Joseph William Mallord Turner, *Study for the Sack of a Great House*, c. 1830. Oil on canvas, 908 x 1219 mm; Turner Bequest 1856, Tate Collection, London

This interior scene belongs to a group of paintings of the 1830s that bring the atmospheric affects associated with Turner’s great land and seascapes inside. The figures and interior details are subsumed by the mist-like air and luminous light.
Misty, sculptural, tactile, theatrical and experiential, atmospheric interiors represent a seismic shift for architecture. They celebrate a wholly Romantic sensibility, in which the emotional response overshadows the rational line and the sensory dominates over the intellect. It seems no coincidence that the dictionary definition of the word ‘atmosphere’ expanded in the late 18th century – the Romantic era in England – from that pertaining solely to planetary gases to the ‘sense of surrounding influence, mental or moral environment’.

Turner, probably the most renowned Romantic painter, made famous by his stormy seascapes – full of spray and light and air effects – also sought atmosphere in his interiors in the 1830s. When painting the interior of his patron’s home, Petworth House in Sussex, he simply brought the mist inside.

Atmosphere brings with it an elusive, but compelling, resonance. So often restaurants, hotels or locations are recommended on the strength of their atmosphere alone. It is this attribute in contemporary life that is able to mark places out from the everyday or the banal – that gives them emotional meaning and human connection. Most often it is historic spaces that are described as atmospheric, evoking with their accumulated traces of human occupation and activity a bygone era, whether a Belle Epoque Parisian brasserie or a medieval manor house.

So what can be in the air of newly completed interiors? Like Turner, guest-editor Julieanna Preston identifies the elusive quality of atmosphere with the metaphor or ‘spatial figure’ of mist (see p 7), opening the issue with the watery air of Peter Zumthor’s Thermal Baths at Vals. She provides us with a multifaceted view of atmosphere in contemporary interiors rather than a single definition. The featured atmospheric spaces are aesthetically diverse, varying from the baroque theatricality of Philippe Starck’s restaurant interiors to the restraint of Foster + Partners Kamakura House in Japan pictured on the cover. The emotional engagement that atmosphere evokes in its subject also makes it a potent field for artists and composers as well as architects, interior designers and textile designers, as epitomised by the work of La Monte Young Marian Zazeela in the Dream House installation in New York (pp 12–15) and the internal weather affects of Olafur Eliasson (pp 30–5). It is, however, the potential to create spaces that call on all our senses and seduce us with the desire to simply reach out and touch a lumpy wall or a voluminous ceiling that is exhilarating – made reality by the progress of CAD/CAM technologies. It beckons a new era in which the eye has lost some of its ground, and the joy of touch and feeling in a space has gained new value.

Helen Castle

Note
1. www.etymonline.com. Atmosphere: 1638, from Mod.L. atmosphaera (1638), from Gk. atmos ‘vapor’ + spharia ‘sphere’. First used in Eng. in connection with the Moon, which, as it turns out, doesn’t have one. Figurative sense of ‘surrounding influence, mental or moral environment’ is 1797.

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