


**Please cite the Published Version**

Edensor, Tim  (2019) Book Review: Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods. *Cultural Geographies*, 26 (4). pp. 542-543. ISSN 1474-4740

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474019838305>

**Publisher:** SAGE Publications

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/626993/>

**Usage rights:**  In Copyright

**Additional Information:** Book review of *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods* by Shanti Sumartojo & Sarah Pink . London: Routledge. 2019. ISBN: 9781138241138.

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

***Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods.* By Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink, London: Routledge. 2019. 134 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-24113-8**

Recently, on Australia Day, I went to watch a football match between Melbourne Victory and bitter rivals, Sydney FC, in front of 21,000 fans. Before the game, Japanese and West African drumming, a Chinese dragon dance and a Maori Haka were performed on the pitch to signify an increasingly multicultural nation. A rendition of the national anthem followed and as the teams came out, they were flanked by two lines of people who had recently acquired Australian citizenship. The game surged into excitement in the 20<sup>th</sup> minute as Victory's Swedish striker, Ola Toivonen, curled a free kick into Sydney's net. A tense battle was punctuated by another goal for Victory in the second half and a quick response from Sydney who scored swiftly thereafter. No further goals arrived, and the match finished 2-1 to the home side. Upon exiting the stadium, the lusty singing of Victory fans was amplified by the narrow, low ceiling of the concourse. Before, during and after the match the atmosphere intensified, waned and levelled out, conditioned by surges of nationalistic fervour, wild celebration, lassitude, frustration, nail-biting tension and relief, along with the balmy summer heat, the luminous sunset, the swirling seagulls and the holiday mood. Though seemingly evanescent, I imagine that my description of these changing atmospheres would have been identifiable by most members of the attending throng.

In recent years, spurred by the non-representational turn, geographers and others have assiduously sought to identify the characteristics, effects and generative potentialities of atmosphere. In their inventive, stimulating and engaging *Atmospheres and the Experiential World: Theory and Methods*, Shanti Sumartojo and Sarah Pink critically assess these numerous conceptions and seek to extend ways of theorising and researching atmospheres.

In laying out the basis for their discussion, the authors demonstrate a firm knowledge of previous theories. While they are generous in acknowledging that the field has offered a variety of conceptual approaches, they adopt a critical perspective towards certain shaky assumptions. In refuting the circumscribing term, 'affective atmospheres', the authors foreground how atmospheres include the representational and symbolic as well as the affective, and argue that to conflate atmosphere and affect is to ignore the melding of the affective, sensual and emotional.

As my example of the shifting atmospheres at a football match demonstrates, they are suffused with identifiable emotions such as excitement, joy, despair and relief that shape the experience of those immersed within them. Atmospheres are thus not singular entities but continuously change, emerging, intensifying and dissipating; accordingly, their particular temporalities must be considered. Moreover, Sumartojo and Pink insist that atmospheres emerge in distinctive social and cultural and historical contexts. These arguments militate against claims that atmosphere is pre-conscious, exists before we arrive and coerces us into a mute attunement. On the contrary, they maintain, this neglects how atmospheres are co-produced by those entangled within them.

Though such concerns may seem forbiddingly abstract, they are discussed in lucid prose that grounds a condition that seems so unamenable to tethering. Perhaps, as the authors submit, this is because atmosphere is never solely the provenance of the intellectual but has an everyday purchase that captures the swelling charge of a concert, the sudden tension that floods a room or the relaxed vibe of a friendly get together.

In furthering their conceptual and methodological approach, Sumartojo and Pink adopt three organising principles, *knowing in atmospheres*, *knowing about atmospheres* and *knowing through atmospheres*. *Knowing in atmospheres* seeks to account for the contingent and processual qualities of the atmospheres in which we are immersed in situ. *Knowing about atmospheres* adopts a more reflexive analysis after the event that focuses on key moments and passages. *Knowing through atmospheres* aims at theory-building and explores how we might connect to other concepts and wider political, social and cultural trends.

Subsequently, three empirically rich chapters focus on spaces of atmosphere, atmospheres of mobility and the relationship between design and atmospheres. These chapters feature diverse settings in which the methods through which atmosphere might be examined are investigated. These methods include auto-ethnography, participant observation, creative practice, go-alongs, photo and video elicitation, and participant interviews. Unlike many previous accounts that have stood somewhat aloof from that which they seek to depict, the authors embed themselves in the swirl of atmosphere for prolonged periods. Of especial methodological significance are the ways in which video recorded interviews reveal a sensory and affective engagement manifest in participants' animated gestures and tones of voice.

The chapter on atmospheric space augments recent configurations of place as processual, unbounded and emergent. Plentiful ethnographic detail furnishes explorations of how atmospheres unfold at three sites: a busy urban market undergoing redevelopment, a sound installation that moderates road noise, and a French post-war industrial heritage attraction. In the case of the market, research was deployed to inform how the market might be redeveloped without losing those atmospheric elements cherished by workers and shoppers.

The investigation of 'atmospheres on the move' follows a hospital worker moving a trolley through corridors, kitchens and wards, who simultaneously produces functional attention and an atmosphere of care, as the approaching sound of the trolley heralds the arrival of cheeriness, conversation and help. A discussion of domestic mobilities explores how occupants endeavour to maintain and restore homely atmospheres through tidying, playing music or monitoring lights, minor yet critical activities that reproduce the home as a liveable space.

Although creative designs cannot predetermine how spaces and things will be experienced, the authors discuss how an awareness of the ways in which people contribute to the generation of atmospheres can inform designerly intentions. The authors discuss their own creative engagements with architects, light designers, photographers and sound artists to produce atmospheres. Examples include a multi-

sensuous shipping container sited in an industrial setting and a series of light projections.

*Atmospheres and the Experiential World* concludes by exploring how instead of being atmospherically manipulated by state ceremonies and commercial designs, atmospheres might contain rich potentialities for opening up inclusive, oppositional and alternative ways of being together that might unsettle normative cultural orientations. Feelings of solidarity generated by potent political atmospheres might prefigure progressive possibilities and utopian desires, suggesting potential futures that veer away from business as usual.