

Lesson Six

Atmosphere and Feeling

This lesson and the following lessons deal with ephemeral or intangible aspects that influence the way we take and read photographs. Atmosphere and feeling directly relate to that which is visually depicted in a photograph, and also play a major role in how we perceive place.

Sitting here writing at my desk, I look out my third story window at blue sky and green leaves. Every so often the breeze picks up and tosses the leaves into motion. I look away from the computer screen to happily watch. My joy in watching the leaves comes from memories of storms approaching during my childhood in Wisconsin. In my mind's eye I see thunderclouds rolling above a lake and feel the air turn humid and cool. But here in Oregon, in the Willamette Valley where I write, thunderstorms are a rarity. This wind does not mean the advance of dark clouds, it is simply a lucky wind in the mild mannered weather of this valley.

I could take a photograph of this scene and present it to you, here:

You see green leaves, blue sky, tree trunk, window sill and some random objects. If I took it at a certain moment in time, with a slower shutter speed, you would see the blur of the leaves in the wind. You also see how the light strikes the leaves. But you do not see my thoughts or feelings. I have to tell you those. You may also have your own unique thoughts and feelings based on your own memories.

I am remembering as I experience this scene. The phenomena of the atmosphere (the wind and light) works on my memory. I react on multiple levels. I see, feel and create a narrative of memory and places which are significant in my life. Memory is the basis for my self image, my self image controls the way I perceive the world around me. Landscape architects such



By the Author, 2003.

Memory is the basis of self identity.

Kevin Lynch. *What Time is This Place?* 1972.

as Kevin Lynch and Anne Spirn, and geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan often refer to the connection between memory and identity in terms of how we experience the landscape. In this lesson we will discuss: 1) what atmosphere is and how its physical manifestations can inform our design process if we pay attention to them; 2) how atmosphere influences how a place is perceived and how those perceptions evoke particular feelings; and 3) how feelings and memories influence our perception of a place and how we view and take photographs of that place.

What is atmosphere?

When we talk about atmosphere it is not the kind that you look for in a good restaurant. (Although it is related, as we will find out.) Instead I am talking about phenomena associated with:

Light

Weather

Climate

Twilight, shadow, gentle breezes, thunderstorms, monsoon seasons, Santa Anna winds, cold fronts, snow, and subtropical climates are all examples of atmosphere. Each of these examples, though easily catalogued under one of the three categories, influences all aspects of each category. For example regular snow fall in Upstate New York influences the color of light and indicates the type of climate for that region.

Ray K. Metzker. *City Whispers*, Chicago, 1982.

Light, Weather and Climate, OH MY!

The quality of light (its color, intensity and angle), combined with its interaction with physical objects, plays the lead role in photography. As we discussed in

the beginning, without light there is no photograph. Photography is all about recording light. It is that light which makes images on film. And it is the quality of light that many photographers seek out, even if their subject matter does not directly relate to issues of light.

The quality of natural light is controlled by weather and climate. Fay Godwin photographs the English landscape in its clouded glory. The photograph presents a real sense of how weather creates the visual qualities of the landscape -- hills and sky covered by thick rain clouds. The light is diffuse and hazy. In turn





Fay Godwin. Rock and Stac Pollaidh above Kirkaig River. 1979.

you should realize that you are having an emotional reaction to this photograph. You may be remembering something, feeling something about a past experience: longing for a far away place, feeling confused and disoriented, or remembering feeling cold and damp after being caught in the rain. These are individual reactions based on personal experience. Some of these reactions may also be based on a collective understanding of a place taught to us at some earlier time in life: e.g. England is cold and damp in the winter.

As many of us have learned, this cloudy weather is typical in England, a result of its climate. To gain a better understanding of this place we must learn how climate controls the everyday flow of life, instead of relying on our basic assumptions about this place. Actively photographing a landscape with these issues in mind reveals its unique qualities. For example, if we are doing watershed planning for this area, to exclusively take “sunny day” photographs of this place

would be a misrepresentation of it to others and yourself (even if you find those sunny day photographs cheerier or more interesting). But if the photographer concentrated on representing the typical weather cycles of this area the designers would have a much better perception of how weather and climate impact the hydrocycles of this watershed. Photographing atmosphere raises consciousness about how climate and weather impact the functionality of the place you are designing.

Traces

Often atmosphere is taken for granted -- a cloudy day, a sunny day, a rainy day. Look closely and there are unique patterns and events occurring. Atmosphere leaves traces on the landscape. Documenting and reading these traces tells us about the history of a place beyond what we personally able experience in an afternoon visit. This is similar to examining traces through the physical manifestations of change over time (as discussed in Lesson Five: Time).

Looking at this grove of trees we see how the wind has sculpted their branches over time. By making certain deductions we can intuit things about the site that may not be evident otherwise: this grove of trees is probably a wind break, and

Fay Godwin. Barbary Castle Clump, spring, 1974.



judging by the size of the trees, a wind break of some age. The trees' permanent windblown look tells us the dominant direction of the wind, even though we can't see the wind in a photograph, or feel it on a visit during a calm day. From this we can start asking: "Why is there a wind break here? What is the land use? What is the history of this place? What is the value of this windbreak?" By taking this photograph we can tell others about the impact of wind on this landscape and remind ourselves that it needs to be taken into account when designing.



Here is another example of unseen atmospheric actions controlling a landscape. Dunes (in Michigan, or anywhere) change and move at varying rates. Their actions are controlled by wind and rain. Dunes grow to be stories tall and then move and diminish, their sand deposited elsewhere by wind and rain. The dunes cover and reveal what is buried by these climatic actions. This photograph, taken in one moment in time, tells the story of how these trees were once completely covered by sand. Now the dune has moved and revealed the snags. Recognizing and understanding these slow moving cycles is critical for planning and designing for such places. The dunes will always move and change. To ignore that fact and build on an unstable dune system is both shortsighted and irresponsible. A photograph or series of photographs about dunes helps others understand that these places change, even though they look stable and static. The change is unstoppable because there will always be wind and rain driving this slow-moving system. This slow dynamism and the physical patterns it creates can also act as inspiration for design.

Gary Irving. Ghost Forest, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Michigan. 1999.

The particular regional landscape should be addressed by the individual design process. The sun arcs through the sky, and so a morning scene is different from an evening scene. And a winter scene is not a summer scene. This is a great fascination -- that the landscape is constantly changing not only from the weather and seasons, but also from the sprouting seedlings pushing up youthful growth.
AE Bye. *Moods in the Landscape*. 1999.



Art Wolf. Frost on Window Pane, Seattle Washington. 1997.

Ephemeral and intermittent traces of atmosphere are equally important. Morning frost on a windshield tells us about the season, the temperature fluctuations throughout a day, and the humidity in the air. If the frost lasts into the late morning, we know this is a colder climate and has different constraints and needs than a place where that frost burns off by 8:30 am. Also, these traces of atmosphere can be extremely inspirational in their form, color and patterns. This everyday occurrence can become deeply inspirational if we just look a little harder. Photographing

these ephemeral events helps us look and think more deeply about phenomena we often take for granted. As we discussed in Lesson Two, these photographs can act as the first stage of abstracting and augmenting these forms for design. The swirls, branches, crystals and formation process of this frost can lead to the development of all kinds of design forms and metaphors.

AE Bye and Moods in the Landscape

The landscape architect AE Bye uses photography to study and distil forms in the landscape. He uses these photographic studies as inspirations for design. Bye's designs exemplify a sensitivity to the subtle qualities of "natural" landscapes. He abstracts and reworks forms in the native landscape, instead of simply mimicking them.

Bye's photographic work explores how atmosphere's relationship with physical forms in the landscape creates particular and unique moods. *Moods in the Landscape* is a photographic catalogue of these relationships.

AE Bye. Three moods in the landscape. 1999.



Why does something seen evoke an emotional response?

Flipping through *Moods in the Landscape*, or the photo essays in *In Response to Place*, we each feel certain unique sets of emotions. Similarly, when we walk through the world, be it down a noisy street or in a lush forest, we experience feelings evoked by our interaction with an immediate environment. Why does this happen? What is the connection between that which is seen and that which is felt?

Bye's goal is to address this question in his work. Looking at how atmosphere interacts with physical forms Bye attempts to document certain situations that evoke certain moods. He looks directly at the connection between atmosphere and form and how those visual relationships play on our psyche. Importantly, Bye acknowledges that "mood is subjective" and that multiple people will have differing and varying responses to his photographs.

Feelings and psychological associations

But really, what is going on? Feelings are manifestations of visually perceiving physical relationships and making conscious or unconscious associations with those relationships. These associations have been created over time in the mind and body by a diverse set of experiences. These experiences can be organized into a loose set of psychological association categories:

memory

personal experience

collective cultural norms

myth and symbol (both universal and particular)

Memory and personal experience are unique to each individual. Each person remembers and experiences events and situations in her own way, based on a multitude of physical and psychological systems and relationship. **Memory** is experience we keep stored in our conscious and unconscious, and at times are able to recall and re-experience. **Personal experience** manifests itself through memory, but also through the unconscious and automatic physical responses conditioned by our immediate surroundings.

For example, when I look at this photograph by Karen Halverson I see the garden hose, what looks like a maple tree, and a white farm house in the background. The color of the light and shadows as well as the fullness of the leaves on the trees signals that it is summer. I am reminded of (remember) a small farm a few houses down from our family cottage in Wisconsin. I remember sounds,

I have tried to capture and identify moods in landscape by studying color, light, shadow, textures, movement by wind, weather conditions, and seasons, and the individual characteristics of a particular environment. The photographs [in Moods in the Landscape] and their captions are intended as lessons in "seeing" landscapes and as challenges to designers to design appropriately and, if possible, to incorporate moods into their landscape designs. If a certain environment has a strong central condition, a design could be developed around the mood evoked by that condition.

AE Bye. *Moods in the Landscape*. 1999.



smells and the feeling of humid air on my skin. I am compelled to unravel the garden hose and begin watering, remembering all of the hours I spent watering my mother's garden at the cottage.

Looking closer, I see that the maple tree is actually a liquid amber tree and the grape vine is hardy and mature. These two details tell me this is not a photograph from the upper-midwest. I have learned and remember that neither of these plants thrive in cold weather conditions. Though I am compelled to remember the midwest, I know this photo was taken in another region, California, from these

clues and the accompanying text. But I still can't help feeling fondness and longing for the place which this photograph causes me to remember.

You may have a totally different emotional response to this photograph. If you grew up in another geographic region, like the desert southwest, Hawaii, or Kansai Prefecture, Japan your response could be totally different from mine. You may feel no familiarity or personal connection to that which is depicted in this photograph. Or you may simply respond differently based on your own personal experiences and memories.

Collective cultural norms and **myth and symbol** are shared associations established by groups of people. These groups can be small and localized, like a collective community (such as an ashram or a rock climbers' camp), or huge and world wide, like a religious following (such as Buddhism or Islam). What constitutes these groups is a set of shared values, beliefs and community agreements. It is these three things which form and dictate collective cultural norms and myth and symbol.

The United States is an example of one large group with smaller sub groups (a nation with a diverse set of regions and states). In theory the Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights and Constitution are documents that articulate shared values, beliefs and community agreements for citizens of the United States. These combined with our capitalist economy create a set of collective cultural norms and easily identifiable myths and symbols. Freedom and prosperity are cultural norms. (I am free to write this book and prosper from any profits that may come from it.) Symbols that represent these values are: the bald eagle, the stars and stripes, amber waves of grain, \$\$, and the Statue of Liberty. Myths that perpetuate these values are: "I cannot tell a lie ... I chopped down the cherry tree", Horatio Algier rags-to-riches stories, Paul Bunyon, Paul Revere, "the promised land" and the tablets Lady Liberty holds "give me your tired, your hungry, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free . . ."

We learn these cultural norms, myths and symbols in school, on television, in print media like newspapers and magazines, and from relatives and friends through shared oral histories. Though these values, beliefs and symbols may not accurately represent the present state of the nation, they still consciously and subconsciously control the way we read and react to particular situations. Myths are often false or unattainable, yet they still control our expectations about freedom and prosperity.



Jan Staller. Trash
Television, New Jersey.
1997.

TV and the American Myth

Looking at Jan Staller's photograph "Trash Television" will help us unpack how cultural norms and myth and symbol control the way we read, and in this case feel about, a photographic image.

The first reaction might be "what an odd photograph." That odd feeling is created by the color of the light (atmosphere) and the disjointed and illogical relationships (composition and viewpoint) in the photograph. Staller purposely skews the color of light through very long exposures (many minutes). The colors

look unreal to our eyes and give a feeling of disorientation or oddness. We also wonder, “what is this tv doing here, where is here?” We are taught that tv’s are found in houses, not empty fields next to industrial sites. Thus the disorientation felt when many of us look at this photograph.

The internal context, or that which is depicted in the photograph, is the primary visual force and thus emotional source for the viewer. There is also a set of associations that can be made regarding the external context of the photograph. This external context is created by cultural norms and myth and symbol.

The title “Trash Television” is both literal and figurative. This tv is obviously literally trash because its appearance signals certain messages to the viewer. This tv is relatively old, still in a wooden cabinet, circa 1970’s and early 1980’s. It looks tattered and worn. The picture tube is dirty and blank. We can call it “abandoned” because its location in an empty field signals the cultural idea of abandonment. Abandonment in the English language connotes rejection, unwanted, disposable, trash.

Trash also refers to the glut of disposable programming found on television and relates to the history of its influence in American culture. This history is external context that can be applied to the reading of this photograph.

The television is a technological development that radically changed the way humans perceive and interact with the world. The power of the visual image (vs. the spoken or written word) skyrocketed, and by the 1970’s the tv became a door (for almost every American) into worlds that could never otherwise be experienced: zebras on the savanna, the surface of the moon, the depths of the ocean, busy market places around the world.

In today’s American culture the tv can literally show you anything you want via broadcast or video rental. It could be considered one of the ultimate achievements of industrialization and capitalism. Television culture, or the culture created by television, also produces a lot of “trash” or fluff -- pure entertainment without any depth. The visual image has become like candy, disposable, meaningless and for pure base entertainment. Most Americans are aware of this perception of television, and in many ways television broadcasts constantly perpetuate this idea of trash tv. We have been conditioned in our society to accept this as part of television culture. In other words trash tv has become a cultural norm.

Staller's photograph can be read as a critique of the disposable nature of televised images. The placement of this abandoned television in a truly sublime industrial landscape turns the tv into a strange and unfamiliar object. Because it is out of context (i.e. not in a living room) it gains this feeling of otherness, or oddness. The red light emanating from the screen amplifies this feeling. The tv looks like some strange technological oracle. Or an alien, or a time machine, each of which symbolize a whole other set of associations. These associations and the objects which signal these associations are all created by culture -- they are all ideas and feelings that we are taught to think about and feel when viewing the signifying object.

The TV is also a symbol and myth. It symbolizes both the virtues of technological advancement and the disposable mentality of American capitalistic society. The technological developments and cultural acceptance of television have created myths about: America's technological superiority ("a tv in every home") in disseminating information to the masses; how tv is the best and fastest way to get information (politicians watching CNN for the most up-to-date-information); tv as the drug for the masses, distracting and filling our heads with meaningless information. We may apply any or all of these ideas to the reading of this photograph. Again, this is external context we apply to our reading of this photograph. The external context associated with cultural norms and myth and symbol are often triggered by initial feelings towards an image.

Unpacking feelings in design

By paying attention to how feelings and psychological associations affect our perceptions of a photographic image we can better understand how we take photographs. Just as each of us has unique feelings and psychological reactions while viewing an image we also apply our feelings and psychological reactions to how we photograph a place. By paying attention to your feelings and perceptions about a place you can become more conscious of the photographic process. Asking yourself "why am I drawn to this particular area?" or "why am I shooting this place in this particular way?" is the first step into bringing our often unconscious reactions to the surface.

Looking more closely at these reactions to a place helps us analyse our own biases. In turn, acknowledging personal biases about a place may help each of us move beyond these biases and engage in a deeper and more inclusive study and

Our experience of any landscape through the senses is inseparable from the social and psychological context of the experience.
David E. Sopher. "The Landscape of Home: Myth, Experience, Social Meaning." *On the Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*. 1979.

design process for the site.

For instance, while taking photographs of the Highline competition held Spring 2003, I unconsciously did not document a very important part of the site context, the West Side Highway. Why? Because I was repelled by it. As a six lane on grade highway during a wintery grey March day I found it threatening and ugly. I didn't take a single photo of it, yet it runs right next to the northern section of the Highline.



By the Author. The Highline. 2003

I didn't realize I had left such an important piece of visual information out until it was too late. I presented my photographs to the studio that entered the competition. Students asked "what does the West Side Highway look like?" "What are the street crossings like?" "What is the view?" I had nothing to show them. I left that very important visual piece of information out simply because I did not like it.

If I had stopped myself that day, despite the icy wind and my wet socks, and asked myself “Anne, what are you taking photographs of and why?” I would have much more likely come to the realization that my dislike for the West Side Highway translated into not taking pictures of it. Then I would have taken pictures of it. Lots of pictures.

If a whole room of people hadn’t asked me about the West Side Highway I may have never understood its importance to the design for the Highline. Revisiting my photographs I would have focused on the surrounding buildings and neighborhoods, of which I had copious photos. I may never have addressed the highway’s noise, views or pedestrian connections closely associated with the Highline’s proposal as a pedestrian way.

The moral of this story: *Be aware of how your personal perceptions and feelings are controlling the way you photograph and design for a site.*

In addition, be aware of this issue when looking at someone else’s photographs. Similarly, don’t assume someone else’s photos are showing you all you need to know. Just as your biases influence the way you photograph, that other person’s biases control the way he photographs. Two people can produce two very different sets of photographs for the same site.

The first step.

The first step to understanding how all of these factors (atmosphere and feeling) come into play is through consciously photographing for these issues. The following assignment proposes a few ways to do this: Take a series of photographs of atmosphere and then write personal reactions to the photos. Walk around the design site and pay attention to your feelings and document those feelings through photographs. Keep notes about your feelings and the photos that represent those feelings. Take a list of words, such as the one found in AE Bye’s *Moods in the Landscape*, and try to find what visual relationships represent those words to you. All the while think about how and why certain physical relationships manifest these feelings.

Primary:

Rubin Rainey. "Introduction" *Moods in the Landscape*. A E Bye. Spacemaker Press. 1999. p. 10-23.

A.E. Bye. "Moods in the Landscape" *Moods in the Landscape*. A E Bye. Spacemaker Press. 1999. p. 26-32.

Secondary:

Appleton, Jay. "Behaviour and the Environment." *The Experience of Landscape*.

Tuan, Yi Fu. "Culture, Experience and Environmental Attitudes." *Topophilia*. Colombia University Press. New York. 1974. p. 59-74.

Tuan, Yi Fu. "Environment, Perception and World Views." *Topophilia*. Colombia University Press. New York. 1974. p. 75-91.

Tertiary:

Barths, Roland. Chapters 4-8. *Camera Lucida*. Hill and Wang. New York. 1981. p. 9-21.

Radway, Janet. *Reading the Romance : women, patriarchy, and popular literature*. University of North Carolina Press. 1984.

Also see writing on "Reader Response Theory."

Assignment Six

Atmosphere and Feeling

At this point we are transitioning into the representation of ephemeral and psychological aspects of a site. Atmosphere is everything associated with weather, climate and light. Atmosphere can be quantitatively recorded and analysed, but it also has a huge impact on how people perceive a place. Documenting weather, climate and light can be done at multiple scales. Also, looking at atmosphere is one way of representing time and change.

Feeling expands on the issues explored with atmosphere. Multiple physical aspects of a place influence the way we feel about a place. Our feelings, or psychological reactions to a place are subjective, as are the photographs we make.

For this week's assignment you will document the atmosphere and feeling of your site. You should look for the physical manifestations that you think influence the feeling of the place. Remember, these reactions are subjective and people may or may not react to these physical manifestations in the same way.

An alternative way to embark on this assignment is to choose twenty words from AE Bye's *Moods in the Landscape* and seek out and photograph places that evoke these feelings in the landscape.

Please pin up Four photos that you think most successfully represent the feeling of your site. You may collage two representations if you like.

Journal Six

Atmosphere and Feeling

What were you thinking/ feeling as you were taking photos?

What new thing(s) did you notice? Why?

What kinds of physical objects and relationships did you document?

How did the above influence your feelings about the site?

How do your feelings towards your site influence how you photograph the site
and how your design for the site?

How might AE Bye's "cataloging" of images and feelings be useful for your own
design process?