

# Architecture in Play: Architectonics of Atmosphere

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## INTRODUCTION

Architecture and videogames both involve multi-dimensional and spatial experiences. Creating atmospheric images and orchestrating movements in space are common languages of these two realms. In order to produce atmosphere and mood, architects organize space by defining its shape and form, dimensions and proportions, limits and boundaries, light and illumination, tectonics and material. While architecture produces its ambiance by employing sensorial qualities, videogames assemble similar strategies to define their levels of engagement, enhance immersion, and suspend the sense of disbelief. It can be argued that atmosphere resides at the core of spatial experiences in both disciplines. This presentation informs the experiential and atmospheric aspects of architectural spaces translated into videogame worlds and highlights the possibilities of interdisciplinary knowledge exchange.

In his seminal book, *The Image of the City* (1960), the architect and urban theorist Kevin Lynch demands that “we need an environment which is not simply well organized, but poetic and symbolic as well” (p. 119). Atmospheres reinforce the relationship between image and imagination. Architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa explains that “lasting architectural experiences consist of lived and embodied images” (2011, p. 11). The fundamental premise is that atmosphere, ambiance, and mood ‘authenticate’ our interactions with the world. Be it physical or virtual, the profound impact of the atmosphere is perceived as a whole (Pallasmaa et al, 2012, p. 238).<sup>3</sup> Both architecture and videogames have been held up as Gesamtkunstwerk – total works of art – which bring together the strengths of all kinds of artistic forms, including the spatial medium. As such, both disciplines benefit from greater dialogue.

Many videogame designers draw inspiration from, and incorporate, architectural characteristics into their level designs and world-building. They utilize architecture to produce eccentric, imaginative, and even impossible spaces. The fundamental premise is that atmosphere, ambiance, and mood ‘authenticate’ the game world.<sup>1</sup> However, based on a series of interviews conducted for my PhD research, it becomes evident that while designers hold an interest in architectural subjects to ensure the intended experience in the game world, the conducted academic research on this relationship is limited.

Videogames do not only incorporate digital attributes. Rather, they require an in-depth comprehension of architectural techniques and methods. Therefore, my ongoing PhD research investigates the atmospheric and experiential aspects of architectural spaces

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in virtual worlds of games. The presentation intends to inform game designers and academics in the field of game studies about the architectural acts that can contribute to the virtual environment design in videogames to transfer knowledge between the two disciplines of architecture and videogame design.

Providing some theoretical background from Juhani Pallasmaa, the architect and architectural theorist, and case studies from the works of Peter Zumthor, the Swiss architect, the talk present examples of ways that architects generate and sustain atmosphere and ambiance in their works through architectural visual language. Specifically, this presentation aims to highlight the utilization of three attributes which increase atmosphere and authenticity in physical architectural spaces:

1. **Formal dimension:** this refers to the architectural form, geometry, shape, dimensions, scale, symmetry, rhythm, and pattern. By considering the formal aspects during the design processes, the arrangement, orchestration, and orientations of architectural components shape a cohesive configuration where the form integrates with the experience.
2. **Tectonics:** this aspect includes relevant arrangements of materials, textures, colours, joints and assemblages of parts. In the context of tectonics, we can understand the intricate interplay within the masonry fabric, the structural harmony, and the strategic arrangement of materials to evoke an aesthetic effect.
3. **Dramatic structures:** this section highlights the meaning of narrative in architectural spaces, arranging the sequences of spaces and spatial experiences in relation to spatial characteristics such as light, sound, and time.

Focusing on the characteristics of the atmosphere employed by architects in their designs, the objective of this talk is to bridge the gap and expand the shared vocabulary between architects and videogame designers.

## BIO

Dorsa is an architect, researcher, former canoe sprint athlete in Iran national team and amateur gamer with a passion for world-building and visual storytelling in videogames media. She received her Bachelor's degree in architecture from Azad University in Iran and finished her double Master degree in Italy from Politecnico di Milano and Alta Scuola Politecnica in architecture in 2018. She is now a researcher candidate at the University of Melbourne and her research interest sits between disciplines of architecture and game studies.

## ENDNOTE

1 See for example Felix Zimmermann, "Historical Digital Games as Experiences How Atmospheres of the Past Satisfy Needs of Authenticity," *Game|World|Architectonics* (Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing, 2021) in which he argues about authentic spaces.

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