the residence constitutes a relaxing and comfortable ‘backstage’ (Goffman 1959: 114) to their public life. However, it may also materialize in a more directly protective manner – for example, when people conceive of the walls of their residence as a physical bulwark against actual or perceived threats (violence, assaults, etc.) from outside. Sloterdijk’s emphasis on the immunological nature of spheres entails that his perspective is more attuned to the protective dimension (Borch 2013b). Indeed, he describes a residence as ‘immunologically speaking, a defensive measure designed to demarcate a sphere of well-being from invaders and other agents of unwellness’ (2004: 535).

The emphasis on the defensive side of architecture finds an equivalent expression in Sloterdijk’s fascination with the American designer and architect Richard Buckminster Fuller. What particularly interests Sloterdijk about Buckminster Fuller’s work is the latter’s mobile architecture. In the late 1920s, Buckminster Fuller famously invented the Dymaxion House, a new type of ‘industrially-to-be-produced, service-rented, air-deliverable, scientific dwelling machines’ (Buckminster Fuller 1981: 138; see also Sieden 1989: 271–85). These fully-equipped, easily-erected, easily-extended, mobile one-family houses were seen by Buckminster Fuller as a means of ensuring affordable housing for all parts of the population, as well as of making workers in particular less vulnerable to the vagaries of the economy – the vulnerability consisting of being hired in one (perhaps even remote) place, buying a house there, losing one’s job in times of economic decline, and finding oneself stuck, with little flexibility with regard to selling the house and moving elsewhere. Much like a snail shell, the Dymaxion house could be disassembled, moved, and reconstructed at a new and more prosperous location. In Sloterdijk’s terms, such mobile architectures amounts to a singular sphere which, cast in the big mould of social foam, offers immunity, not so much through thick protective walls, but rather via its mobility, i.e. its high adaptability and independence of a particular locale.

This is but one type of architecture examined by Sloterdijk. Other related analyses focus on more permanent forms of architecture that give material expression to the foamy modality of the present. Such architectures include, in generic form, apartment blocks in which...
Conclusion As this essay has demonstrated, there are different ways to address and conceptualise the relation between architecture and atmospheres. Common to the perspectives discussed above is the notion that architectural atmospheres should be analysed with a view to power and politics. In other words, an atmospheric approach to architecture does not simply amount to a call for a particular type of (multisensory) aesthetic awareness; it also amounts to taking seriously that (and how) architecture affects us, and that (and how) this occurs through its atmospheric dimensions. To extrapolate from Sloterdijk’s ideas, it may be said that we are dependent on atmospheres: the air we breathe and the spaces we inhabit are formative for our existence as human beings. People see atmospheres as shells that offer protection and make sense of the world. However, the immunity granted by atmospheres may come at a price, as it is often embedded in larger objectives of governing behaviours, experiences, and desires – whether this materialises in the economic field, in attempts to entice consumers to spend more money, or politically, in the form of mobilising support or deterring certain types of behaviour. This is another way of saying that architecture has long since lost its innocence – or, more accurately, that it never was innocent. The particular advantage of pursuing an atmospheric approach to architecture therefore lies in recognising that architecture should not be subsumed under a merely aesthetic discourse. Architectural atmospheres affect us, change our moods, and influence our behaviours, and these effects may be produced without us consciously recognising them. The fact that there is a lack of scholarly attention directed towards the numerous ways in which an architectural atmospheric “conduct of conduct” is exercised should only encourage further inquiries into the politics of atmospheres.

Christian Borch

The Politics of Atmospheres: Architecture, Power, and the Senses


This relates to atmospheres because, in this type of economy, which is more aptly called the aesthetic economy, production increasingly drifts to an aestheticisation of life by means of art, design, and so on. Most of the demands created in the open-ended market are aesthetic demands. Following Borch, it makes sense to differentiate between the use-value and the market-value of a commodity, and to argue that many commodities are bought not because of their use-value but because of the design or stage-setting of the buyer that they offer. Put differently, this type of economy is an aesthetic economy because the primary function of most of its products is to design and stage-set the person who buys them.

CB: How would you see connections between architecture, art, and atmospheres on the one side and epistemology on the other, Olafur?

OB: I agree that production in the West especially has become a production of aesthetics, and that even production itself has become aesthetic, as it is related to corporate brands. But I think we should not fall into the trap of thinking that conventional production, the manufacturing of everything else, is actually still taking place; it has just been moved elsewhere, to Asia and Africa, for example. So we have an aesthetic production in the so-called global North, and a kind of non-aesthetic production, which has been removed from our sight, in the less resourceful South. I agree that excess – the brutality of this excess – presents us with new existential challenges because we are not willing to give it up. There is very little reflection on this excess, and criticism of it is rarely translated into real action. I think we lack the necessary sensitivity to understand the consequences of the way we are living.

This also has atmospheric dimensions, which has become most explicit, during my lifetime, in respect to the climate, where there is obviously a link to consumption and excess. The world is trying to grasp those casual contracts with the climate. Here, we first have to acknowledge that the climate is in fact relative. When I was young, we still felt that the climate was a constant, that it was something outside of human reach. Now, we understand that the climate is not something natural but something cultural, we are co-responsible for it and we have to manage our