

Designing Atmospheres: The Pedagogical Approach of Peter Zumthor

Isabel Potworowski

Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT: How can the design of atmospheres be taught? How can it avoid the vagueness and superficiality at times associated with this concept? This paper describes the pedagogical approach of an architect for whom atmosphere is a central concern: Peter Zumthor. While his architecture is well known, little has been written about his teaching at the Academy of Architecture – Università della Svizzera italiana (USI-ARC) between 1996 and 2007. The paper analyzes the documents of Zumthor’s teaching and highlights three aspects of designing atmospheres: analyzing and reproducing emotionally significant memories of atmospheres, documenting observed atmospheres, and imagining and building atmospheres. Lessons for the future of architectural pedagogy include: working with ‘real’ construction materials to develop an awareness of their sensory qualities, using personal memories and experiences as starting points for design, forming a clear intention for atmosphere and material qualities at the beginning of the design process, and designing atmospheres not merely as aesthetic experiences, but as backgrounds for social life.

KEYWORDS: Atmosphere, materials, memory, imagination, pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Architectural education is continuously evolving in order to prepare students better for the changing realities of professional practice – to work within them, to critique them, and to improve them. These changing realities include projects of increasing complexity, the climate emergency, social justice challenges, and evolving technologies and digital practices (Sanderson and Stone 2022). The role of the architect is also shifting from a designer or master builder to a coordinator of multiple efforts. Approaches to architectural pedagogy are adapting, for instance with live projects, community-engaged design-build studios, and complex, real-world design assignments (ibid). However, design teaching still often emphasizes the talent of the individual designer and the formal, artistic aspect of architecture, overlooking the collaborative and social dimensions (Salama 2021).

The design of atmospheres may at first seem to perpetuate this overly artistic approach to architectural pedagogy. Atmosphere has been described as an ephemeral and theatrical sensuous surface effect that architects show in their drawings through glowing or blurred edges, but that cannot realistically be predicted or controlled (Wigley 1998). Its appeal to the senses can seem to avoid intellectual and critical engagement with buildings (Wegerhoff 2016), and to overlook contemporary social issues (Campbell 2004). However, this paper argues that the design of atmospheres is concerned with tangible material qualities, that the pre-reflective experience of sensuous atmosphere supports rather than opposes critical engagement, and that atmosphere is an inseparable part of the social dimension of the built environment.

The relevance of atmospheres in architectural pedagogy is demonstrated by examining the work of an architect for whom this concept is a central concern: Peter Zumthor. While his architecture is well known, little has been written about his teaching at the Academy of Architecture – Università della Svizzera italiana (hereafter referred to as ‘Academy’ or as USI-ARC) in Mendrisio between 1996 and 2007, with the exception of recent scholarship by Brazilian architect and scholar Rafael De Conti Lorentz (2021). An examination of the records of Zumthor’s teaching in the Academy archives reveals approaches to teaching the design of atmospheres that can enrich the future of architectural pedagogy.

This paper is structured in three sections. The first introduces the notion of atmosphere in the built environment. The second introduces Zumthor’s design teaching at the Academy, describing two core principles of his pedagogical approach – phenomenology and what he calls “scientific intuition” – and draws parallels between these principles and his architectural practice. The third section describes selected assignments that Zumthor gave his students, presenting three aspects of designing atmospheres: (1) remembering atmospheres, (2) observing atmospheres, and (3) imagining and building atmospheres. The conclusion formulates lessons for architectural pedagogy.

1.0 ATMOSPHERE

Atmosphere is that which relates the perceiving subject with the sensory qualities of the environment. German phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz (1928 – 2021) describes atmospheres as “affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods” (Böhme 2017, chap.1). For instance, the atmosphere of a room may be oppressive, and that of

a valley may be joyful. Schmitz influenced German philosopher Gernot Böhme (1937 – 2022), who defines atmosphere as that which “mediates objective factors of the environment with aesthetic feelings of a human being,” or with one’s “bodily feeling in that environment” (Böhme 2017, Introduction). It is both objective and subjective. For example, in stage design, a specific atmosphere is created by using particular sounds, lighting, materials, colours, objects, signs, and spatial arrangements (Ibid).

Atmosphere plays a role in the socio-cultural aspect of the built environment because it affects place attachment and the experience of place identity. The emotional dimension of architecture affects how we remember the events that take place there (Hornstein 2011), and subsequently the identity and meaning that a place acquires for us. According to Mexican-Canadian architectural historian Alberto Pérez-Gómez, emotions emerge as responses to the physical environment, at a pre-reflective level (Pérez-Gómez 2016). According to him, atmospheres attune us to the shared mood of an environment, making us feel like participants in it and in a larger whole. Atmosphere is part of a phenomenological approach to the study of spatial experience that informs the study and pedagogy of place and placemaking (Seamon 2023). Spatial atmospheres mediate our affective relation to spaces, in turn shaping the social relations and processes that take place there.

Atmosphere is multi-sensorial rather than having to do with form, style or image (Pérez-Gómez 2016). Formal and stylistic concerns dominate an ocular-centric approach to architecture (Pallasmaa 2005), a tendency that has been affected by the proliferation of visual imagery (ibid), not least in architectural education. The precedents that students consult are too often limited to photographs and renderings of buildings – often by well-known, canonical architects – that are lifted from their cultural, geographic and socio-political context, rather than engaged experiences of architectural spaces.¹ How can a more multi-sensory approach to architecture be taught?

2.0 ATELIER ZUMTHOR AT THE USI-ARC

2.1 Atelier Zumthor: a phenomenological approach based on “scientific intuition”

The Università della Svizzera italiana (USI) was founded in October 1995 and consisted of the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio and the Faculties of Economics and Communication in Lugano (De Conti Lorentz 2021, 25). The Academy of Architecture welcomed its first cohort of 104 students the following fall (idem, 35). It offered a six-year degree, split into two cycles: a two-year cycle, the second year of which is dedicated to external internships, followed by a four-year cycle, the last year of which is dedicated to the diploma project (Mendrisio Academy Press 1997, 1998, and 1999). In the 1996/97, 1997/98, and 1999/2000 academic years, the incoming cohort was split into three sections of first-year design studios, taught by Mario Botta (director of the school), Aurelio Galfetti, and Peter Zumthor (De Conti Lorentz 2021, 35). During these three years, Zumthor had classes of 20 - 40 students, with three or four assistants (USI-ARC archive).² His three first-year studios were conceived as a continuous didactical structure and consisted of 19 assignments, titled A – S. Starting in the 2000/2001 academic year until 2006/2007, after which he left the school, Zumthor alternatively taught third-, fourth-, and fifth-year studios, and directed diploma projects. This second cycle of his teaching included assignments T – Z as well as other thematic studios. Alongside these studios, Zumthor taught a “Special Course” for more advanced students in the years 1996-97 and 1997-98, as well as a design studio at the Harvard GSD in the spring of 1999.

Zumthor was 53 years old when he began teaching at the Academy, and was completing the Therme Vals and the Kunsthaus Bregenz. His teaching period coincided with the development of the Kolumba Museum, the Bruder Klaus Chapel, and other projects that made increasing use of large-scale material tests and models, approaches that he was also teaching at the Academy.³ It was shortly after he left the Academy in 2007 that he earned the Pritzker prize in 2009.

Zumthor’s first-year studios taught the “foundations of composition” based on “the perception of the world through the five senses” (Mendrisio Academy Press 1997, 98). The studio intended to offer “a new, personal approach” to architectural education (ibid).

The student[s] abilities to perceive the world through [their] five senses was challenged in a conscious, phenomenological approach. The student[s] biography was examined “scientifically”. [Their] early experience with the “constructed” universe was recalled from [their] memory (Mendrisio Academy Press 1998, 116).

This phenomenological and personal approach to design teaching stressed the relation between “individuality” and “collectivity,” and the relevance of a “personal approach” to design spaces that “serve a common need of use or beauty” (Mendrisio Academy Press 1999, 152).

The proposal document outlining Zumthor’s upper-year (second cycle) studios elaborates on these concepts, describing the main didactic method as “scientific intuition”:

Knowledge and environment are an unanimous estate to profit from with dedication, but nothing without the individual intelligence: intuition, imagination, decision and action.

Scientific intuition emphasizes eagerly the individual process of “acquiring” or “conquering” knowledge over the academic process of “transmitting” or “conveying” knowledge, in other words, the process of “making” knowledge over the process of getting “already made” knowledge, or even, the process of “desiring” knowledge over the knowledge itself (USI-ARC archive).

Scientific intuition, as practiced in Zumthor’s studios, involves the “desiring” of knowledge based on emotionally significant memories and observations, experienced intuitively and subsequently analyzed to understand and reproduce their sensory qualities. It is a process of recognizing emotionally significant atmospheres, then dissecting and reassembling them to produce new ones.

This didactic approach reflects Zumthor's own design process, which he calls phenomenological (Zumthor and Lending 2018, 30). It works as follows:

We look first; we feel first; and then, [...] we start to analyze our feelings, not the other way around (Zumthor 2015).

This approach is based on trusting intuition and on avoiding "rationaliz[ing] and [...] explaining too early in the process" (Zumthor and Lending 2018, 36-38).

2.2 The USI-ARC archives

The records of Zumthor's teaching on which this paper is based are in the USI-ARC archive. They were first studied by Lorentz in his 2021 dissertation *Teaching Architecture: Peter Zumthor and the foundations of composition*, which examines the first three years of Zumthor's teaching. Almost nothing remains of student's physical work; however, student drawings and models are documented in over 4,000 slides. There are annual teaching reports published by the school that include course descriptions and a small selection of student work. There are also binders of material relating to his teaching from 1996 until 2002. They contain assignment outlines, studio schedules, reflections by the teaching team about the success of selected exercises, student descriptions of their exercise, and internal and external faxed correspondence. According to Lorentz, documentation was interrupted in 2002 most likely because Zumthor's main assistant, the Spanish architect Miguel Kreisler, who was primarily responsible for documentation, left the atelier that same year (De Conti Lorenz 2021, 15-17). After 2002, when Ivan Beer was the main assistant, three books were published with documentation of individual studios: *Ciao Chiasso* (2005), *Make it Typical! A small atlas of architectural atmospheres* (2005), and *Bauen am Rhein* (2008).

3.0 DESIGNING ATMOSPHERES

Atmospheres affect how places are experienced, used, and acquire a sense of meaning and identity. They are experienced pre-reflectively, at the level of intuition and feeling, and depend more on sensory qualities than on form. Accordingly, Zumthor's pedagogy centers on personal intuition and on sensory experience. Following these principles, students are taught to design atmospheres as a background for social life.

3.1 Remembering atmospheres

For Zumthor, memories of atmospheres are reservoirs for designing (Zumthor 2010, 8). As he describes in the course outline for the Harvard GSD studio, designing is for him

more re-discovering than inventing; it means to re-configure, to re-cognize, to re-assemble impressions and emotions which [he has] experienced and now consciously [tries] to recall (USI-ARC archive).

By re-assembling remembered atmospheres, he forms a mental image of the atmosphere of the future building, or what he calls an "inner image" (Zumthor 2010, 67). As Zumthor writes in the USI-ARC 1999-2000 curriculum description, to begin designing, one needs a concrete, sensuous inner image of the material qualities of the building, related to place and use (USI-ARC archive). During this process, the sensuous quality of the inner image helps him "not to get lost in arid, abstract theoretical assumptions" and "not to fall in love with the graphic quality of drawings" (Zumthor 2010, 67). He taught students to examine their remembered atmospheres, identifying physical qualities that can inform a sensuous inner image.

For Assignment A, "The personal construction module," each student chose a material that they either liked or disliked, because of a remembered personal experience (USI-ARC archive). They used that material to build a 36x18x18cm block that would convey the qualities of their memory. Students built blocks from materials such as Lego, beeswax, comic books, and match boxes. One student recalled a memory of sitting in a patted-down area in a field of tall grass, and built a grass block. Some blocks, however, were deemed not to be precise enough; for instance, a student spoke about a memory of the smell of wet asphalt, but the asphalt block that they made was already dry. Another student had a memory of how the dry plaster on house facades interacts with light, but their plaster block was too fresh and humid to show the same effect (ibid).

The first assignment of the following first-year cohort dealt with representing a remembered space. The outline for Assignment H, "A space that looks at the landscape of my youth," reads:

Our memory is rich in images. We remember certain images. Some of them move like the images of a film. Others are still and silent. We find ourselves in a space, quietly looking at a landscape or looking inside another space. We recall exactly the space where we were, and remember exactly the view, what we saw then, as if it was a multicolored image or the scene of a movie. [...] It has become an inner image that we can summon at any time (De Conti Lorenz 2021, 108).

Students had to reproduce such a personal image in a 1:20 model using primarily clay, then photograph it so that it appeared as realistic and as similar to their memory as possible. "And something of the atmosphere of the moment comes back" (ibid).



Figure 1: Assignment H “A space that looks at the landscape of my youth” (1997). From left to right: work by Gustavo Gulino, Andrea Huber, Aymone Poletti, and Mohammed Nabil. Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

Assignment K, “The typical space,” pertains to memories of “typical” spaces such as a kitchen, greenhouse, veranda, or barbershop, ones that remain impressed in our memory precisely because of their non-particularity. Typicity, Zumthor writes in the assignment outline, refers to the common properties in a kitchen or a greenhouse, based on how it is used, despite individual variations. Such spaces, according to him, are “part of our collective memory” (USI-ARC archive).⁴ Students documented the atmosphere of a typical space by arranging three or four materials in a 35x45x25cm box. Among the documented spaces were a U-Bahn wagon, shown with a black box, red imitation leather, a metal rod, and plastic imitation wood veneer; a movie theatre, shown with a black box containing pieces of linoleum, red velvet, and acoustic panel; an apiary as a yellow box with earth, a piece of thin copper, a pile of broken honeycombs, and beeswax (ibid). This exercise addresses the collective dimension of atmospheres. It suggests that, if students compose atmospheres based on such typical spaces, then their atmospheres might speak to a broader public.

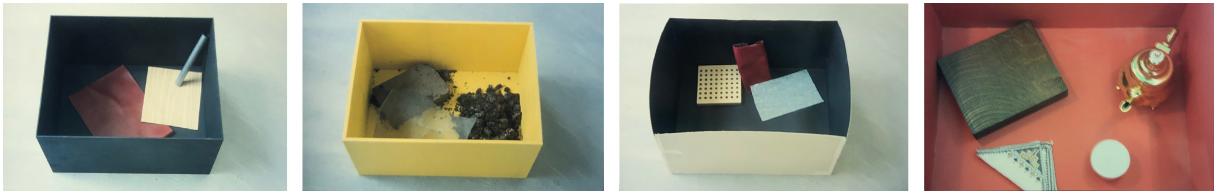


Figure 2: Assignment K “The typical space” (1998), representing, from left to right: an U-bahn wagon (Marisia Conn), an apiary (Sandra Giovanacci), a movie theatre (Maria Elena Salati), and a living room (Mohammed Nabil). Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

Assignment K also taught students to describe atmosphere through language. Their descriptions were to include only the sensory properties of the space, its use, lighting, sounds, scents, etc.; they should be “objective,” not including “feelings.” They need not include full sentences; “rows of words” would suffice (ibid). Such objective description, which Zumthor would also prescribe for later assignments, maintains the focus on sensory qualities and excludes anything that is not physical: ideas, feelings, concepts.

For Assignment O “A miniature,” students produced an image that captures the “essential quality” of a remembered place in which the sun or rain was a determining component. It could be a collage, painting, photo, or real material, but had to be “precise and concentrated,” “essential and minimal,” as the assignment outline describes (USI-ARC archive). Images included a blurred roofscape seen through rain-covered glass, framed feathers, and a photo of light on the surface of water.



Figure 3: Assignment O “A miniature” (1998). From left to right: work by Chiara Del Corso, Julian von der Schulenburg, and Jela Herring. Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

These first-year assignments teach students to identify the sensory qualities of atmospheres, to draw from their memories, and to convey this atmosphere to others through materials, model photos, collages, and language.

3.2 Observing atmospheres

When beginning a project, Zumthor says that he observes the site to form an impression of its atmosphere. He “concentrate[s] his powers of imagination” on the site, especially on its sensorial qualities and physical traces of

history (Zumthor 2010, 36-37). Observing the site in this way gives him an emotional impression that depends on feeling and intuition (Zumthor 2023). The site models built in his Atelier use materials that capture his impression of the atmosphere of a place, such as sand, coal, stone, clay, or coloured wax.

This phenomenological approach to observing the site is described in the assignment T, “Atlas,” part of the 1999-2000 fourth-year studio that Zumthor taught with the London-based architects Adam Caruso and Peter St. John (USI-ARC archive). Students documented twenty buildings that had an “anonymous” appearance and that had been inhabited for many years (Mendrisio Academy Press 2001, 258) – “the normal buildings amongst which we live our lives,” as phrased in the assignment outline. “Just as when a child sees a chair, table, or room for the first time,” students were instructed

to observe a building by going beyond [architectural] visual conventions and entering into a profound relationship with it, establishing a significant emotional rapport with [their] own work. Thus, architecture can be considered a way of looking at the world with renewed intensity (Mendrisio Academy Press 2001, 258).

“Really seeing” one’s surroundings requires, according to the outline, questioning conventional representations such as plans, sections, and perspectives, which “tend to exaggerate the importance of formal composition” (USI-ARC archive). Instead, students should use means of representation that can “expose the violence of a new window opening inserted into a heavy brick wall,” or that can show the traces of inhabitation in a small house. They should record the buildings through photographs, full-scale drawings, and written descriptions, “emphasizing what is observable and real” (ibid).

For the 2000-2001 fifth-year assignment W “Portrait of Pavia,” Zumthor instructed students in the assignment outline to observe a village in the Italian province of Pavia “with a childlike gaze, free from perceptual prejudices” (USI-ARC archive). They should focus on sensory qualities:

[L]ines, patterns, surfaces, textures and masses; weight, temperature, sound, movement and light are patiently observed as if for the first time. The approach is driven by emotional confidence (ibid).

Students were asked to observe four aspects of their assigned village:

the phenomenology of water; motorways, railways and paths; the vegetation, fabric and masses; the solid bodies of built or tellurian objects (ibid).

Based on their observations, documented through photographs, diagrams and written descriptions, students made wooden models of their assigned sites (ibid). They should bring out the qualities they observed; for instance, the group investigating Cascina Crocedue built the ground out of horizontally stacked layers of wood to evoke the linear patterns left by tractors on the farmland (ibid).

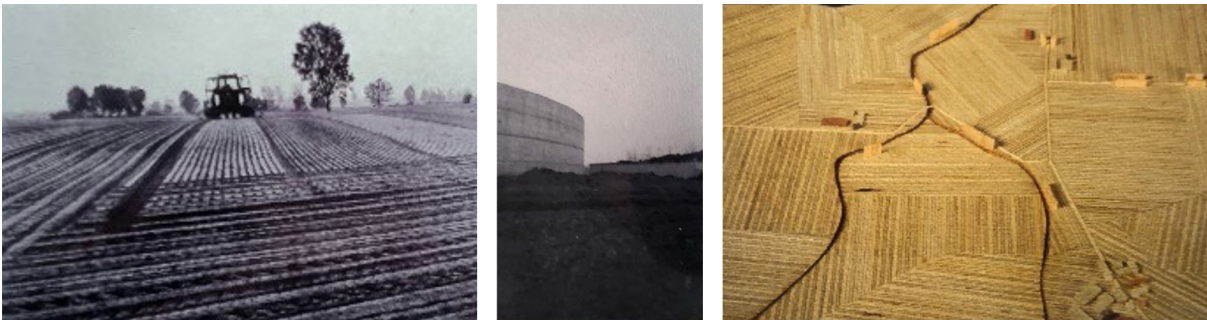


Figure 4: Assignment W “Portrait of Pavia” (2000). Photos and model of Cascina Crocedue (students unknown). Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

Zumthor proposed a similar approach to site study for the 2003-2004 fourth-year studio “Solutions for the double periphery,” this time more explicitly prompting students to consider their emotional response to the site. He calls this approach “energy modelling” or “emotional relief” (Mendrisio Academy Press 2005, 189).

We seek the things that move us; the emotional face of the territory, identity, intensity, special atmospheres that allow themselves to be perceived and defined physically, which can be experienced in the place. We understand the body of this development [...] as an organism clinging to the terrain, a cellular tissue that lives, changes, dies and is renewed continually. We want to learn to understand and render visible the structure, the construction, the character of this body (ibid).

This “emotional relief” was applied to the study of Chiasso, an urban area on the “double periphery” of Milan and the Swiss border, which is said to be a merely functional urban agglomeration, lacking character and identity. It is a “typical” border condition town (idem, 188). Zumthor prompted the students to observe the life of the site: where the crowded places are, the pedestrian passages, abandoned places, night life, and where immigrants spend their time; the physical, sensorial aspects: where water can be heard, where there are enclosures, and where the scars in the ground are; and what *moves* the students: where they feel small, their favourite roofs, the unique beauties of Chiasso, what they find surprising (Zumthor 2005, 10). These questions help students to *empathize* with Chiasso and to form an emotionally significant impression of it, based on which they built models of the site using materials that emphasized this impression, such as clay, metal plates, and wire.

Observing and empathizing with the life of a place also requires spending time there. The first-year assignment F, “In situ,” the first assignment of the second semester, began with the entire class observing the sunrise from the nearby Monte Generoso. In the first portion of the assignment, “F1: First encounter,” students were divided into small groups and assigned a site in or near Mendrisio. The outline instructs them first individually and personally to “encounter” the place, only subsequently exchanging observations with the group. For “F2: The time of place,” students chose one viewpoint from which to photograph their site. They made one photo and one 10-second sound

recording every hour, for 24 hours. Then, based on their observations, for “F3: Remodelling the site,” each group built a physical model that would capture the essential elements of their experience of that place. Only as a last step, in “F4: Analysis of the place,” students produced scaled orthographic drawings and diagrams of their sites.

These assignments teach a way of looking anew at the landscape and built environment, at its textures, material qualities, and at aspects that are not easily represented in scaled orthographic drawings. They teach students to empathize with the site, with its life, forming a personal emotionally significant impression of it. This impression is captured and conveyed to others through models, notes, sketches, and photographs.

3.3 Imagining and building atmospheres

In Zumthor’s teaching, the design of an intervention grows out of a personal engagement with the site, as described above, and is conceived as a setting for – or a spatial mood for – the life that takes place there.

For example, assignment F “In situ” was followed by assignment G, “1:1 intervention.” The aim of the project was to render visible the particularity of the place – its topography, function, form, history, meaning – through means such as water, light, materials, and sounds. Each group produced a setting for a social event, for instance: covering an area of the Vecchio Borgo (old town) with four cubic meters of black gravel and installing four large white umbrellas for a tasting of self-made gazpacho; a sound installation in the nearby Chiesa Rossa that would give a voice to the old church, with crates of cherries around the site; an installation of incandescent lights, candles, cups, and a selection of wines at the canteen on campus; projecting four 4000 watt theatrical lights at the former Saceba cement factory and seated audience at 10:40pm, then turning them off to experience the darkness. The interventions were atmospheres for events.



Figure 5: Assignment G “1:1 intervention” (1997) in the Vecchio Borgo, Mendrisio (students: Sabine Andrey, Silvia Carnelli, Rada Fornara, Annette Göhringer, Laura Perolini, and Elena Saricu). Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

Applying this approach to the design of buildings, Zumthor taught a spring 1999 studio at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in which students composed a sequence of atmospheres for a house without designing its overall geometry; the studio was titled “The House Without a Form.”

This design exercise stops at the delicate line just before form begins to emerge out of the process of sensual composition. If the composition works, it will be easy to imagine the resulting architectural forms – in fact, they will almost be there already (USI-ARC archive).

Rather than drawing plans and sections of the house, students made 1:1 collage-like installations or projections showing the physical, sensuous qualities of a sequence of seven rooms, accompanied by “strictly descriptive words” of physical qualities (ibid). Students chose sites with which they already had a personal connection and showed moments of how they might be experienced, for instance a living room window that looks onto the Mississippi river, or a house that opens onto a hilly landscape of red earth in Cyprus, so that one could feel the earth.

Reflecting on this studio later that year in the document “Curriculum 1999-2000”, Zumthor remarked that, while the Harvard GSD students had previously designed large architectural projects, presenting them in scaled orthographic drawings and models, they only had a vague idea of how their building would feel and how it would be physically assembled (USI-ARC archive). Supposedly, he writes, there is insufficient time in school to consider these aspects, and students expect that they will learn them in practice.

But I wonder: Is that true? Aren’t the images of a building’s specific physical presence, the images of material construction, the atmosphere of the rooms [...] part and parcel of the basic concept of any design? Doesn’t an awareness of these things belong to the beginning and not the end of the design process (ibid)?

He continued this approach the following semester at USI-ARC, for the fourth-year assignment U: “Hotel.” Students first described atmospheres through photographs, collages, and written descriptions, but this time took the design process further, making materially evocative conceptual models and then drawing floorplans of the hotel. Students’ initial descriptions were of the façade and interior materials, lighting, furnishing, and sounds. For the last part of the assignment, students made 1:20 models of one room in their hotel and photographed it, so that the photo would appear realistic. These models resemble ones that Zumthor’s Atelier builds, populating them with furniture, fixtures, objects, vegetation, and cut-out photos of people. Showing how spaces are occupied helps him to imagine the life that might take place there (Brand 2017, 228).



Figure 6: Assignment U “Hotel” (1999), 1:20 interior model photos by (left to right) Catherine Dietschi, Filippo Colombo, and Luca Bazzi. Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

Imagining and representing buildings as a setting for life is also how Zumthor taught the design of a single architectural element in the first-year assignment I: “A window for my friends, to read by the light of the lake” (USI-ARC archive). Using no more than three materials, each student built a 1:1 fragment of a window and photographed it by the nearby lake in Riva San Vitale. The photos were to show only the window fragment, the water and the sky, and an open book or part of it. Students only had to build the portion of the window that would appear in the photograph. The photos were printed in black and white, at 60 x 90 cm, attached to a hard support, and were considered successful if they provoked a longing to read by that window.

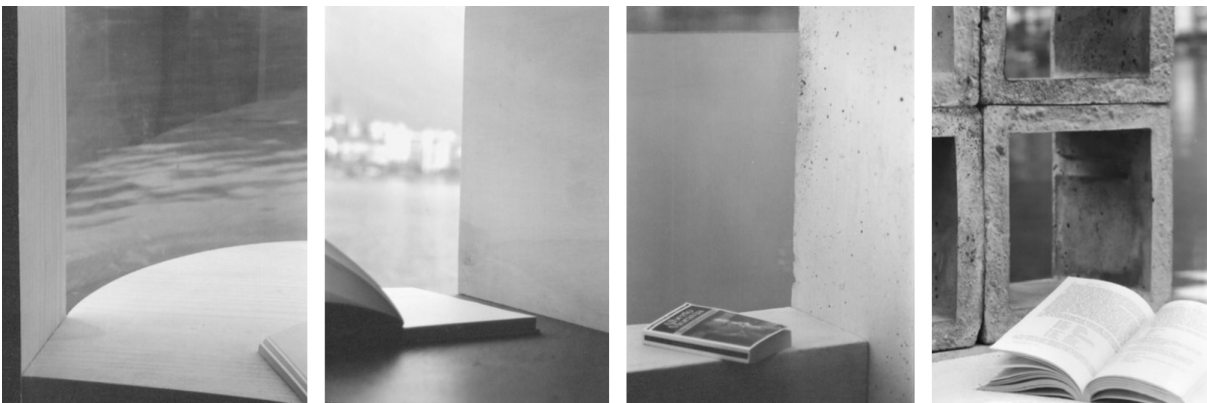


Figure 7: Assignment I “A window for my friends, to read by the light of the lake” (1997). From left to right: work by Marta Monti, Beatrice Morelli, Andrea Huber, and Federica Ballerini. Source: USI-ARC archive. By kind permission of USI-ARC. All rights reserved.

These assignments show that atmospheres are settings for the life that takes place there. Zumthor guides students in this direction by formulating an intention for these atmospheres, describing them in terms of specific materials and multi-sensory experience, before designing the form.

CONCLUSION

Zumthor taught his students to have an awareness and appreciation for the sensory qualities of the environment and the emotional impact of materials, as well as how to form an intention for these qualities at the beginning of the process. His teaching reflects his own phenomenological design approach based on remembering emotionally significant atmospheres, forming an impression of the site, representing it through evocative models, and forming a strong sensuous inner image of the atmosphere of the future building to guide the design process. His teaching approach suggests the following lessons for the future of architectural pedagogy:

First: working with the sensory qualities of ‘real’ materials. Students can develop an attention to the sensory qualities of materials and spaces by working with ‘real’ construction materials, and through assignments that address sensory qualities: sight (especially the interaction between materials and light), sound, touch, and smell. Such assignments also teach students to take notice of, and to become sensitive to, these qualities in the built environment, so that they can later make use of them in their designs.

Second: starting from personal memory, experience, and feeling. Students can learn to use their personal felt experience to discover the material qualities that influence atmosphere, such as sight, sound, smell, and textures, which can inform their designs for new atmospheres. Drawing from personal memory can valorize everyday environments and the diversity of student experiences. Moreover, atmospheres are experienced above all emotionally, intuitively, and pre-reflectively. Students can be helped in designing atmospheres if they recognize their felt experience, trust it, and then seek to understand it. Personal feeling and experience can be a starting point for critical thinking. This approach is also student-centered, encouraging them to discover knowledge through experience rather than taking in already-made knowledge, as Zumthor describes with the term “scientific intuition.” This approach also allows students to become aware of collectively lived atmospheres.

Third: imagining the atmosphere at the beginning of the design process. When students begin designing by describing the sensory experience of their building, through visual means as well as through language, then this imagined atmosphere can guide the development of the form. Representing and describing the intended

atmosphere can be part of a collaborative process, as it is in Zumthor's practice, where the inner image develops in dialogue with collaborators and clients.

Fourth: designing atmosphere as a background for social life. The design of atmospheres can be an integral part of the event through which people experience a space, and can contribute to the social dimension of environments. The designing and building of sensorially rich atmospheres can attune people to their environment and give emotional significance to the life and activities that unfold there.

REFERENCES

- Böhme, Gernot. 2017. *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*. Edited by Jean-Paul Thibaud. Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Space. Abingdon: Routledge. E-book.
- Botta, Mario. 2021. *Tracce di una scuola: Accademia di architettura a Mendrisio, 1996-2021*. Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press.
- Brand, Anthony R. 2017. *Touching Architecture: A Felt-Phenomenology of Affective Atmospheres & Embodied Encounters*. PhD diss., University of Auckland.
- Campbell, Hugh. 2004. "Zumthor's Trousers – A Critical Guide." *Building Material* 12: 48–51.
- De Conti Lorentz, Rafael. 2021. *Teaching Architecture: Peter Zumthor and the Foundations of Composition*. PhD diss., Università della Svizzera Italiana and Università IUAV di Venezia.
- Goffi, Federica, Isabel Potworowski, and Kristin Washco, eds. 2025. *(Un)Common Precedents in Architectural Design*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Hornstein, Shelley. 2016. *Losing Site: Architecture, Memory and Place*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. 2005. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy.
- Pérez Gómez, Alberto. 2016. *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Zumthor, Peter. 2015. "Peter Zumthor Interview: Different Kinds of Silence." Interview by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. <https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/peter-zumthor-different-kinds-silence>.
- Mendrisio Academy Press. 1997. *Report on Teaching Activities 1996/1997*. Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press.
- Mendrisio Academy Press. 1998. *Report on Teaching Activities 1997/1998*. Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press.
- Mendrisio Academy Press. 1999. *Report on Teaching Activities 1998/1999*. Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press.
- Mendrisio Academy Press. 2001. *Report on Teaching Activities 1999/2000*. Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press.
- Mendrisio Academy Press. 2005. *Report on Teaching Activities 2003/2004*. Mendrisio: Mendrisio Academy Press.
- Salama, Ashraf M. 2021. *Transformative Pedagogy in Architecture and Urbanism*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Sanderson, Laura, and Sally Stone, eds. 2022. *Emerging Practices in Architectural Pedagogy: Accommodating an Uncertain Future*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Seamon, David. 2023. *Phenomenological Perspectives on Place, Lifeworlds, and Lived Emplacement: The Selected Writings of David Seamon*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Wegerhoff, Erik. 2016. "Neue Sinnlichkeit: Postcritical Issues Regarding an Architecture of Sensuousness." *Future Anterior* 13 (2): 118–37.
- Wigley, Mark. 1998. "The Architecture of Atmosphere." *Daidalos* 68: 18–27.
- Zumthor, Peter. 2005. "Atelier Peter Zumthor: Rilievo Emozionale; Progetti Su Chiasso." Interview by Solange Vernò and Massimo Daviddi. *Chiasso So!*
- Zumthor, Peter. 2010. *Thinking Architecture*. Translated by Maureen Oberli-Turner and Catherine Schelbert. 3rd ed. Basel: Birkhäuser.
- Zumthor, Peter, and Mari Lending. 2018. *A Feeling of History*. Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess.

ENDNOTES

¹ "This remark about precedents is based on the book *(Un)Common Precedents in Architectural Design* that the author co-edited with Federica Goffi and Kristin Washco (Goffi, Potworowski, and Washco 2025).

² The documents at the USI-ARC are not part of an indexed archive; they are stored in binders and unlabelled boxes. Documents from the archives, including images of student work and assignment outlines, are therefore named in the text and referenced as "USI-ARC archive." The copyrights of the documents and student work are owned by the school, Academy of Architecture – Università della Svizzera italiana (USI-ARC).

³ For a further explanation of the correspondences between Zumthor's practice and teaching, especially in relation to representation practices, see De Conti Lorentz (2021, 250-255).

⁴ This and subsequent citations from assignment outlines A to O are translated by the author from the original Italian. See also the translations of Zumthor's first-year assignments in De Conti Lorentz (2021, 90-133).