

Providing a stage for atmospheric encounters

Brattøra's seafront by SLA

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Abstract

The article addresses the theme of 'particular places' in the contemporary landscape metropolis by focusing on the temporal, climatic and geographic specificity that determines each place as unique. In particular, it explores how design can support the appreciation of a 'particular place' by enhancing the readability of its temporal, climatic and geographic constituents through an engagement with local weather phenomena.

The article considers the capacity of design to foreground the particularity of a place by connecting to its weather through a critical reading of SLA's redesign of the seafront of Brattøra in the city of Trondheim in Norway. My critical approach to the project juxtaposes a personal investigation of the design work based on primary experience and the insights of a conversation with SLA's principal Stig Lennart Andersson, performed and transcribed in 2012 as part of my doctoral thesis. Elaborating on this conversation, the article is articulated in three successive thematic sections, dealing respectively with the concepts of ground, exposure and wonder. Albeit specific to the project, these notions afford the possibility to expand upon more universal considerations of the capacity of design to foreground diffuse, changing and immaterial components of space in human experience. In the conclusive part of the article, I attempt to verbalise why SLA's work can be considered a valuable reference for the design of 'particular places' in the contemporary landscape metropolis.

Keywords

landscape architecture; perception; experience; agency; affect; immaterial; weather; ground; exposure; wonder; seafront; environment

Introduction

Landscapes are inherently temporal. They are shaped over time by flows, processes, and relationships (Corner, 2006; Waldheim 2016), by uses and practices (Ingold, 1993), and by movement. But landscapes are also temporal – of time – because they are always defined by the singularity of a season and a time of the day. Of time, again, because they are also defined by a weather condition. The French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy posits the temporality of landscapes with an exquisite definition: “A *landscape is always a landscape of time, and doubly so: it is a time of year (a season) and a time of day (morning, noon, or evening), as well as a kind of weather [un temps], rain or snow, sun or mist.*” (Nancy, 2005: 61 [1]) This article unfolds the theme of SPOOL’s present issue by exploring how certain temporal constituents of landscapes – their weather conditions across the seasons and the local effects of global cycles – can support the appreciation of a place as ‘particular’. The weather is dynamic, always unfolding, ever changing in its states, currents, qualities of light and colours; it is alternately damp or dry, warm or cold, luminous or dark. Yet, it can be highly site specific, and a forceful agent able to define a place’s character and foreground its uniqueness. (Høyer, 1999; Meyer, 2005) In the current age in particular, which is characterised by radical changes in climate, and consequently, in weather patterns, weather phenomena and their perceived characteristics are rapidly becoming forceful determinants on our apperception of ‘places’ – and of our own position within them.

The article addresses the theme of ‘particular places’ from the perspective of design practice. It embraces the idea, first advanced by American artist, Carl Andre (1968), that place and design are indissolubly linked, since to define place is to talk about the result of a design. For Andre, “*a place is an area within an environment which has been altered in such a way as to make the general environment more conspicuous*” one that “is related particularly to both the general qualities of the environment and the particular qualities of the work that has been done.” (as cited in Lippard, 1997: 47). With these words, Andre not only implies that the creation of a place is the necessary result of a design, but he also implies that the modalities by which designers devise places inevitably pass from an alteration in the perception, and therefore in the experience, of certain given conditions within an environment.

Following Andre’s insight, I propose to discuss the role of design practice in the shaping of place by adopting the perspective of a concept of environment. Environment is a concept that speaks of an individual’s phenomenal world in its singularity. [2] In its twofold connection with both being and perception, the concept of environment proves especially useful when discussing design in relation to temporal phenomena because it allows us to address a living being’s existence in and experience of space in a unitary notion. (Sloterdijk, 2006; Ponte, 2014: 215) Approaching the design of place from the perspective of a concept of environment instead of, for example, space or landscape, elicits a deeper inquiry into existential conditions, atmospheric states, sensual encounters and affective relations. All these categories provide a constructive vocabulary for discussing design practice, place and temporality alongside each other.

The article explores the capacity of design to foreground the particularity of a place by connecting to its temporality through a critical reading of SLA’s redesign of the seafront of Brattøra in the city of Trondheim in Norway. It concentrates on the characteristics of the landscape of Brattøra that are most relevant for a person’s experience of the site and unravels them in three successive thematic sections, dealing respectively with the notions of ground, exposure and wonder. Following the example of SLA’s work, in its closing lines, the article advances a consideration of design’s capacity to define ‘place’ and to isolate its particularity by framing distinct environmental conditions for encountering and engaging with a site’s phenomenal and temporal constituents.

The Conversation as a Method for Research

This article builds on a research work that explores the possibility of formulating concepts in conversation as a method for conducting research in the field of design. The reflections contained in this article juxtapose a personal investigation of the design work based on primary experience, namely repeated site visits and the study of design documents, and the insights of a conversation with SLA's principal Stig Lennart Andersson performed and transcribed in 2012 as part of my doctoral thesis. (Labadini, 2016) [3] In the article, first-hand readings intertwine with selected contents of the conversation, thus trying to reflect the full scope and process of the work's investigation.

The format of the conversation has been chosen with an intention to experiment with a mode of collaborative reflection on theoretical issues crucial to design. The format of the conversation constitutes an attempt to explore a series of design research questions in a format that allows a continuous exchange between matters of theory and design actions. The dialogue mobilises an active agency in the design work, both by actualizing it as site of discussion, and by allowing it to speak out through the voice of its designers. Conversely, theory enters the dialogue in the thinking of each of the interlocutors, and through their verbal exchange is both transformed and produced. The dialogue itself becomes an operative medium that allows for a series of continuous “relays” (Foucault, 1977; Rendell, 2003) from theory to practice, since they are not under the total control of one exclusive subject. In this respect, the conversation may be regarded as a productive place for theoretical projection, holding a certain similarity with a design process: in it, the critic's viewpoint and his or her first-hand readings can be confronted with design actions, both questioning design intentions, and retrospectively reviewing their physical outcome.

The notions presented in the article originate from the conversation, and the reflections presented here constitute an attempt to consolidate the intuitions that emerged in a broader theoretical scope, aiming to extract applicable theory from the singularity of the discussion and of the design work under scrutiny.



FIGURE 1 The harbour promenade, March 2016. SLA lays out the seafront of Brattøra as a continuous concrete walking surface. (Photograph by SLA, 2016).

Brattøra Open Space

SLA's project for the seafront of Brattøra can be regarded as an inspiring example of a design that is capable of transforming a derelict space into a compelling environment by engaging with the distinct temporal characteristics that are unique to the site (Fig. 1).

In Trondheim, local weather conditions vary significantly, even across relatively small distances and within very short periods of time. At times turbulent, the weather in Trondheim is defined by a hemiboreal oceanic climate with prevalent north-westerly fronts. As a consequence of this, Trondheim's weather phenomena and their rapid changes manifest their utmost potency at the seashore of Brattøra, which is orientated toward the main direction of the fronts. Furthermore, sea levels in Trondheim change notably as a result of significant tidal ranges. An intention to embrace the site's distinctive temporal conditions and especially its weather as chief drivers for the design of Brattøra's seafront was presented previously in SLA and Pirl's 2009 winning competition entry. [4] There, the project is presented as a celebration of "*nature's raw forces, the changing light of the sky, the poetic and the aggressive.*" (Fig. 2). These programmatic words are the expression of a design intention that seeks to reconfigure the landscape of Brattøra in close relation to the site's most phenomenal and temporal components. How could this ambitious statement grow out of the competition boards and materialise into a physical space without losing its power? Could a public space project, with all its material and programmatic requirements, maintain and accomplish its original ambition to celebrate immateriality?



FIGURE 2 Collage from the competition entry. The collage evinces SLA's ambition to embrace Trondheim's distinctive weather phenomena as chief drivers for the design. (Drawing by SLA, 2009)

In SLA's design, the drive to embody the impetus of local weather phenomena in the physical landscape of the site finds expression in an approach that seeks to foreground temporality by acting on the spatial fundamentals of a person's experience of the site. In the following lines, I seek to unravel SLA's approach with regard to three distinct notions: respectively ground, exposure, and wonder. Could these notions contribute to the development of a design lexicon for the contemporary landscape metropolis, which is inclusive not only of atmospheric and weather phenomena but also of their radical and ineluctable change?



FIGURE 4 The harbour promenade, September 2014. The promenade's flat topography and its openness to the water draw a space where the ground component clearly prevails. (Photograph by SLA, 2014)



FIGURE 5 The harbour promenade, September 2014. The homogeneous and unchanging character of the promenade's ground powerfully counters Trondheim's ever-changing sky. (Photograph by SLA, 2014)

As a result, when walking along the shore of Brattøra one finds oneself immersed in an environment that is shaped by an unmediated relationship between the matters of the ground and the meteors of the sky. This unmediated relationship between ground and sky intensely informs the experience of the landscape of Brattøra, which is closely dependent on the atmospheric events taking place above and around it. By means of the distinct material and geometric characteristics of its ground, one could say that the shore of Brattøra transcends its pure function as vertical foundation for the human body and becomes a stage for an ultimate confrontation between the human body and the elements of the weather.



FIGURE 6 Nordkapp, 1845 by Peter Balke. Sparebankstiftelsen DNB, dep. Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum, Tromsø. (Photograph by Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum).

SLA's work embodies a topos of being at shore that is evocative of a romantic aesthetic of the sublime. (Corbin, 1994). In our 2012 conversation, SLA's principal Stig Lennart Andersson aligns the notion of ground underpinning the design of Brattøra with the painterly work of the nineteenth-century Norwegian artist Peder Balke (Fig. 6). Balke's oeuvre is characterised by repeated depictions of a few iconic pieces of the Norwegian landscape, each one engulfed in a different, but equally haunting, weather condition. The constancy of the subject, and especially its geological solidity – take the rocky cliffs of North Cape as an example – reinforce the visual predominance of stormy seas and threatening skies in Balke's paintings. Similarly, the landscape of Brattøra's seafront may be said to actively bring the presence of atmospheric phenomena to the fore, in the way its flat, unchanging and open ground powerfully counters the diffuse, changing and weightless character of the phenomena of the atmosphere.

One could, of course, question whether and to what extent an aesthetic of the sublime can be resumed in today's landscapes and in concurrence with the disquietude regarding global changes in climate and weather conditions that characterises our times. It may, however, be precisely in this context that a sublime aesthetic may reassert itself, as proposed by, among others, the Swedish landscape architectural theorist Maria Hellström Reimer, with its capacity to convey "*a sense of tension, entanglement and interdependence.*" (Hellström Reimer, 2010: 29) [6] The experience of certain weather events at Brattøra might then be described as sublime in that the seafront's ground, by offering little more than a support to the body's posture, not only frames compelling encounters with the phenomena of the atmosphere, but also reasserts a fundamental connection between our individual existential sphere and the atmosphere that surrounds us.



FIGURE 7 A position of exposure, September 2014. Because of the openness of the promenade to the sea, a person standing on the shore of Brattøra is literally exposed to the impetus of the weather fronts. (Photograph by SLA, 2014)

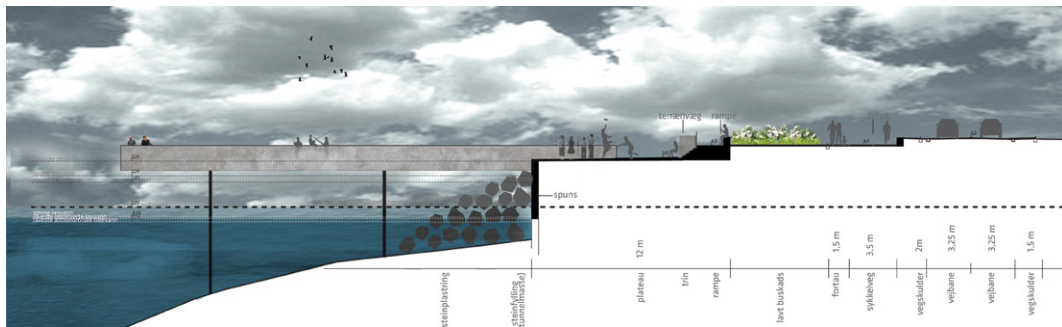


FIGURE 8 Section with view on the pier. Open and narrow, the pier stretches perpendicularly from the shore into the ocean. (Drawing by SLA, 2009)

The Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz has repeatedly pointed out the common etymology in Norwegian between the term 'vær' – weather – and the verb 'å være' – to be (Norberg-Schulz 1996: 6). By creating a space of existence for the human being that is intimately connected with atmospheric conditions, the landscape of Brattøra hypostatizes, so to speak, this connection. [7]

Exposure

When walking along the shore of Brattøra, one is also left alone in a position at the limit of comfort against the presence of the elements (Fig. 7). This position is hypostatized in what is maybe the most iconic segment of SLA's design: at a certain point along the walk, the promenade branches off into an open and narrow pier stretching perpendicularly from the shore into the sea. (Fig. 8)



FIGURE 9 The pier, September 2014. On the pier, a sudden contrasting verticality encompasses one's body, where the concrete pavement hangs over the waters with an unmediated fall. (Photograph by SLA, 2014)



FIGURE 10 The pier, March 2016. The pier, even more so than the promenade, draws a person standing on it into a compelling confrontation with the depth of Trondheim's sky, with the infinity of the sea and with the force of the elements that come from them (Photograph by SLA, 2016).

There, a sudden contrasting verticality encompasses one's body, where the concrete pavement hangs over the waters with an unmediated fall. The pier, even more so than the promenade, urges a figure standing on it into a compelling confrontation with the depth of Trondheim's sky, with the infinity of the sea and with the force of the elements that come from them (Figs. 9-10). It is a confrontation that requires a certain surrender.

One could tentatively define the environmental setting of this confrontation as one of exposure. Holding a subversive effect on subjecthood, a condition of exposure is capable of destabilising the conventions of a rational approach to the landscape. Because of the openness of the promenade and pier to the sea and to the sky, and in the absence of other geometric references than the ground on which one stands, one could say that a person walking along the shore of Brattøra is literally exposed to the impetus of the weather fronts. This mobilises a relationship between the human subject and the landscape that escapes the totalising impulse of a coherent aesthetic experience. Rather, the vitality of Trondheim's weathers strikes the one who stands on the shore of Brattøra, or urges one onto the pier with a modality that is both unmediated by reason and indifferent to a subjective will. The indifferent nature of Brattøra's landscape recalls the Scottish poet James Thomson's description of the shores of the North, where nature holds no compassion to mankind, and "*terrifying meteors sweep through the landscape*", where "*winds, flashing lightning, and waves join forces*." (as cited in Corbin, 1994: 125) Forcefully unsettling, a condition of exposure discloses the intimate and fundamental connection between our own individual existential sphere and the phenomenal dimension of the climate and its changes in that it relocates the modality of our engagement with weather phenomena "*from contemplation to agency*" (Hellström Reimer, 2010: 31). In a condition of exposure, a person is compelled to embrace a position in relation to her or his environment that is similar to what the English scholar Timothy Morton calls "*a zero-person perspective*." (Morton, 2011: 80) A zero-person perspective adopts a point of view opposite to the one of a frontal approach to the landscape. From a zero-person perspective, one finds oneself looking at the landscapes while the landscape, so to speak, looks back. This generates a situation in which a human being is not only inclined to appreciate the aesthetic potency of weather phenomena, but is literally taken by them. [8]

Wonder

Air movements, weather phenomena, and sunlight effects are all entities whose individuality is engendered in the act of happening, rather than being the result of an inherent identity. [9] The American landscape architectural theorist Elisabeth Meyer has talked about the individual events that intersect with a place as haecceities, an expression that interestingly connects with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophical writings. (Meyer, 2005: 111; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 261-263) Especially in the work of the latter authors, the term haecceity assumes a particular value in that it individuates entities by their mere taking place – here it is – describing an emergence that is revealed in a variation of state rather than in a confinable identity. [10] Unexpected moments of encounter with singular events evoke an aesthetic force that could be aligned with a notion of wonder. Wonder is an often-recurring heading in the work of SLA (SLA, 2010). But what can an aesthetic of wonder bring about in a design that addresses local weather and global cycles, their phenomena intersecting with a place, and their irreversible change? Wonder is a category of aesthetics that describes the effect of a sudden confrontation with something out of the ordinary (Fisher, 1998). Wonder is also what drives humans to question the world: as Socrates remarked to Theaetetus, "*wonder is the only beginning of philosophy*." The twofold meaning of the term 'wonder' is well exemplified by its use in the English language, as the American literature scholar Philip Fisher also points out (1998: 11). The first sense in which the word is used is that of interrogation, where wonder is a verb (I wonder ...?). The second use is in exclamation, where wonder is a noun (what a wonder!). Wonder is that which bridges the gap between the delight we feel in confronting an extraordinary event (or thing) and the intellectual curiosity that compels us to make sense of it. At Brattøra, SLA lays out a topology of spatial situations and potential phenomena that aim to reformulate the visitor's distracted approach into an engagement with place that is infused with wonder.

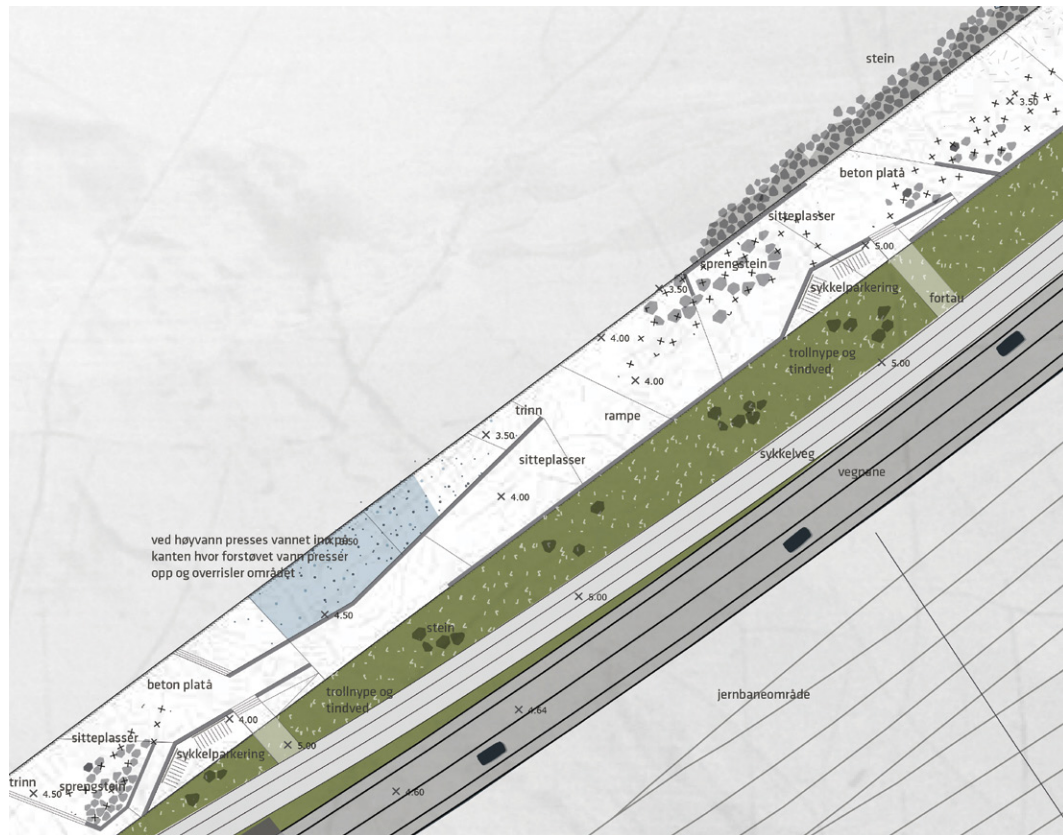


FIGURE 11 The tide-measuring stepped topography. Plan detail from the competition entry (Drawing by SLA, 2009)

Through wonder, the visitor is moved into a confrontation with the site's specificity that is both aesthetically and intellectually rich. In SLA's design, a sense of wonder is latent in the potential encounter with striking atmospheric phenomena and in the spatial setting that the project provides to these encounters. A more focused intention of provoking wonder is expressed in the design of a stepped topography along the outer edge of the harbour promenade, the levels of which are informed by the average intertidal height that the sea maintains between ebb and flow (Fig. 11). Designed so that the different steps retain water after the tide has lowered, revealing the changes in height when the tide is at its minimum, they provide the visitors with tangible evidence of the processes of change in water levels. This topographical artefact illustrates tidal variations by compressing the tide's temporal dynamics into a spatial composition of juxtaposed wet surfaces. The project decomposes the transition between sea levels into progressive time sequences, and reconstructs them in space. In a way, the project's approach to change may recall early experiments of visualizing movement in modern art, from cubism to futurism. The layering of different states in the same spatial sequence, past and present, unfolds the visitor's experience of the space into an interplay between sensuous perception of the present phenomenon and intellectual reflection on the recent history and causality of the same phenomenon, inscribed in the traces left by the receding tide.

The stepped topography of SLA's project makes productive use of the agency of measures in people's relationship with landscapes in order to manifest and foreground temporality. Measures are, for people, both intelligible and intellectually appealing in that they speak to our rational mind. The capacity of a design to present people with a measure provokes them to wonder about the dynamics that sustain a certain phenomenon. It engages their curiosity and interest in understanding processes of change that would otherwise not be so clearly readable. While infusing their senses with pleasure, Brattøra's wondrous phenomena provoke the visitor to question the physical and material cause of their emergence, and, by extension, they shed light on the site's particular temporality as a result of its unique geographic and

climatic location. Ultimately, Brattøra's stepped topography might also be interpreted as a device for tangibly measuring sea level rise as a consequence of global warming, in this sense exposing – again – humans and their awareness of the inescapable impact of our actions on the planet.

Conclusion

Weather phenomena are one-of-a-kind and often exist in the singularity of a fraction of time: one moment they are there, the next they are gone. In this sense, they are also 'particular'. Therefore, SLA's redesign of Brattøra's seafront supports an understanding of the particular as something that is bound to the singularity of a temporal moment and the way it intersects with the more permanent features of a place. The work poetically interprets Carl Andre's definition of 'place' in that it frames a firm spatial setting by which the presence and perception of local weather phenomena is rendered more conspicuous. The type of place that the work creates can be said to be particular because the actuality of an experience of it is bound to a distinct temporal moment – a distinct season, or a moment of the day – and the singularity of the phenomena there occurring – like the occurrence of a violent westerly storm, or simply a moment of high tide.

With its take on the notions of ground, exposure and wonder, SLA's project harnesses the accidental character of these phenomena and renders them an almost choreographed component of the place's experience. By framing distinct spatial and existential conditions that foreground temporality and intensify a person's perceptual awareness, the project manages to incorporate the site's temporal and phenomenal constituents as an integral component of the place despite their unpredictability. Thus, the project embraces the generative potential of a few precise spatial operations set at the service of responding and interacting with specific phenomenal conditions found on site, without fully determining the aesthetic content of the experiences they may create.

Steered by a focus on individual experience and perception, SLA's project encourages us to think of the design of 'particular places' as the design of sensually engaging and forcefully unsettling environments that are not only singular and constantly changing, but whose changes have also the capacity to connect us with a dimension of entities and forces that transcends the time and scale of the here and now. By creating potent conditions for experience without fully determining their programmatic or semantic content, Brattøra's landscape actively engages the human body not as a passive receiver of sensory stimulation, but as an active participant.

SLA's project for Brattøra suggests that designing a 'particular place' may also and especially mean cultivating and enhancing the perceptual richness of a landscape by framing a physical stage for encountering its more intangible components – its weather, its light and atmospheric qualities, and the temporal phenomena that happen to take place in it or that it is capable of generating.

Might particular places of this kind also become possible sites of environmental reflection in the contemporary landscape metropolis? Unsettling places of forceful agency, places in which we do not necessarily feel at ease, but which may support the recovering of our intimate connection with the physical world by means of the powerful aesthetic experiences they are capable of providing (cf. Hellström Reimer 2010, Meyer 2008).

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Notes

- [1] Nancy's definition makes productive use of the fact that, in the Latin languages, the word for 'weather' is the same as the word 'time' (tempo/temp/tiempo). This linguistic analogy supports the idea that the weather must be regarded as an essential component of the landscape.
- [2] Albeit the term environment holds in contemporary English a wide range of meanings, I have chosen here to call attention to a specific understanding of the term, which departs from a definition given by the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll. According to Uexküll, the term environment, or Umwelt, designates the phenomenal world of an organism as distinguished from its physical surroundings – its Umgebung (Uexküll, 1934). Uexküll's concept of Umwelt, described and made public in the biologist's writings since the first decade of the 1900s, has become extremely influential in 20th century European philosophy, influencing thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleu-Ponty, and Gilles Deleuze, among others.
- [3] The conversation between the author and Stig Lennart Andersson was recorded at SLA's office in Copenhagen on 13.02.2012.
- [4] The project Brattøra Open Space was developed jointly by SLA and the Norwegian architecture firm Pir II, which was responsible for group leadership and planning.
- [5] James J. Gibson, in his theory of sensual perception, affirms that the basic orienting system of terrestrial animals, and, therefore, human beings, is based on the relationship between the horizontal ground plane and our vertical posture. Gibson calls these two axes "the direction up-down" and "the plane of the ground" (Gibson, 1966: 59).

- [6] I would like to thank my reviewers for drawing my attention to Maria Hellström Reimer's important contribution to a discussion on aesthetics in a time of environmental crisis.
- [7] It is also interesting to notice that, when looked upon in existential terms, the weather represents one of the few real public and democratic domains that are left in our cities and landscapes. Olafur Eliasson beautifully points this out in a conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist along the Goose Lake trail in Iceland, transcribed in the book *The Goose Lake Trail (southern Route)*. Eliasson observes that the weather, especially in northern countries, actively functions as a social organiser. Weather also defines what he calls "*a kind of shared environment*" and "*a kind of shared physicality*" that bring people together both metaphorically and physically (Eliasson & Obrist, 2006: 44).
- [8] In this article, I often use the term situation in close analogy to the definition given of it by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. 'Situations' are, for Sloterdijk, heterogeneous groupings of different materials, the configuration of which is primarily shaped by the relationship between them and the interacting agencies of their components. These 'situations' are also spatial configurations that determine the environment of humans, and therefore their perception, in a fundamental way, since being immersed in them is a condition intrinsic to human existence. Thus, the term situation simultaneously describes a space in which humans are immersed and that gives shape to their existence in a fundamental way, and a spatial assemblage that is primarily shaped by relations of agency between humans and things (Sloterdijk, 2011).
- [9] In the essay "The eye of the storm: visual perception and the weather," the British anthropologist Tim Ingold proposes a definition of the weather that is inclusive of all phenomena in the atmosphere (Ingold, 2005). He also argues that weather conditions are mostly revealed in visual perception as changes in the qualities of sunlight. In including air movements and sunlight effects in my argument I embrace Ingold's definition.
- [10] In the chapter "1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming- Imperceptible..." of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze & Guattari refer to haecceities as bodies whose individuality is not determined by form, substance or function, but by the totality of the relations that they are capable of establishing. Deleuze & Guattari write, "*A season, a winter, a summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject. They are haecceities in the sense that they consist entirely of relations of movement and rest between molecules or particles, capacities to affect and be affected. [...] A haecceity has neither beginning nor end, origin nor destination; it is always in the middle.*" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 261-263).