

On Post-Catastrophe Atmospheres



German film director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau has beautifully represented the atmosphere of catastrophe. Screenshot of his movie "Faust", 1926.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty did not develop a formal theory of Atmospheres but his work on Phenomenology is one of the principal intellectual foundations upon which the theory of Atmospheres was later built, being Böhme's "Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces" the most influential work.

Böhme states that "the atmosphere of a city is quite simply the manner in which life takes place in it" adding that everything that cannot be conceived of as structure was shifted into the realm of interpretation, what fails to recognize that the era of representation has long since passed (Böhme, 2017: 77). He explains that in a multicultural world, our cities contain understood pictograms -a visual symbol that conveys meaning through its likeness to a physical object- "but no longer symbolisms understood by the general public. That means that what appeals to us in a city cannot be interpreted as a language but enters our disposition in the form of impressions" (Böhme, 2017: 77).

The approach to "affect" in social sciences and anthropology since the late 1990s has related the feelings, emotions and subjective experiences in terms of bodies in space. Since then, scholars began to introduce a wider understanding of the body as the basis for the study of affect, including human and non-human, material and immaterial entities, where a body can be anything, an animal, a body of sounds, a mind, an idea... (M. Schnegg, J. Bens, 2025). Then atmospheres can be transformed by changing the arrangement and characteristics of the elements that constitute them. Böhme states that our mood is modified by the qualities of the space in which we are; architectural forms, lighting, colors, materials, the atmosphere that architectural structures

radiate determine one's disposition in spaces or built environments through bodily sensing (Böhme, 2017: 141).



An interesting analogical diagram from Tobias Cohen's Ma'aseh Tuviyah (1708). "My Body is a Four-Story House". The human body is considered as a house, where every part is related to a room, like kitchen-stomach. Public Domain Review.org

The destructive power of humanity on nature has been defined as a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, where the sensing body becomes the medium through which environmental catastrophe is experienced, transforming urban destruction into an embodied atmosphere of collective memory loss, resilience and cultural transformation.

Urban destruction and negative atmospheres are deeply intertwined, whether driven by wars, natural catastrophes, degradation along the years... The physical collapse of homes and monuments leave behind a psychological vacuum described as "dark new age".

The traumatic experience causes changes in the person relationship to the world; it affects the person's perspective that now sees behind the veil of a negative atmosphere. The wreckage, the abandoned possessions, the remnants of the fallen ones, are a constant reminder that the city has become a hostile environment.

In a ruined city, a negative atmosphere or oppressive ambience is a tangible sense of hostility, decay, and trauma. Space carries an emotional and psychological weight that is hard to describe and represent, even when it reflects the objective qualities of the surrounding environment.

A latent perceptual construct is something that cannot be observed or measured directly, but whose existent is inferred from observable indicators, such as

- . Collective memory
- . Attachment to place
- . Cultural identity
- . Atmosphere of loss
- . Sense of belonging
- . Perception of continuity after a disaster

These constructs mediate the relationship between physical morphology and reconstruction decisions, allowing cultural and emotional dimensions of place that should be incorporated into urban recovery.



Palestinians collecting aid supplies in Gaza, October 2025. Photograph: Ramadan Abed/Reuters.
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