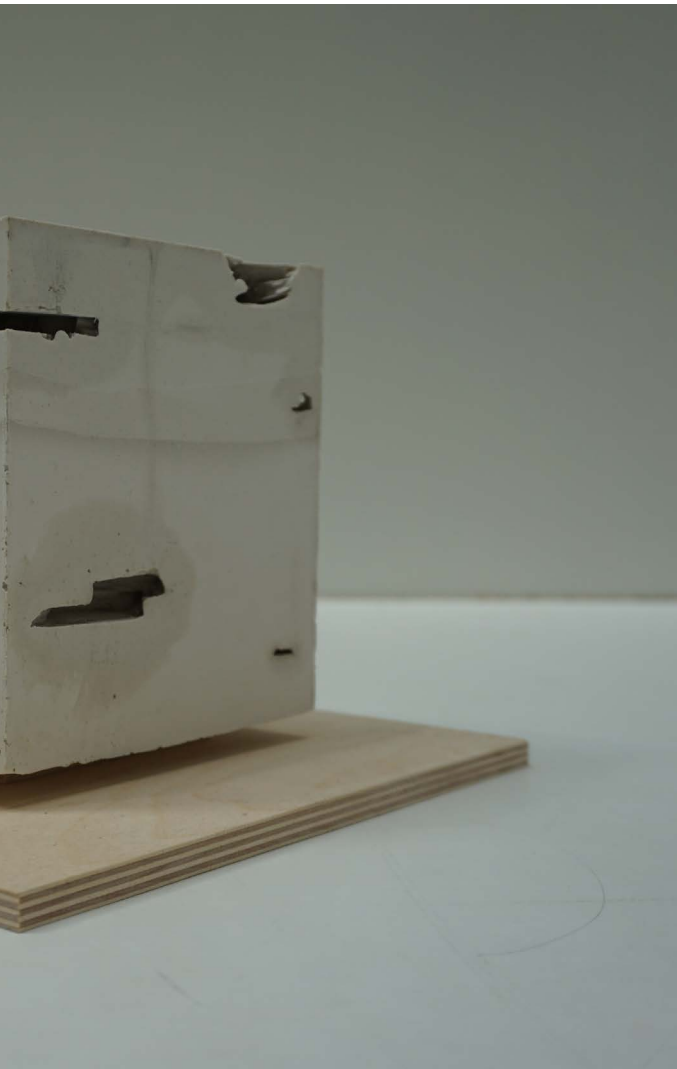


chipped or cracked? Are the colours faded, is it covered in dust or does it look brand new? Was it just placed there or is it there permanently? How was it made? What is it being used for? Is it moving in any way? Questions like these add a completely different kind of depth to the image of the cube than questions like the ones we discussed before. What these questions represent is an extra dimension that was lacking before in the image of the cube as a representation of a real thing, which is temporality. The image created before was incomplete.

Temporal empathy is about a perspective on temporality as an inherent and integral part of architecture. Even though temporality can be hard to grasp, it is possible to gain a more meaningful understanding of its relation to architecture.

This perspective sprouted from reflection upon experiences, and was further developed by relating it to architectural theory and cognitive science. Though understanding temporal empathy is highly dependent on concepts such as atmosphere, imagination and experience, there is great value in trying to put into words the processes behind it. It allows ideas to be made explicit and developed further. This essay attempts to dissect the possibilities of understanding temporality through a personal and emotional connection. Hopefully, in the end, our knowledge surrounding temporal empathy will be more clearly detailed and rich than before and we can have lively discussions on the inner workings of every part for hours.







Empathy

# Mental image

To understand how our ability to empathise can play a role in gaining a more meaningful perception of the temporality of things, we first have to discuss how we give meaning to things in general. To do this we'll discuss how things are seen as entities, and the different types of understanding that are important in doing so.

## **The mental image**

Think of things such as your bedroom, your parents' house, or a city you've recently visited, an image comes to mind. Through our ability of imagination, a representation of these things shows up in your mind's eye. In instances like this, the word 'think' seems less appropriate, instead 'imagine' seems more fitting. This image contains similar information that can be divided into the categories mentioned earlier, such as the way it looks, how big it is, et cetera, but instead of being general notions they have become actual characteristics of the thing you're imagining. In this way they have become tied to actual instances, something you can relate yourself to. This collection of characteristics you form in your mind come together as a representation of we understand as what a thing is. We'll call this a mental image. Through this mental image we can relate ourselves to things. Despite the term, a mental image does not necessarily have to be visual. It can also consist of linguistic descriptions. In fact, people with aphantasia, who lack the ability to visualise in the mind completely<sup>1</sup>, picture things purely as descriptions.

So a mental image is defined here as a complete body of characteristics that one understands as constituting a thing. When talking about architecture, most things could be described as either a space, place or object, but it is easier to simply describe them as things. While this might seem very vague, it is a fitting description. There are no specific traits or characteristics to define a 'thing', there is no want for the exclusion of any specific type of thing. The term is meant to be inclusive. What is important to have is a term that describes something in isolation. Though everything exists in relation to other things and its own context (as we'll later discover), a thing can be seen as a singular entity, with its own nature.

### **Factual understanding and atmospheric understanding**

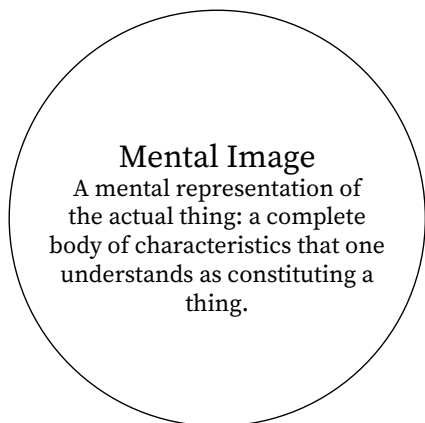
The characteristics in the collection that make up our mental image are not all of an equal nature. A distinction can be made between two types, factual characteristics and atmospheric characteristics. This distinction is made because they are each associated with their own way of perceiving, their own way of understanding. Because of this there is a difference between factual understanding and atmospheric understanding. This distinction between the factual and the atmospheric is reminiscent of the one made by Theodor Lipps near the end of the 19th century, who distinguished two ways of 'seeing': optical and aesthetic<sup>2</sup>. The former encompasses matter, the latter what exists outside of matter, the physical and mental respectively. These two were to come together to form a complete image. Similarly, factual and atmospheric understanding are two sides of the same coin; they are each other's opposite, but are both integral to our mental image. But rather than describing the division as physical and mental, the factual and atmospheric are divided by the way they lead to an understanding: thinking and feeling. Factual understanding encompasses the objective and absolute. It is gathered and measured within pre-

established terms. In architecture they are expressed as terms such as kilograms, lumen, metres. Handling facts is done through thinking. It is most suited to the explicit; though one can have an intuitive grasp of facts, they are best expressed as words or numbers, providing a certain clarity. Factual understanding is completely indifferent: they are solely descriptions of what is observed without judgement. They seem like descriptions of the thing as a physical entity. The collection of factual characteristics are called facts.

Atmospheric understanding deals in the exact opposite. It encompasses the subjective and relative. In architecture they are expressed in terms such as heavy, bright, imposing. Handling atmosphere is done through feeling. It is most suited to the implicit; though feelings can be expressed in words, it is often hard. Even when one succeeds it feels like parts of it, a certain depth, is lost in the process. Atmospheres are passionate, judgmental in their very nature. Instead of being tied to the physical body of a thing, an atmosphere seems to emanate from it. The collection of atmospheric characteristics come together as an atmosphere.







*Consists of*

**Factual  
understanding**

Collection of  
factual information  
tied to a thing as its  
characteristics

**Atmospheric  
understanding**

Collection of  
atmospheric  
information brought  
forth by a thing

	Factual understanding	Atmospheric understanding
--	--------------------------	------------------------------

<i>Consists of</i>	facts	atmosphere
<i>Handled through</i>	thinking	feeling
<i>In nature</i>	objective and absolute	subjective and relative
<i>In the shape of</i>	knowledge	judgment
<i>Suited to</i>	the explicit	the implicit
<i>Tied to</i>	the physical	the ethereal
<i>Gained through</i>	observation/ measurement	Experience

# Atmosphere

By its very nature, the concept of factual understanding is easier to understand than atmospheric understanding because the former and latter deal with characteristics suited for the explicit and the implicit respectively. Yet in order to talk about it we have no choice but to try and express atmospheric understanding explicitly. The best way to approach this issue is by taking a look at different aspects of the 'product' of atmospheric understanding: atmosphere. In doing so the relation between factual understanding and atmospheric understanding also becomes clearer.

## **1. Atmosphere as mental conception**

The first aspect of atmosphere is the one that was found by separating the physical and the mental: atmosphere is a mental conception of a thing beyond its physical (factual) characteristics. Interestingly, this idea has been explored in the past under a different moniker, namely space. It was Emmanuel Kant who described space as the following:

*'Space is not an empirical concept which has been derived from outer experiences. Space does not represent any property of things in themselves, nor does it represent them in relation to one another. [Space exists] in the mind a priori... as pure intuition, in which all objects must be determined [and contains] prior to all experience, principles which determine the relations of these objects. It is, therefore, solely from the human standpoint that*

*we can speak of space, of extended things, etc.*<sup>3</sup>

In this school of thought space is a concept in the mind only, which we use to determine the nature of things. The interpretation of a space is therefore purely a construct of the human mind. This separation of the physical and the mental is the same as was made earlier, which means this interpretation of space is equal to atmosphere as we defined earlier. Our fundamental concept of atmosphere (space) allows us to form an atmosphere (a space).

You might wonder why I insist on translating the concept of space into atmosphere. The reason for this is twofold, and both have to do with the fuzzy definition of space as it is used today. The first issue is with the conflation of the physical and mental when it comes to what constitutes as space. Though Kant's conception of space clearly constitutes a mental interpretation, in architectural practice the term 'space' just as easily refers to the physical and factual. Questions about an amount of space will often be answered in square or cubic metres. The second issue is that space is often seen as something that can be entered, passed through and envelop someone. This would exclude things with which you can have a different sort of interaction, such as an object. The use of the term atmosphere paints a clear image of a mental experience and more free from association with specific things. When it comes to mentions of Kant's conception of space and others who built upon it, the term is equal to atmosphere.

Many have built and expanded upon the idea Kant presented here, some with a more direct link to architecture. It was August Schmarzow for example, who continued from this idea and stressed that spatial construct is to be seen as a property of the mind, not to be confused with actual geometric space in buildings<sup>4</sup>. Lipps' distinction between the optical and aesthetic also finds its origin in Kant's statement.

## 2. Atmosphere expressed in bodily terms

The next aspect can also be derived from what Kant wrote about space, which is about the nature of the atmosphere we create. We create an atmosphere in certain terms, which is fundamentally tied to us being human beings and the way we perceive our own bodies. Art historian Heinrich Wölfflin, also continuing from Kant's legacy of the space as a mental construct, considered the shape of architectural space to not be what is seen but rather what is experienced by the entire body<sup>5</sup>. Architecture has a sensory and bodily impact, and thus is it interpreted as a bodily state. Gernot Böhme continues from this point:

*'a place, a district can seem serious, joyful, majestic, frosty, cosy, festive . . . In other words, the rich repertoire of terms we can use to describe our sensitivities also provides a broad spectrum of characteristics of atmospheres and thus of spaces of mindful physical presence.'*

Because we experience an atmosphere with our own body we have no other way of interpreting it other than in the terms we use to describe our own body. As seen in the examples above this goes not only for the bodily terms we feel physically, but also the ones that describe our mental state. We see atmosphere in terms that we use to describe personality, emotion, mental and physical state within ourselves. This not only goes for the way we describe atmosphere in words, but also how we feel atmosphere before we make our thoughts on it explicit. In recent years this line of thinking has been emphasized in cognitive science as well; thinking is not done with just your brain but with the entirety of your body<sup>6</sup>. This is also why atmospheres are personal, slightly different between each individual. People are relatively similar to one another. Most of us have the same limbs, seldom differ more than a metre in length at the same age, and way relatively the

same weight. Especially in comparison to the scale of architecture we often might as well be identical. However, the slight variations in our bodies as well as the difference in experiences we've had in our lives lead us to judge what we experience differently. Someone who has had only horrible experiences in very colourful spaces will surely not be as quick to describe the atmosphere as festive as most of us would. As a toddler the dining table seemed way more massive than it does now, and the opposite is true when I try to walk through doorways built over 200 years ago.

### **3. Atmosphere formed through factual understanding**

In our conscious mind, we are often explicitly aware of our atmospheric understanding before our factual understanding. That is to say, we are often aware that we feel something before we start thinking about it factually. A feeling comes to us automatically, facts require conscious effort to think about. But the question remains, where does this atmosphere come from? The answer to this lies in our subconscious. In our subconscious, the order of atmospheric and factual understanding is actually reversed. Our subconscious uses our factual understanding of something, coming to us through our senses, to form an atmosphere which is then fed to our conscious mind.

An atmosphere is only formed because we perceive something, real or imagined. Stimuli have to reach our senses before we can perceive anything and interpret them. The source of these stimuli is the thing itself. Whether it be the light bouncing off it into our eyes, the smell emanating from its materials or the sound of our footsteps as we pass through it, they are a result of its physical characteristics. These characteristics can be described as factual information, and are thus registered as part of our factual understanding. This is then used by our subconscious to create a coherent atmosphere. It does this through the interpretation of our factual understanding.

To illustrate the process we can use a simulated (and simplified) situation. Imagine a very dimly lit space. This amount of light makes the space feel quite eerie. The amount of light is factual, the eeriness is atmospheric. How do these types of understanding relate to each other?

Starting from the factual, there is a certain amount of light. This is something that can be expressed in a measurement. Though you might not know the amount of lumen expressed in a number, you have also experienced other amounts of light and thus have an intuitive understanding of how much light there is. This goes for our factual understanding in general. Though we might not be able to express all physical characteristics precisely without measuring, we intuitively register factual information based on these physical characteristics.

On the scale of lightness of spaces, based on other situations you know, you'd probably describe the space as dark. It is also hard to see everything in full detail, so you experience bodily strain in trying to focus what you see exactly. It's also somewhat comparable to situations you might perceive as dangerous. All these considerations are combined into a conclusion, being that the space has an eerie atmosphere. By contextualising, associating and judging the factual information, we make up our mind of what we think about the thing we are confronted with. Describing another way you might say that atmospheric understanding gives weight and meaning to the indifference of our factual understanding. Some other simplified examples are:

A certain wall has a width and height (factual), it is quite wide and tall, it is imposing (atmospheric).

A room is painted in certain colours (factual), it reminds you of birthdays, flowers and parades, it is joyful (atmospheric).



This entire process is not something that you consciously go through every time you experience something. Having to process every stimulus in your conscious mind would be exceedingly tiresome. Luckily our brains are equipped to handle such processes subconsciously. They happen pretty much automatically and involuntarily, but they can be directed through conscious effort if needed<sup>7</sup>.

#### **4. Atmosphere as nature of a thing**

Even though we describe an atmosphere in the same terms as we would ourselves, we don't see the atmosphere as part of, or in relation to ourselves. This statement seems to contradict everything we've discussed before. An atmosphere exists only in our mind, expressed in terms related to our body, and through our judgement. Yet, we still attribute an atmosphere as being a thing's own nature, belonging to it. Perhaps the apparent contradiction can be explained by considering the following: there is a difference between how things are, and how we perceive them to be. In terms of how things are, atmosphere is heavily dependent on and tied to ourselves. However, that is a very conscious and rational observation regarding the way our mind works. In terms of how we perceive atmosphere, we feel as if it is something that belongs to a thing itself. This is possible because, as described earlier, the process itself does not take place in our conscious mind.

An atmosphere is of an ethereal nature, seemingly emanating from a thing, surrounding it. This much is reflected in the etymology of the word itself; first relating to the air enveloping the planet, finding its origins in ancient Greek, where *atmos* means gas/vapour and *sphaira* means sphere<sup>8</sup>. John Dewey also acknowledged this aspect of atmosphere. He believed that the atmosphere that is felt is seen in relation to the thing itself:

*'The object and the feeling cannot be separated; they are factors of the same consciousness [...] The connection is not an external one of the feeling with the object, but an internal and intimate one; it is the feeling of the object.'*<sup>9</sup>

Dewey argued that this much can be seen when looking at what we say when we try to communicate the atmosphere (the feeling) of the thing we experience beyond our factual knowledge (object), using examples such as 'The food is agreeable [...] that landscape is beautiful, or that act is right.' We attribute any part of an atmosphere, whether understood explicitly or implicitly, as being a true description of the nature of a thing. This nature can be likened to the way we see the mental nature of another person, as a personality and emotional state. Of course things don't wilfully or consciously display a certain atmosphere as person would emotions or personality, since they are not conscious beings. However, it is important to realise that this is not at all necessary for interpretation to occur. The act lies with the one who experiences. It is based on the attentiveness to stimuli and their subsequent interpretation. This is all that is needed for someone to form an atmosphere.

### **The relation between the factual and the atmospheric**

The four aspects allow us to paint a clearer picture of what constitutes an atmosphere. These aspects come together they form the following definition:

A mental conception of a thing  
perceived and described in bodily language  
created through the evaluation of our factual understanding  
seen as the nature of the thing itself

What these aspects have also shown is that factual and atmospheric understanding do not function separately but instead influence each other. Factual understanding is a

prerequisite to atmospheric understanding, as atmosphere is a result of the contextualisation, association and judging of the factual characteristics of a thing as we perceive them. It is an evaluation through a personal and emotional interpretation that lets us know what our position towards it. In this way it gives weight and to the indifference of facts. In this sense atmospheric understanding could be seen as a deeper kind of understanding than factual understanding. With facts as a basis, a mental image becomes richer as an atmosphere is added; it becomes meaningful to us personally.

In turn, our atmospheric understanding can give direction to our factual understanding. By reflecting upon atmosphere we can better understand our position towards a thing. This reflection can be tied to what we perceive and allows us to grow and adjust our attention. With our attention adjusted, we again sense different characteristics or see known ones in a different light, changing our factual understanding. In this manner the two types of understanding can continually influence each other to create and develop our mental image.

# Experience

With a better grasp of our atmospheric understanding, its importance to our mental image has already become clearer, but a question remains: what does all this have to do with empathy? The best way to answer this is by taking a look at the process in which atmosphere is created: experience.

## **The basis of experience**

An experience is a personal observation or encounter with something<sup>10</sup>. It is the process of gaining knowledge through sensing and feeling. The very basis of an experience or the act of experiencing is the interaction between the experiencer and the experienced. In most cases the experiencer is a person. Since we are talking about experiencing in the context of architecture, the experienced can be buildings, rooms, beams, and whatever else. Again, things in a broader sense.

Experience does not necessarily have to be induced by interacting with your surroundings in the physical world. One of the most powerful assets of our complex brains is our power of imagination. We can conjure up conditions and situations and pretend they are real, experience them by interacting with them in our mind. This is what a mental image entails: through imagination we can form a recreation in our mind of things we've experienced in interaction with an actual

physical (as in, existing as a thing in reality as opposed to only in our mind) thing before.

It is for this reason that we are not only able to recognise and be affected by our surroundings, but conceive of ways to shape them creatively. The process of design works this way as well. We imagine ways our environment can be changed and are able to make judgements on those ideas after creating a mental image. If they don't produce the intended experience, adjustments are made until they are correct. You might say that this is how creativity comes to be in the first place. Shakespeare is quoted as having said the following on creativity<sup>11</sup>:

*'I think that the dressing and the mask are as old as human civilization and that the joy in both is identical to the joy in those things that led men to be sculptors, painters, architects, poets, musicians, dramatists—in short, artists. Every artistic creation, every artistic pleasure, presumes a certain carnival spirit, or to express it in a modern way, the haze of carnival candles is the true atmosphere of art. The destruction of reality, of the material, is necessary if form is to emerge as a meaningful symbol, as an autonomous human creation.'*

The dressing and the mask, as Shakespeare put it, describes our ability to transform our perspective and state of mind, to dress up as the other. The atmosphere – being the mental conception we create and understand through dressing up – does not necessarily have to be tied to a physical thing, but can also be a mental image we can imagine as a physical thing.

### **Experience step by step**

While describing atmosphere as a combination of aspects the process of forming an atmosphere has already been touched upon, it is only one step in a more complex sequence of events. There is also another important consequence that was not mentioned before, but will be

now.

In order to form an atmosphere a thing first needs to be perceived. Perceiving something is not a given. Not every single thing is immediately recognised and awareness of atmospheres is not a state one is constantly in. This makes sense; you cannot possibly be aware of all things that are in range to be sensed. This would be too much to handle. Instead we prioritise and only pay attention to that which is relevant in a given situation. Often times this is nothing in particular: many times we are simply occupied with our thoughts and don't pay much attention to our surroundings at all. In these situations our subconscious quickly works through everything we sense and decides that nothing is out of the ordinary and needs no attention<sup>12</sup>. Most people recognise the feeling of going somewhere lost in thought and arriving only to realise they have no recollection of how they got there exactly. In cases like this you are not consciously experiencing the world around you, you are in a closed state.

Experiencing requires a certain sensitivity. Böhme describes this as a mindful physical presence<sup>13</sup>. On top of your physical body being present, it also requires a conscious body. It requires you to be aware of your surroundings by being receptive to sensory stimuli. By doing this, we are able to form our factual understanding. That is, a collection of factual characteristics that we recognise as being part of a thing. From this point we can start evaluating those characteristics. This happens through the contextualisation, association and judgement of our factual understanding, as described in the previous chapter. This way we start to understand a thing through feeling, and an atmosphere is formed of the thing you are experiencing. Broken down into steps, this is what constitutes the process of experience:

•

*Closed state: you are unaware of your surroundings; there is no conscious connection to your senses.*

• *Mindful physical presence: you are receptive to stimuli from your surroundings; you become aware of a thing.*

• *Interpreting of atmosphere: by sensing your surroundings and interpreting them, an atmosphere is formed.*

It is this last point that requires our attention now. The reason for this is because it is at this step something interesting takes place. The atmosphere that we form of the thing we experience does not include any notion of our own being. As described before, even though an atmosphere only exists as a product in our own mind, we don't see it as such. Instead, we perceive it as being the nature of a thing itself. In doing this, we recognise that thing as existing outside of our own being, different from us. As Schmarzow eloquently put it:

*'The spatial construct [read: atmosphere] is, so to speak, an emanation of the human being present, a projection from within the subject, irrespective of whether we physically place ourselves inside the space or mentally project ourselves into it. [...] We perceive the spatial construct as a body outside ourselves with its own organization.'*<sup>14</sup>

This is the crux of why atmospheric understanding is so valuable. This realisation is what makes the creation and feeling of an atmosphere empathetic.

### **Defining empathy**

Understanding this statement requires a small tangent towards the definition of empathy. The first thing we need to do is establish what is meant exactly by empathy, as there are actually multiple types. What most people initially think of when it comes to empathy is something of the following: someone is crying nearby. They are hunched forward with their face resting in their hands,

sobbing softly. You take notice of this, and suddenly you feel slightly sadder yourself as well. This type of empathy is called affective or emotional empathy. It is a type of empathy that works through emotional contagion<sup>15</sup>. By observing another displaying signs or characteristics you associate with certain emotions, those emotions are also brought forth from within yourself. In this case it was some form of sadness, but it applies to every possible type of emotional state or feeling.

Now let's approach the same scenario from a different angle. Someone is sad due to the situation they're in. That situation does not concern you nor would it make you sad personally. Yet you understand their perspective and their mental state. This is called cognitive empathy. This sort of empathy is not so much dependent on the recognition of emotions as it is of the acknowledgement of the other person's identity and circumstances<sup>16</sup>. It requires you to recognise that someone is different from you, and in what way. It concerns the capacity to imagine yourself 'being' another to understand them. In Dutch there is a specific verb that describes the act of becoming the other. *Inleven*, which roughly translates to 'living into', describes the act of placing yourself in another's shoes to understand them better. It quite literally implies imagining living as them to be able to grasp their emotions as a product of both their circumstances and their personality. What this leads to is a recognition of the fact that another exists not just in relation to you. They exist outside of yourself, different from you and in different circumstances. It's this type of empathy that I refer to when I use the term throughout this text.

Of course this much is factually obvious. You would be hard pressed to find anyone who would explicitly claim others as mere copies of themselves, thinking and functioning exactly the same, just with a different coat of paint. Yet there is a difference between knowing this fact and feeling it. A fact is isolated and emotionless on its



own, it carries little weight. It only comes into play when a mental connection is made in one's thoughts, as if a drawer is opened and its contents reviewed when relevant. Cognitive empathy changes the way you view the world and its contents from the outset, it forms your perspective. In a sense the factual knowledge gains personal and emotional weight. If you possess cognitive empathy the realisation that other are different from you and exist outside of yourself does not pop into your mind every now and then. It takes the form of a subconscious understanding and shapes your interaction with your surroundings.

Though every person is different from one another, all of us – with the exception of a very small minority – operate from the same emotional system. Our bodies are all relatively the same in comparison to other beings. People across all different regions, cultures and religions smile when they are happy, frown when they are angry and cry when they are sad. One of the signs this is not learned behaviour can be seen in those who are born blind, still exhibiting the very same characteristics when experiencing similar emotions. Seeing as we're so similar in both our physical and mental nature it makes sense that we are able to imagine ourselves as being another and empathise with them.

### **Empathy in atmospheric understanding**

With this we've only discussed empathy as relating to other people, but from what we've seen when it comes to atmospheric understanding this is not the full extent of our empathy. The description of cognitive empathy matches with what has been established about atmosphere. Whether it is with people or things, with both we are able to realise, through feeling, they exist outside of ourselves, with their own nature, different from us. Similar to Schmarzow before, Pallasmaa connects the empathetic nature of atmosphere to things imagined:

*'..the act of imagining spaces and objects, is not solely a matter of visual projection; it is a process of embodiment, identification and feeling the entity as an imaginary extension of one's self, through embodied simulation.'*<sup>17</sup>

Rather than make the distinction between the imagined and the real, Dewey posed that empathy was inherently rooted in our capacity to imagine. Our ability to empathise is made possible because we are able to imagine things instead of solely processing what is in front of us. He even went as far as to use the terms almost interchangeably, defining empathy as 'entering by the imagination into the situation of others' and calling imagination 'empathetic projection'<sup>18</sup>. The mental image then, being the imagined representation of a thing in our mind, is inherently empathetic. This is due to the fact that characteristics as facts are not unembodied but tied to a thing itself, which are then experienced in the mind, leading to atmosphere. The connection between cognitive empathy and the experience of atmosphere was also present in Wölfflin's idea of experience through the body. He noted that something is not simply described in bodily terms, it is experienced in the body, 'as if internally realised'<sup>19</sup>. This again brings to mind *inleven*, or transforming the self into the other for a moment to understand its state and perspective. To bring the story full circle we only need to mention that Wölfflin's conception of this theory is founded on Robert Vischer's question on how architecture can express a mood or emotion<sup>20</sup>. Vischer's answer to this question was the conception of *einfühlung*, or 'feeling into'. This was later translated to English. The German term was translated to empathy. This means that, just as we can understand the difference between us and other people, we can do so with things as well. Instead of being able to envision ourselves as other people, we are capable of doing so with the 'other' in general. By doing this empathically

we acknowledge the nature of a thing, and how it exists outside of ourselves, beyond a factual understanding, and can instead be felt, lived and experienced. This is the greatest value of atmospheric understanding.

### **Context as a result of empathy**

There is one last step to mention in the process of experience, which is a direct consequence of empathising with things. Due to the recognition of a thing as its own being, it is inevitably recognised as being part of a larger context. Isolating elements can only be done when a difference is identified between multiple things. The first instance of this is when the distinction is made between the self and the other. Part of understanding the other as a being with its own nature and state is separating it from yourself, that also has its own nature and state. The second instance comes from the fact that both you and the thing are seen as entities with their own boundaries. Neither is part of the other, which means that neither is constant or all-encompassing. The fact that this goes for both parties inherently means that they exist in a greater context. This means that the final list of steps for the process of experience is as follows:

- *Closed state: you are unaware of your surroundings; there is no conscious connection to your senses.*
- *Mindful physical presence: you are receptive to stimuli from your surroundings; you become aware of a thing.*
- *Interpreting of atmosphere: by sensing your surroundings and interpreting them, an atmosphere is formed.*
- *Awareness of greater context: the realisation that you and the experienced thing each exist with their own nature, and neither is all-encompassing, leads to an awareness of existing in a greater context.*

## **Mental image as recreation**

Through either experiencing reality or our imagination, we are able to empathise with things and thus recognise things as existing outside of ourselves, with their own nature and place in a greater context. By understanding this through empathy, we understand it on an emotional and personal level. This atmosphere comes together with our factual understanding to create a mental image of what we understand the thing as being. However, this image is limited in a sense. Actual things are incredibly multifaceted and detailed, too complicated to capture in this way. Many characteristics we are able to sense are ignored since there are simply too many. To solve this issue we use abstraction and only capture those aspects we deem essential to its image. Depending on our personalities, our state of mind and what we focus on, the atmosphere we create can differ greatly. After all, our empathy heavily depends on how we interpret it. This works fine most of the time, but it does allow for problems to arise.

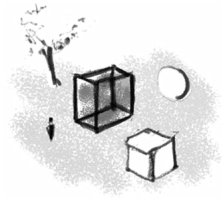




*Closed state: you are unaware of your surroundings; there is no conscious connection to your senses.*

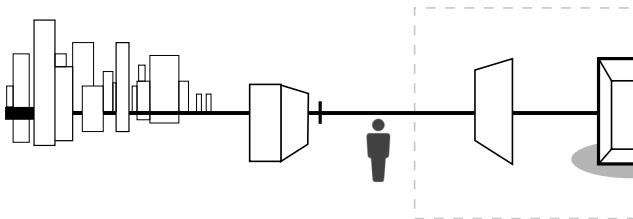


*Mindful physical presence: you are receptive to stimuli from your surroundings; you become aware of a thing.*

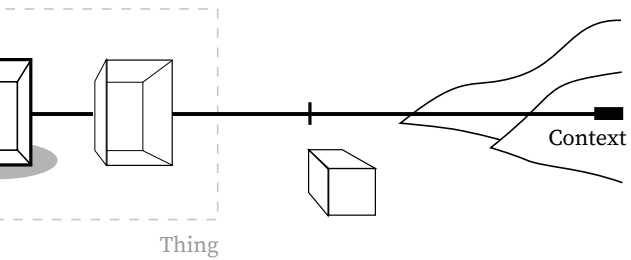


*Interpreting of atmosphere:  
by sensing your surroundings  
and interpreting them, an  
atmosphere is formed.*

*Awareness of greater  
context: the realisation that  
you and the experienced  
thing each exist with their  
own nature, and neither is  
all-encompassing, leads to  
an awareness of existing in a  
greater context.*









Temporality

# Temporality of things

As architects we are pretty well-accustomed to understanding things through atmosphere, and by extension through empathy. By exploring the concept explicitly, as we've just done, you might understand and be able to apply it better or more often, but the practice itself is nothing new. As mentioned before, it is a key ingredient to the creative process. Design ideas are often rudimentally realised in the form of a scheme or sketch and then reflected upon. Rather than fully conceptualising an idea before executing it, we allow ourselves to bypass the tedious – or even impossible – act of conceiving every detail and make iterations and see what is missing or needs to be changed.

Our innate understanding of things existing in a context is also applied heavily in the design process. Even if we only create a single building, we often make drawings on many different scales, including its immediate surroundings, adjacent structures, even entire neighbourhoods. Decisions are made in relation to these surroundings in terms of shape, orientation, style, materials, the list goes on. It is also visible in the drawings we use to communicate to non-architects. Renders we produce show buildings not on their own, but situated within their future surroundings. Both architects and non-architects relate to things in a context through atmosphere quite naturally. This way of understanding architectural

things serves us quite well, but it has one shortcoming: it is highly spatial (in its modern sense with all its fuzzy conflation between physical and mental space). That might not seem like a shortcoming in itself, but it does mean that something is sorely lacking, which is temporality.

Just as things are of a spatial nature in a spatial context, they are of a temporal nature in a temporal context. The latter is often neglected, rarely inherently present in our atmosphere of things. This means that it is not a natural or fundamental part of the way we perceive architecture. Space, in all its different and fuzzy meanings, physical and mental, might be seen as the most fundamental property of architecture<sup>21</sup>. This fact has even become evident in this every essay: as we've tried to establish the processes and characteristics surrounding atmosphere the pages became filled with the word space. Even though time is ultimately the subject, the score so far doesn't look good: space is winning from time 33 to 4. But while the practice of architecture arguably concerns itself with the shaping of space first and foremost, it is a mistake to neglect that the architectural things we create are just as much temporal in essence as they are spatial.

A lack of temporality in our atmospheric perception does not remain a strictly philosophical issue, but has very real and practical consequences. If we ignore the temporality of things when we design architecture, we create incomplete or misshapen designs. This is not much of a problem as long as the design stays in the imagination, where it has no responsibility to the outside world, but it creates friction as soon as they are executed and become a part of reality. We see a mental image of the design in our mind as a representation of what will eventually become real. When a design is realized into an actual physical thing it will inevitably consist of both a temporal and spatial nature. If temporality is lacking in the considerations of the design process, it means that the design as an idea is not

an accurate representation of the real thing. At best this means that the design and real thing don't correspond, at worst it creates a host of issues by forgetting aspects of reality an architectural thing will have to deal with. This way temporality, which seems far removed from practicality, shows its influence in real situations.

There are many more architectural discourses on subjects that could be described as being temporal. Conversations on movement, deterioration, lifespan, flexibility, the weather, are examples of considerations that are ultimately all part of the temporality of things, so it is not completely absent in architectural design. Yet the lack of a general sense of the temporality means that, firstly, these subjects are treated in isolation instead of as part of a general sense of temporality, and secondly, they are only considered in the conception of architecture as conscious inclusions. Both of these issues result in the possibility that some of these aspects are ignored, at least some of the time.

If temporality is included as an inherent part of our mental image, all these inherently temporal subjects would become a natural and constant consideration in the process of understanding and conceiving architecture. It would also mean that temporality is understood atmospherically, and thus empathetically.



# Temporal Empathy

Making temporality an inherent part of a mental image requires the process in which it is formed (experience) to be adjusted somehow. The place to do this is at the very beginning. The first step away from a closed state is a mindful physical presence, or awareness of our surroundings. In essence this awareness allows us to shape our factual understanding by shifting our attention to allow specific features of a thing to be sensed. As we've discussed while defining atmosphere, while our factual understanding is first processed by our subconscious, we are also able to shape it by shifting our focus. In this case, the characteristics of the thing that require our attention are of a temporal nature. If we manage this, the atmosphere that will come forth from this will also be of a temporal nature. Doing this will achieve two things: temporality becomes an inherent trait of things through our factual understanding.

## **Temporal Characteristics**

Then what does it mean for characteristics of a thing to be of a temporal nature? Characteristics of things convey a sense of temporality in many different ways, just as they convey spatiality. Understanding them only requires a different perspective on what we perceive. From sequences of rooms, to attentiveness to the path of the sun, to the moss on a wall. Characteristics like these can be described and



categorized in terms such as movement, cycles or growth. There are multitudes of ways such terms can be defined, often overlapping and interchangeable depending on which perspective one takes. While these can be insightful and clearly tied to different physical characteristics, there are more fundamental ways to describe them.

The first is to consider temporal characteristics of things as the disruption of our regular, innate sense of time. As beings we are just as much part of a temporal context as the things we perceive. We experience the flow of time through all sorts of processes. Some have to do with how we experience outside processes, such as the weather or the movement of things around us, and others with bodily processes, such as our bowel movement or sleep cycle<sup>22</sup>. So long as these processes take place in a way that we are accustomed to we are not aware of them. We have preconceived notions on how, in what speed and tempo, these processes should unfold. This can be seen as a sort of neutral sense of passing time. As soon as this sense is subverted however, we take notice. Temporal characteristics of things function in much the same way. We feel there is friction with our regular sense of passing time, and because of this we take notice.

Another way of putting it is to imagine the effect of temporal characteristics as creating a focus on certain points or areas in time. By experiencing them, we can identify a certain point or period on a larger timeline. Either singular, multiple or perhaps even repeating, they point our attention towards the past, future or present. This way of describing temporal characteristics puts a focus on the larger temporal context, and the distinction between the specific and the all-encompassing. Instead of describing the encounter with these characteristics as a friction with our regular sense of time, you could say that we simply experience processes which create a sense of time that we did not have before. They allow us to look at temporality in a way our former sense of time did not.

Though these views are slightly different, the basis is the same. The difference in perceiving temporal characteristics of things is about perceiving the changing (or unchanging) nature of a thing. Besides changing our perspective ourselves to perceive these characteristics, the characteristics themselves can also be so distinctly temporal that our perspective is drawn towards temporality by experiencing them. To put it differently, the more striking the temporal characteristics the more they make us aware of our sense of time. Either way, it makes it so that part of our factual understanding is based on temporal characteristics.

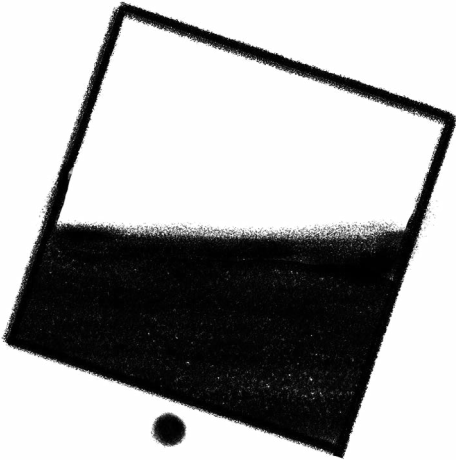
### **States**

Once our factual understanding of a thing includes a notion of temporality, it will also be incorporated into its atmosphere. At this point something very interesting takes place. The thing's temporal characteristics are realised in our mental image, which means our mental image that we create suddenly gains an extra dimension. Rather than only experiencing a single, timeless state, the factual understanding of the temporal nature of a thing simultaneously allows you to imagine all the other possible states a thing can find itself in. Rather than a single image, multiple images are understood at the same time. It is the experience of these states that allows for temporal empathy. The images that are formed – in the combination of our factual and atmospheric understanding– can be likened to memories. They are images of situations made by the mind, but instead of having actually lived them they are created by the imagination. This requires yet more of our capacity to imagine: without temporality we either directly experience the thing in front of us, or imagine a single representation at most. An added layer of temporality requires us to construct a multitude of images to experience.

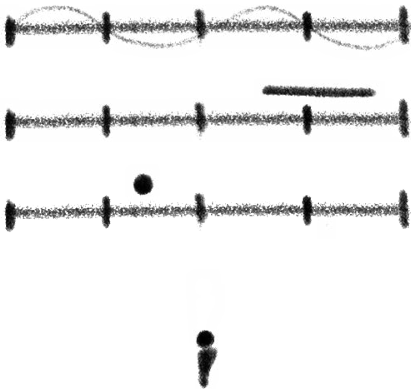
Our atmospheric understanding then also consists of a multitude of atmospheres. Because of the empathetic nature of our atmospheric understanding we do not only see these states as if we experience them in interaction, but we actually live them by becoming the other. Through this process we gain an awareness of the temporal nature of a thing, not just through thinking but also through feeling. By empathising with the temporal nature of a thing its temporality has been given personal and emotional weight.

Just as we do with empathy in a spatial sense, this empathy also lets us see a thing in a greater temporal context, as well as ourselves. Instead being able to place a thing on a line with only spatial context, we are able to place it in a field with the added dimension of time. A thing's own temporality is placed in our greater sense of time.

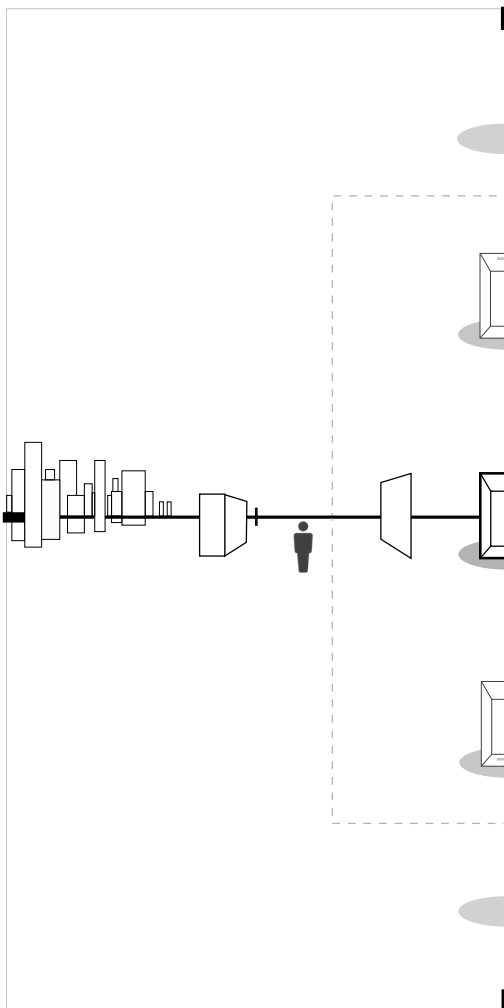
It is about the moss grown and yet to grow, the sunlight peering through a slit in the fence for just a moment, the wood swaying as a branch to the worn handrail from thousands of passing hands. As we recall our mental image and we imagine these things, they unfold into a story. As we live this story in our minds, we truly understand the temporal nature of things. We understand its existence in time as its own entity by both thinking and feeling, and by extension it also helps us to understand ourselves. This is temporal empathy.

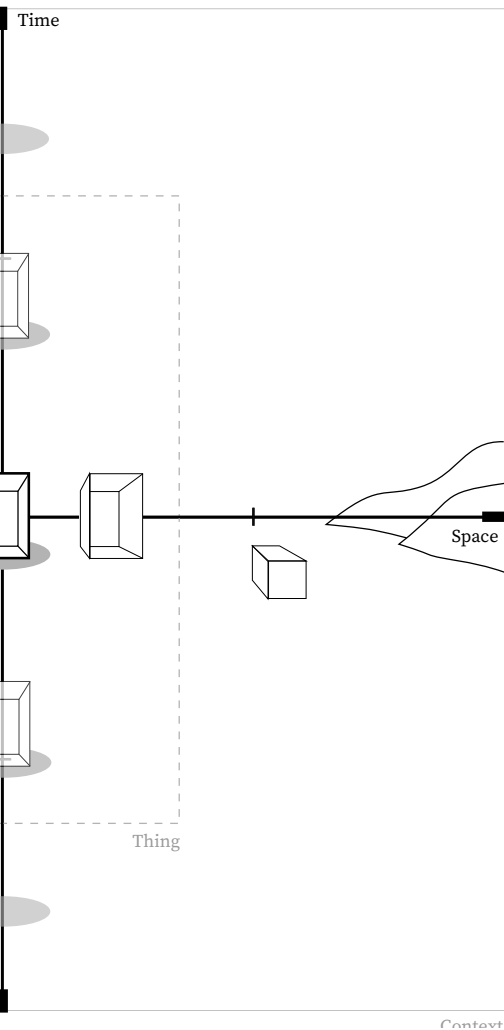


*Awareness of time can be created by experiencing an imbalance in our sense of time.*



*Awareness of time can be created by experiencing a focus on a specific moment or period in time*





Context

# Consequences

Now that the meaning and inner workings of temporal empathy has been made clear, the question remains on what the purpose of it all is. I think there are two ways to this.

In the first place, it offers a different point of view as an architect, or creators in a broader sense. Applying this way of understanding things to our creative process means that the nature of our design, as a representation of the eventual actual thing, will be more in line with reality. It is about the constant consideration of a multitude of questions. How will it be used? How will it change over the years? Where does everything come from and where will it go? Since we are ultimately aiming to not simply imagine architecture but have it be built, I would say this is something we should always be aiming for. In a practical sense this should also help preventing crucial aspects during the design process from being overlooked.

Next to this there is also the possibility of extending temporal empathy to others through the architecture we make. By exploring temporal empathy in words we can explicitly understand it and better apply it in our future experiences by shifting our focus. But just as things can be understood both as factual knowledge and through empathic experience, so can the idea of temporal empathy itself. If physical characteristics which invoke a clear temporality are more actively incorporated in designs,



others can gain an understanding of temporal empathy through them. An understanding of temporal empathy can inspire the shape our designs take, in turn shaping the understanding of those who experience it.

I feel that empathically understanding temporality elicits a certain care. It creates not only an understanding but also a concern for what we create. Not just as a static object, but as something that has a place in this world in time. We relate to the other by comparing them to ourselves, thus giving it the same amount of consideration we would spend on ourselves. Having temporal empathy does not directly change what or how we create. Decisions based on understanding it could take all manner of forms, and I have no intention of dictating what shape they should take. The only aim is to show that things can be seen in a different light. Buildings, spaces, materials, things; temporality is inherent to the essence of all of them. Though we've discussed things as being spatial or temporal in terms of experience, there is no actual division between them being either one or the other. They can be whatever, depending on what way you look at them. All that is needed is a shift in focus in our experience of things. In the end, temporal empathy is only a matter of perspective.





# Reflection

The process through which the idea of temporal empathy came to be has been interesting. From the beginning, this research started out not as an idea, but as a feeling. It was a feeling brought forth by different architectural experiences that, despite being very different, all seemed to be related to a certain awareness of time somehow. Working from the suspicion that there was an underlying concept relating all these experiences, more experiences were gathered, compared and reflected upon. Only after a solid foundation of thought had been established did any relevant literature come into play, again to make sense of what exactly was the meaning behind the original feeling. The entire process has been an attempt at understanding this feeling explicitly. Because of this I know that I have a much wider and deeper understanding of temporal empathy, while still feeling it just as much. In the end my factual understanding of temporal empathy has finally caught up to my atmospheric understanding.

This way of working definitely had its advantages. I would like to believe that, at the risk of trying to reinvent the wheel, developing thoughts freely from the ground up before relating them to existing theory allows for new perspectives to form. It allows for some truly fresh ideas to form instead of following preconceived notions. Staying close to the source of the fascination, being the examples gathered that brought forth a sense of temporal

empathy, also helped avoiding the loss of that which is hard to put into words. On the other hand, staying close to the initial idea meant that the scope of the research was quite large. At some point it became clear that there are two clear sections, those being empathy and temporality. Each of these is rich enough to serve as a graduation project on their own (though the exploration of empathy was a necessary step to accurately explain the experience of temporality). Because of this not every aspect of this research has been given as much attention as it might have deserved, increasing the density of the texts and running the risk of not explaining things clearly enough. You win some, you lose some. It would, however, be good to mention a couple of aspects which could be expanded:

-From the perspective of psychology the idea of mindful physical presence could be expanded upon. What is the difference between being and not being receptive to your surroundings, and in what way your perception can be influenced, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Concepts such as attention and priming come to mind. The same goes for the step from factual to atmospheric understanding as a process of the subconscious.

-Only mentioned briefly, there is a strong link between empathy and imagination. Whether they are equal, one is part of the other, or they depend on each other, understanding what the exact place of imagination is in this context requires further research. Due to the vast amount of associations the concept of imagination brings with it it is not a simple addition, but if the theory of understanding through feeling or empathy is to be further developed it is a necessary one.

-Though it has been barely referenced, there are plenty of ideas concerning temporality and the awareness of it, both in architecture (such as the Metabolist movement and Van

Eyck's place and occasion) and general philosophy. The empathetic part of temporal empathy has been thoroughly associated with existing literature. It would be only logical to do the same with the temporal part. It might be even more interesting to research these across different cultures, as interpretations of temporality vary widely between them. Concepts such as the focus and emotion related to the preciousness of passing moments described with *mono no aware* in Japanese culture, and the eternity and lack of separation between past, present and future described as the Dreaming in Aboriginal culture.

-It would also be interesting to take a closer look at different situations in architecture where a lack of temporal empathy played a major role. Some of these have only been mentioned briefly as movement, deterioration, lifespan, flexibility, the weather, but a few specific examples could help illustrate the point even better.

To make a clear distinction between Thoughts on temporal empathy and A feeling of temporal empathy, the use of examples throughout the essay is quite low. This strengthens the purpose of each; both parts offer a type of understanding the other does not. However, if the essay is to be expanded there could perhaps be place for more in order to allow for a more examples in a manner that does not overlap with the function of the collection.









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*ExploreLab 29  
Graduation Research  
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