

Spatial Hardware and Software

Stand First:

In light of his visit in 2007 to the Documenta 12 art institution in Kassel, Germany, **Rochus Urban Hinkel** speculates on the reciprocity of 'spatial hardware' and 'spatial software' to create interior atmosphere. This essay traverses between the two as he takes us through the exhibition spaces housed in the temporary urban and industrial 'gallery' environment, Aue Pavilion.

(insert Fig 1 here)

Jean Baudrillard speculates in *The System of Objects* that where design is about the calculation of function, atmosphere is created through the manipulation of materials, forms and spaces. More importantly, atmosphere is the 'systematic cultural connotation at the level of objects'.¹ Objects and surfaces, form and light, material and colour are often described as the ingredients for the design of the interior. They are used to construct space, its functions and appearance. But how strong is their contribution towards the creation of an atmosphere? The temporal, ephemeral, intangible elements and sensations within interiors, together with cultural connotations, preconceived knowledge and personal memories, also factor in the formation of interior atmosphere. Often described as phenomenological, these influences attend to the experience of a perceiving subject open to a world of sensations. I call such atmospheric influences, 'spatial software' – a term more inclusive than the predetermined phenomenological definition with its assumptions about the fixity of the perceiving subject. If there is 'spatial software,' then we can presume there also must be 'spatial hardware', which pertains to what can be measured – the construction of the interior, the definition of boundaries, materials and details. Spatial software and spatial hardware are codependent and co-present; one does not mean much without the other, though their proportions vary depending on the specific interior under consideration.

(insert Fig 2 here)

I am at Documenta, an ephemeral contemporary art institution that is held as a quinquennial event. Inaugurated in 1955 as an addition to a federal garden show, it has taken over the German town of Kassel for the twelfth time. This year, a temporary greenhouse, the Aue Pavilion, appears prominently positioned on a field of grass in the Karlssaue Park opposite the baroque Orangerie. The artistic director of Documenta 12, Roger M Buegel, explains that the Aue Pavilion is a contemporary orangerie, not for housing exotic plants, but for protecting instead the symbolic value of art. The French architects of the original Aue Pavilion concept, Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, supply what is necessary for Documenta – more space. The Aue Pavilion is distinctive for its use of banal and industrial materials and details and its lack of pretension. A simple steel-post construction meets a rudimentary red bitumen floor, and the walls are clad in ribbed polycarbonate sheeting. This deployment of readily available materials and rudimentary details facilitates the inexpensive provision of a large volume. The pavilion's industrial appearance, as a counterpoint to the baroque ornamentation of the original Orangerie, plays with preconceived ideas of the greenhouse type and its associations with suburban garden centres. Placed in the context of Documenta, the 'greenhouse' is necessarily recontextualised as unexpected accommodation for a contemporary art exhibition. Furthermore, the historical and cultural context that is Documenta contributes to the spatial software that shapes the atmosphere of the Aue Pavilion. It must be remembered that the Aue Pavilion sits in relation to a series of other

exhibition venues all dedicated to the Documenta event, manifesting an atmosphere of festivity in Kassel for the period of a hundred days and nights.

(insert Fig 3 here)

(insert fig 4 here)

Buergel and his partner Ruth Noack, the curator of Documenta, write in the preface of the exhibition catalogue that 'the big exhibition has no form. More often than not exhibitions come with a theme or are dedicated to a particular artist, a certain era or style, however Documenta's inherent formlessness contradicts any such approach.'² Instead, three leitmotifs framed as questions open up a forum for debate: 'Is Modernity our Antiquity?'; 'What is bare life?'; and 'Education! What has to be done?'. Buergel and Noack avoid placing art in a curated field of meanings and interpretations. Instead, the work of the collected artists is meant to speak for itself in direct dialogue with the visitors who attend Documenta. The unobtrusive architecture of the Aue Pavilion facilitates this meeting place between art and visitor. Monumental gestures and novel formal expression, otherwise deployed to articulate an exclusive status for the art-object in the world of art markets or 'high culture,' have been avoided. The pavilion opens itself to encounter, and in terms of its architectural signs, demands little of the visitor except for an attention to the experience at hand.

Buergel critiques the contemporary art industry for manufacturing art that is detached from its viewers and its tendency to operate as spectacle and entertainment. He questions existing exhibition practice and places the encounter between art and the viewer in the centre of his aspirations for Documenta 12. This encounter is framed by interior space, and contributes to the concept of spatial atmosphere that I am forwarding here. As the Aue Pavilion was the only new building constructed for Documenta 12, it becomes the spatial articulation of Buergel's vision for potential encounters between art and audience, which, in turn, put questions of representation and interpretation aside. The pavilion could be seen as an anti-museum in that it offers an invitation to open dialogue and uninhibited engagement. In what way does this influence the interior atmosphere and the spatial experience?

On the interior of the pavilion the spatial hardware, all the material and structural signs of architecture, almost disappears. The spatial hardware is not interested in fine detail or expensive material; its task is to enclose an expansive volume given over to display and the possibility of different forms of encounter. The interior creates spaces of potential in which audience members can become participants in the curation and interpretation of art as they forge their own path between one cluster of work and another. In one sense the atmosphere created in the Aue Pavilion is not ready-made, but created in the midst of the milling people who gather to experience the art; it emerges where the interior, the audience and the art come together simultaneously.

(insert fig 5 here)

(insert fig 6 here)

(insert fig 7 here)

An analytical reading of the spatial hardware of the temporary pavilion quickly gives way to a more experiential apprehension of spatial software and how atmosphere is aroused between these two registers. There are subtle distinctions. For instance, the distribution of ancient Chinese chairs throughout the pavilion, a contribution by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, seem to rest between the art, the architecture and the spatial experience, [offering respite as a place to rest](#). The chairs form small circles suitable for groups of up to 20 people – an interior within the interior. As a gathering spot for guided tours, participants, even strangers, are encouraged to exchange their experiences and thoughts. There is empty space, where no art is evident, with empty walls.

The exterior skin and its interior curtained counterpart only offer enclosure, never a surface to exhibit or hang art. The art sits away from the pavilion's skin.

While the first impression of the pavilion's interior is of a massive, endlessly open space punctuated by loosely placed art, eventually the space narrows and I cross a threshold that offers a visual connection to the outside. A sonic experience, part of an art installation, also marks this transition. In the next part of the pavilion, partitions are more dominant and begin to organise a constant spatial flux between walls with art and empty walls. Relations between art works are set up in multiple ways. Enclosed for a while I forget the outside again, until a huge picture window reveals the baroque Orangerie. I am almost at the end of my progression through the Aue Pavilion. The open spaces inside the pavilion operate as an urban interior, similar to a public space or sphere, only enclosed. Smaller passages open up onto larger public squares, large art objects take me by surprise, and then smaller delights can be discovered around corners. Classes of chattering excitable school children pass by. Not afraid of running around or talking loudly, they too appear to be promenading a town square or boulevard. The pavilion creates a spatial envelope of peculiar humility, offering a social space in which everyone can perform a part in response to contemporary art.

(insert fig 8 here)

As it is a hot summer's day in Kassel, the climatized interior is well tempered; it is a pleasant place to be. The experience also benefits from the intense sunlight in July. A strong relation to natural light at certain junctures in the pavilion would transform when it is dark or raining outside, or simply overcast. These qualities, facilitated through the ephemera of spatial software make this interior a space where the experienced atmosphere constantly shifts, presenting different experiences for different visitors. The ephemeral qualities of the pavilion combine with the intellectual concepts behind the pavilion. The pavilion's spatial software achieves an unexpected affect on many of its visitors. Even if the pavilion does not convince everyone, it creates awareness of the role the interior plays in our experience of art. Though the spatial hardware, in the opinion of the architects, Lacaton and Vassal, has failed, success of another kind has been achieved. Though they were not happy that the pavilion had to become a hermetically sealed environment controlled by ungainly air-conditioning units visible on an approach from Karlshau Park, nevertheless the interior creates the potential for different experiences aroused in contact with the art.

Through the mingling of spatial software and spatial hardware, the failures and successes of the Aue Pavilion contribute towards an interior atmosphere. Time filters the residue of atmospheric effects such that some impressions remain more vivid in my mind, while others fade. [Memory, prior experience and knowledge of the serial Documenta events, discussions with others, even photography as an augmentation to memory and experience, continue to develop further layers to the interior atmosphere of the Aue Pavilion even once I have left Kassel far behind.](#) Atmosphere is a contemporary experience in real time, but it is also composed of the residual memories our past presence in an interior. And importantly atmosphere is an ongoing process of negotiation between the experienced, the remembered, the thought, the known, the analysed, the imagined as well as the forgotten. Atmosphere manifests as an ongoing state of flux, and that is what makes it so hard to grasp. It is not simply a singular moment of sensory apprehension; it is an ongoing relation to an interior that opens up a constant development and reiteration of unfolding experience.

Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans James Benedict, Verso (London, New York), 2005), p 49.
2. Roger M Buergele and Ruth Noack, 'Preface', *Documenta 12 Catalogue*, Taschen (Kassel), 2007, p 11.

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Captions:

Fig 1 IMG_0346_rh.tif

~~Anne Lacaton and Jean-Philippe Vassal, Aue Pavillon, Documenta 12, Kassel, Germany, 2007~~

Documenta's temporary Aue Pavillon was situated in the Karlsaue Park opposite the historical Orangerie. The historical Orangerie was built in 1711 by the architect Hofbaumeister Johann Conrad Giesler and was once a summer residence for the landgrave Karl.

Fig 2 IMG_0367_rh.tif

The interior is reminiscent of an arbour-like, shady garden alcove; where trees or climbing plants might be expected there are instead diaphanous curtains that obscure the light through layers.

Fig 3 Aue_Pavillon_14_jz.tif

Art works are loosely composed in no apparent hierarchy about this spacious interior. (Artwork: Alice Creischer, *Mach doch heute Lobby*, 1998–2007.)

Fig 4 IMG0275_rh.tif

The interior is modulated by different intensities of natural and artificial light. Translucent wall panels form the physical and visual boundary between interior and exterior.

Fig 5 Aue_Pavillon_17_jz.tif

Discrete steel-profile posts, set in a regular rhythm, are the only visible structural elements and plunge directly into the dirt-red bitumen floor. (Artwork: Gerwald Rockenschaub, *Klassenzimmer*, 2007.)

Fig 6 Aue_Pavillon_04_jz.tif

Despite the architects' original intention, the greenhouse that is the Aue pavilion is an internalised, sealed and fully air-conditioned space. This was part of Anne Lacaton's and Jean Philippe Vassal's dispute with Documenta 12. They retracted their involvement before the Aue Pavilion was completed.

Fig 7 IMG0226_rh.tif

Towards the deeper recesses of the greenhouse, the light darkens and artificial lights focused on points of attention augment the space; the exterior recedes further, becoming increasingly muffled.

Fig 8 Aue-Pavillon_02_jz.tif

At the end of the journey through the interior of the Aue pavilion the view opens up to the outside and the historical Orangerie.