Staging atmosphere in design anthropology

- And taking interventionist speculations to a sensory level

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Intention

• Introducing the concept of atmosphere as a way to...
  ◆ Understand and unfold the effect, impact and possibilities of design methods
  ◆ Emphasize a focus on the human bodily presence among researchers and interlocutors
  ◆ Make room for further debate and reflection
Starting point

Design anthropology is a study that works around the relationship between human and material (subject and object)
• Traditionally this relationship has been studied through a focus on praxis

• But it seems as if there is more to the relationship than that ...
“I really like the living room here (...) For me it is not just a room to sit and read the paper or drink coffee together... It is also a place where I can relax and free my mind snuggled up in a soft carpet, looking out at the lake while hearing the crackles of the fireplace... In some way it makes me feel safe.”

(Relative at a hospice in Denmark)
Design can not only encourage a certain DOing
It can also encourage a certain FEELing
How can we understand this?

“The tactility of the social”
- The study of feelings, sensations and moods -
Translating concepts

• From the social tactility between humans
  (anthropology – subject/subject)

• To the social tactility between human and design
  (design anthropology – subject/object)
The concept of atmosphere

• “Atmospheres are in fact characteristic manifestations of the co-presence of subject and object.” (Böhme 1998:113)

• “(T)hings articulate their presence through qualities – conceived as ecstasies (...) (and) they are sensed in bodily presence by human beings.” (Böhme 1993:112)
Ecstasies

The presence of the thing – its extension
“My perception is not a sum of visual, tactile and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being: I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once.”

(Merleau-Ponty in Pallasmaa 2012:23).
Doing and Feeling design

Designs not only have an impact on what we DO...

It shapes our experience and how we FEEL by addressing all our senses at once
Summing up and zooming out

• If we understand design anthropology as the study of the relationship between human and design...

• The concept of atmosphere tells us to understand the relationship as a co-presence, created by the human multiple sensation of ecstasies...
Addressing design interventions

1. Create a shared atmospheric space around subject(s) and object
   → Setting the mood-scene for the design intervention
2. Create a co-presence between subject and object

→ Creating a foundation of involvement and ownership towards the design
3. Addressing, activating and including the human bodily presence as a whole

→ Creating a design that speaks to the informant in a multisensory manner
Thus...

• An atmospheric lens can shed new light on the relationship between human and design
• ... and interventionist speculations in design anthropology
An atmospheric lens...

- Sets the human bodily presence in the center of design interventions and methods
- Forms a tool to unfold the understanding of praxis
- And makes room for informing design on a sensory level
In return...

Usage of the lens demands a certain level of sensory awareness and reflection from both researchers and interlocutors in the invention of design.
Further debate and reflection

“So many other entities are now knocking on the door of our collectives. Is it absurd to want to retool our disciplines to become sensitive again to the noise they make and to try to find a place for them?”

(Latour 2005)