# Could you please start by saying a few sentences about your office's name? Why soma?

KS   We never wanted to use our own names for the practice, but rather have something that meant many things, that carries the ambiguity we tried to achieve within our work. We understood our practice as an accumulation of ideas or projects, rather than something that we wanted to define strategically. We always looked at our work, reflected upon it and found new trajectories out of that. That's why for us, <u>soma, was this exciting notion of being a body that has its own feelings - it's a sentient body. It doesn't have intellect, it's not a personality, it's more like a vivid mass, something that lives.</u> That's how we came up with that name and…

SR   … liked it a lot! Anyway, it's a good idea sometimes to switch off the intellect and to concentrate more on your body and bodily feelings, especially in the process of designing…

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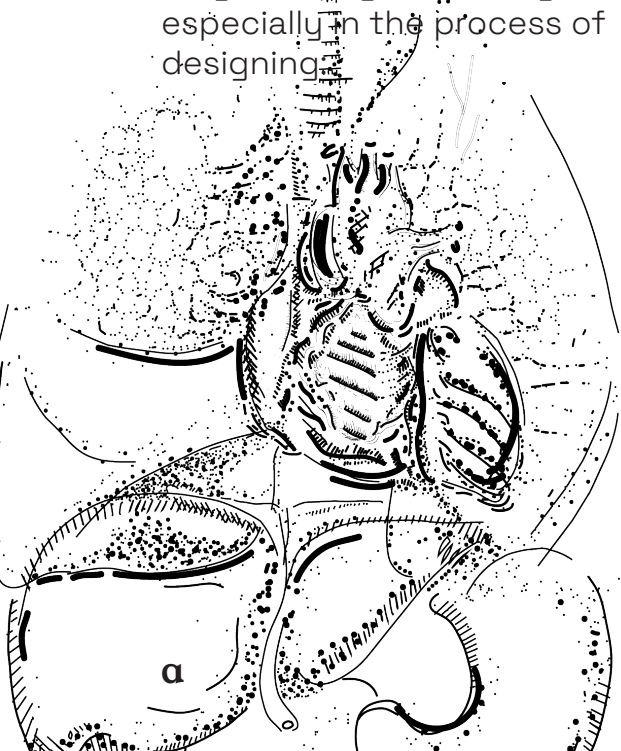
KS   I think atmosphere has also a lot to do with that.

Why atmospheres? Could you please elaborate a bit on what the term means to you? And where your interest in it stems from?

KS   With many of our projects we often begin with a particular atmospheric condition. For example, when we did our Vague Formation Pavilion, we wanted to have an oscillation or a flickering. We were designing a structure and instead of going into certain clichés of how to construct it, we like to start with these atmospheres. A flickering means many things. It's a spatial effect that triggers different senses.

SR   The vague Formation Pavilion is a good example because it causes curiosity and puzzles visitors by the nature of its appearance and structure. At the same time, the material was chosen so that it has a shiny reflective finish, which was able to catch colour and light from the surrounding, which enabled a kind of communication with its environment. It's an alien wherever you put it, but at the same time, it starts to communicate. It's not isolated, it's connected.

KS   Somebody in the office once said that some of our competition designs look 'sympathisch', sympathetic. We really like the idea that things talk to people, that they are a little bit familiar, but also strange, that they give you a puzzle, but there is still this kind of sympathetic dialogue or interaction happening through multi-layered appearances. Sometimes, our renderings even look a little bit like

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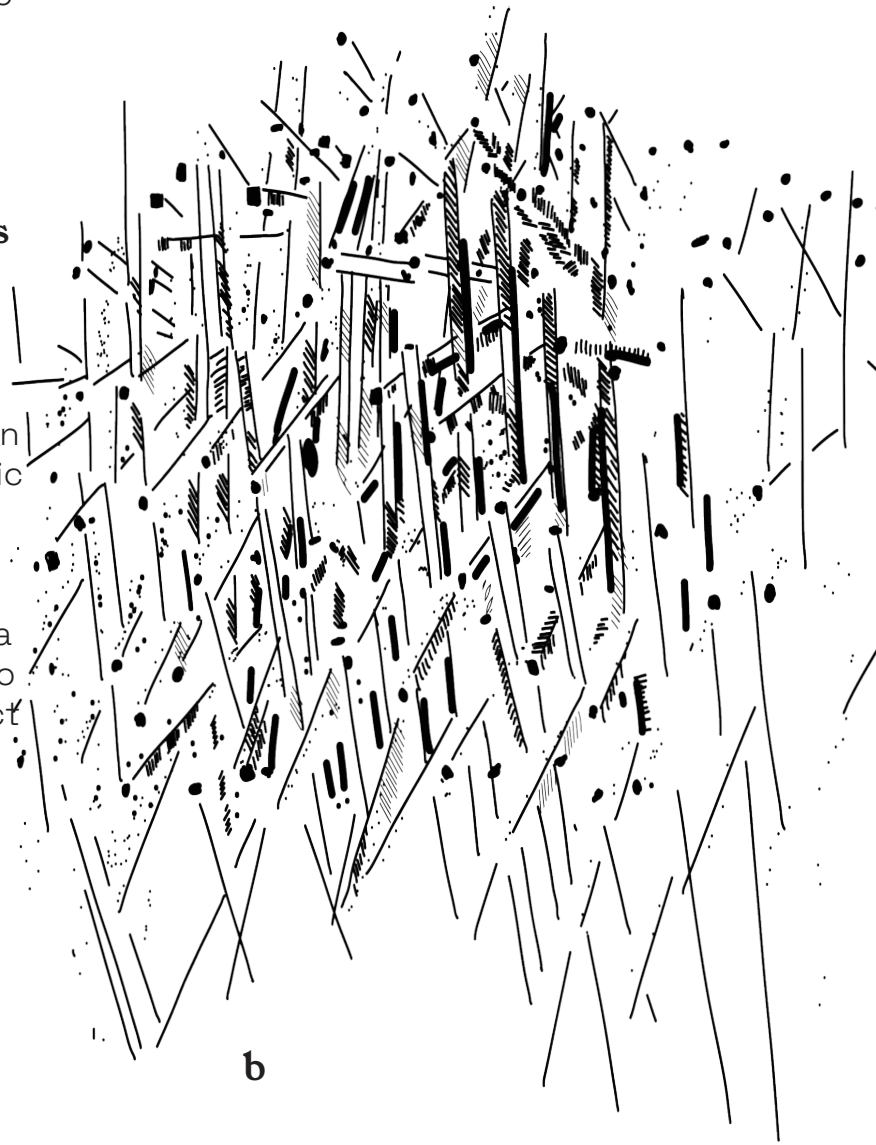
meteorological atmospheres. As for example our latest competition entry for the Museo del Novecento in Milano, a museum extension that should function as a bridge. It's a historical and very interesting urban setting, a symmetrical twin building and relict from fascism. We decided to render another urban direction visible, that is, the hidden direction of the Palazzo Reale and the former Roman city. It's a very simple geometric gesture that suddenly bridges the two buildings of the museum, so instead of doing a literal bridge we placed a volume that has a cloudy appearance and reflects the sky, with a façade effect like Perlmut - the mother-of-pearl. On one hand the city is a conglomeration of direction and masses, but then there is also the communication of the building with

the visitors – and that's where we would like to trigger a sensation. What can be perceived is how the building melts with the sky and it almost looks a little bit like a build atmosphere. Of course, these concepts sound very vague, and the question how to materialize and fabricate such structures is far more complex and difficult. I think that was also the issue with our design course last semester. To really bring atmospheric ideas to architecture is always a struggle. It's not easy to really translate that.
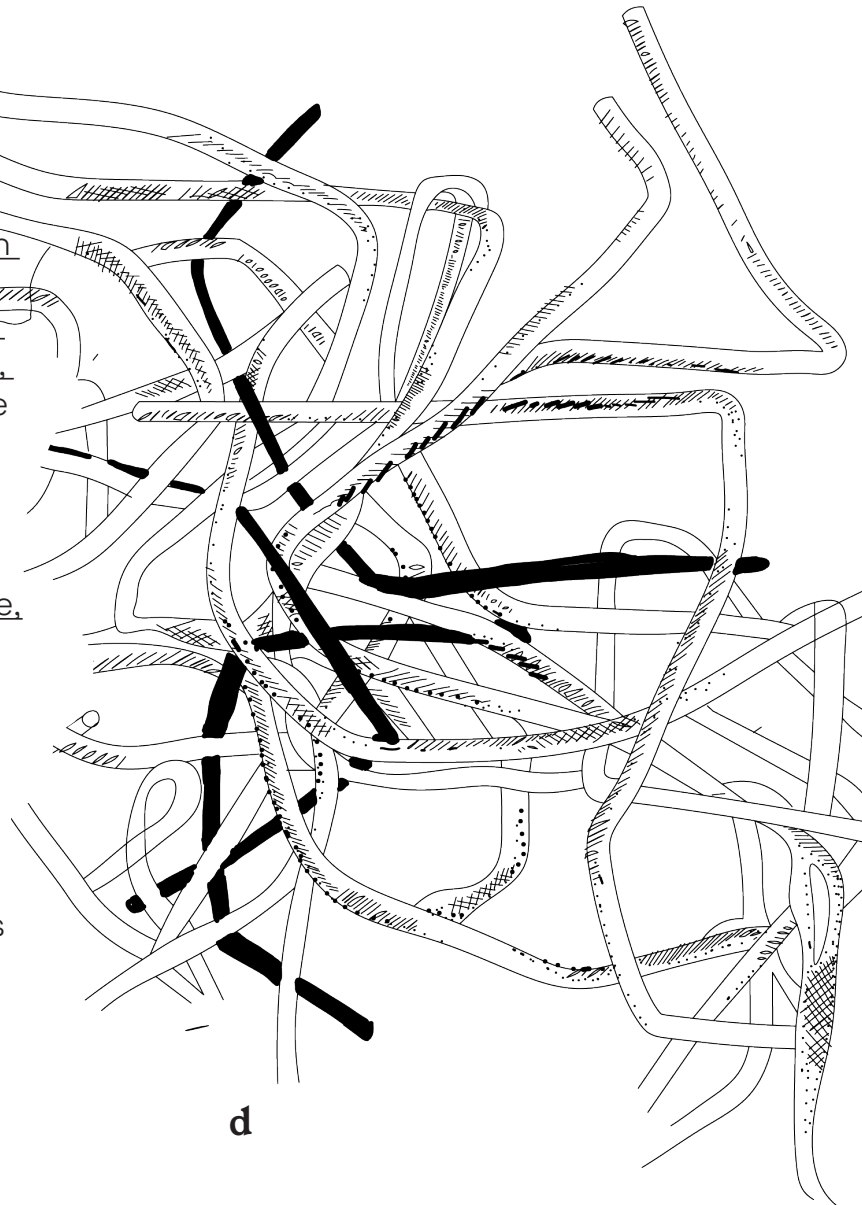
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SR Technically, this is balancing out geometry with materials and light situations. You have to find the right techniques in order to get the concepts across even if the

ideas are vague or dealing with vagueness itself. This is probably just more difficult than being very explicit. There are different sets of techniques that can be used to transfer vagueness, which over the years, we have tried to work with. The competition entry for Milano is geometrically quite explicit, but the appearance and the presence you perceive is vague through its changing effects.

KS Another example is an academic project we did with students in Vienna, the Formless Pavilion, which was also very much about showing the students a technique of how to translate a vague concept. What could the formless be or what could unfold as a formless space or structure? It was interesting for the students to understand that the concept had to be implemented in all the layers of the project, it needed to become fundamental. Also, an atmosphere has this fundamental aspect, because it needs this common base in order to develop immediacy. It's nothing that I could now scientifically describe, it's just a feeling I have that if things are really working atmospherically, there needs to be some foundation in the way it's materialized, how it acts and interferes with people. If I realize it's just fake, it's just a superficial effect, it doesn't go spatially deep, then it does not work. That's why I think the Pavilion of the Formless was a fascinating experiment for our students. It's important to have that 1:1 experience, to be able to build it yourself and take your own photographs. It was so interesting to see and compare what they saw in the structure.

SR There was also another aspect of how the notion of the formless

was introduced, that had to do with the structural integrity of the pavilion. Because there was a lot of redundancy in terms of elements and how the force flows were distributed – it had a highly dynamic behaviour, this ever-changing and ever transforming aspect of the formless. That was an interesting observation because it wasn't initially conceptualized, but it developed while doing mock-ups, studies and simulations. There were also critical voices who said 'this is not really formless, it's just looking kind of strange, but it's a very formal project'. But by observing the force flows within the structure, I realized that we are managing to translate the concept of the formless into a structure.

KS And that's exactly what evokes an atmosphere – this link e.g. between something visually and its performance. If you find an object that creates a synthesis between sensual triggers, you don't know where to look at first and from where to get information. You're entirely caught up in this totally enjoyable play of your senses and sensations. And I think that also links back to sympathetic. I think we simply enjoy atmospheres. It's something really pleasing that gives people this kind of sympathy, this kind of feeling of trust and rest. And I think that's why in architecture, it would be so important to teach and train students more on how to compose atmospheres. As kids, we constantly play. We're creating atmospheres all the time. Also, as people in our daily lives, we do it everywhere. Through every gesture through everything we take on, we create atmospheres, but why is it so difficult for architects? Maybe it has to do with these conventions, maybe these techniques that are blocking our way, I don't know, but

we have to really think about how to teach that and how to change that.

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SR Especially when it comes to the notion of playing and investigating and intuition. I think intuition is the key. If you are playful within the design process and you have a good intuition for it, then the chance that interesting outcomes will emerge, is high. The thing is that our design methods and the tools that are helping us to design are not always as intuitive as physical model making or sketching on paper. They have a higher level of abstraction, and they need some skilling before you can start to get intuitive with them. And that is sort of hindering some of us to get into that intuitive play. To have this intuition, this playfulness within the design process is super important.

These are the moments where you free yourself from all kinds of conventions, and new stuff can emerge out of it. But you have to prepare, you have to make a setting beforehand to allow for this kind of intuitive play, and you need to get a lot of training before you can start to play on that level. It does not make sense to sit in front of a piano when you don't know any of the keys. Nothing will emerge out of it.

How do you manage to marry your ideas and understanding of atmospheres with the research that you do in material innovation and digital fabrication?

KS   In our research, we have this fascination for point clouds. As part of our SFB research project we observe that point clouds have this perceptual ambiguity – they let you look at the object and behind the object and within the object at once. We're interested in finding out if that is something that we could translate into a method or a new way of volumetric designing. Leonardo da Vinci was looking at stains a lot and interpreting them – as crowds, as storms, as all kind of different things that he saw in them. Like stains point clouds help to keep this imaginary process alive for a very long time. The point cloud has this kind of openness of an atmospheric carrier – at least visually. It would be fantastic if that could also have a tactile quality!

SR   Basically, the point cloud has many features in regards to how we translate the notion of vagueness in our design process. On the one hand, it's super discreet when it comes to the point itself. It's clearly describable with coordinates. On the other hand, when you have a

lot of them they start to become vague or interpretive. They have this kind of openness that we are looking for in our design projects. It seems to be a very good vehicle, a geometric description of both qualities and quantities. At the same time, it is a horrible geometry system to work with because there's a lot of information which overwhelms our perception.

KS   Working with qualities is also causing problems today because the physical experimentation is at the moment very reduced, usually we would do a lot of material testing in 1:1, we prefer to evaluate artefacts by taking them in our hands, touching them, there is no way around it when working with atmospheric effects, you need to create and materialise them. Of course, you could also create atmospheres by writing a text, for sure, we're big fans of literature, but we're not experts in doing atmospheres with words. So we need to do it with material and images and colours and patterns. So for us, it's crucial that the people who we are working with can create imagery. That's sometimes difficult, but it's the only way to exchange what exactly is the aim. We're very much looking for interactions, effect and these kinds of perceptual experiences. I think experiences are the word, and if it goes towards the experiential, you need to represent it in whatever way. I would say, we're very much like alchemists.

SR   You know, what you're looking for and then you start trying to find gold, maybe! Maybe it's just gunpowder, a bad try, but sometimes it's also gold.

[Laughing]

Let's find out more about this secretive world. By describing your projects and practice - this is something I've also been observing in your conversations with the students - you use many suggestive terms to speak about architectural qualities. You have a way of implying things without rendering them explicit by communicating a feeling for a feeling. How do you negotiate this with each other and your clients, employees, or students? Is this ephemeral body of knowledge something that you are secretly grasping and consciously don't communicate, or is it something that you don't want to capture as part of your creative process?

SR   The good thing is that architecture has many ways to explain itself and how you can get it across. It depends on whom you talk to, because there are people who only understand quantities and then you would probably not get far, trying to explain what kind of atmosphere you would like to create. But sometimes, there are people who are sensitive to that, and they understand immediately what you mean. Sometimes it doesn't even need a lot of words. It just enough to show them the intermediate results, and they kind of grasp it. In that case the conversation starts on a completely different level. I would say there is no general rule on how to communicate, it really depends. Sometimes it's a good conversation; sometimes it fails.

KS   I think, unfortunately, it depends a lot on shared sensibilities. And if you want to build common sensibilities, it takes a lot of time. We are working together now for 20 years, we have a lot of common ground, and we have almost a shared visual memory. When I see something, I can be pretty sure that the images my brain recalls are the same that Stefan sees. I think in order to make students capable of grasping our comments in a more profound way, we would have to spend much more time with them and do seminars, where we would only talk about a couple of images and explain exactly what we mean here. That's how the Angewandte where we both studies worked – for many years we were working in one studio with the same group of people. We were collecting our shared visual memory and our shared language. We always exactly knew what something was referring to. I think it's tragic in regards to the transfer of tacit knowledge, but I think it also good, the amount of time it takes, because that makes it precious. If it could just be consumed through a You Tube tutorial, we would all be jobless. But since we have lots of tacit knowledge that took a lot of time to acquire, it becomes very powerful.

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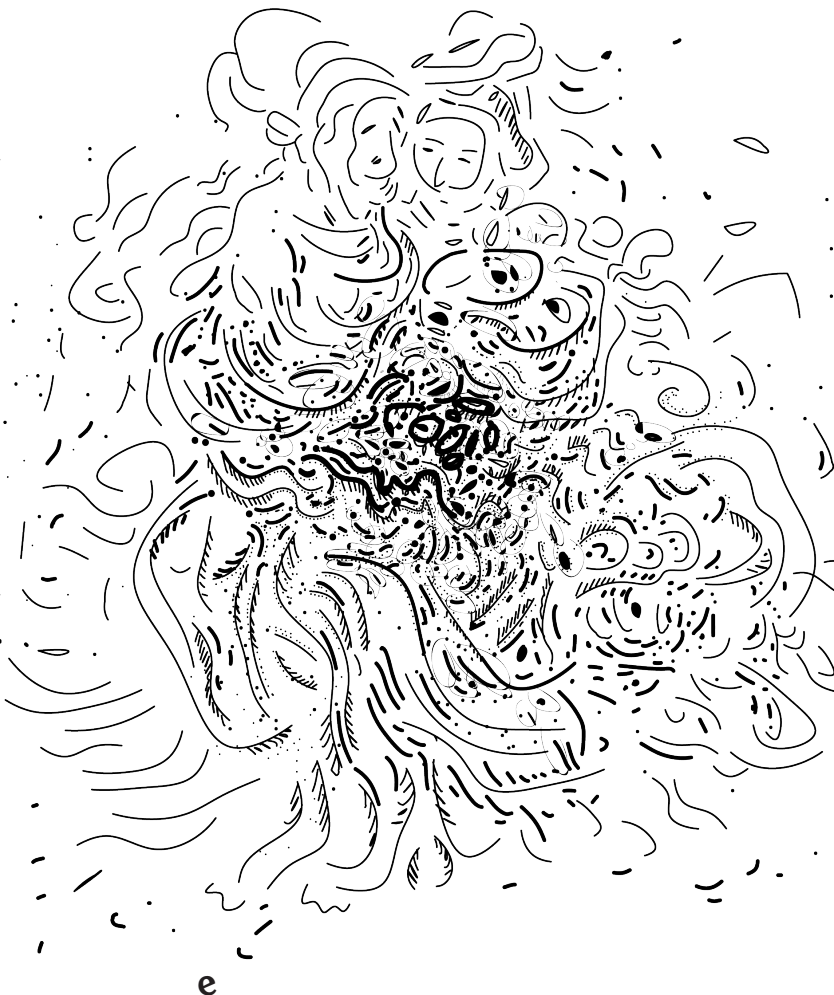
SR   When it comes to communication, I think the most interesting part is also the mismatch in the conversations. For sure, what you explained before is really helpful because it accelerates the conversation and amplifies it to a certain level. But still, I think the conversation is fruitful when you have different images in your head than your conversation partner – when you're spinning around those to develop new ideas. We had this a lot in practice with engineers like with Bollinger + Grohmann Ingenieure, which also have, let's say, a familiar background coming from a familiar milieu in Vienna, the Angewandte, and so on, so forth. But the fact that they are coming from a different discipline that they are engineers and we are architects, this was enough tension to develop really interesting concepts together. As mentioned before, the Vague Formation Pavilion, was to a large extent, developed with the engineers. They played a significant role in the development of the project and how it finally turned out. I think that also came from this kind of – mismatch is the wrong word – but in a conversation you have different takes on the same topic, so you're creating pictures in the other's head, which is slightly off from your own, I think this is a very productive situation.

Coming back to material qualities, why do you think natural materials, such as wood or stone, are often valued higher than synthetic materials regarding their capacities to create atmospheric environments? Where do you think that stems from, and is it likely to change in the future, given the growing interest in digital fabrication techniques?

       You think natural materials are used more in designs, which are connected to atmospheric concepts?

No, but I think their qualities are discussed more often in texts speaking about atmospheric architecture.

SR   I would completely disagree. I think there are simply more precedents in the past because some well-known architects have dealt with those materials more than with others, but I disagree that there is one material that is better than another in creating atmospheric qualities or how it could be used in building up atmospheres, I think it simply depends on the kind of atmosphere one is looking for to produce.

KS   I think it's the European atmospheric discourse that pushed this relation of atmosphere to nature. The American Westcoast discussion that took on Deleuze's Logic of Sensation, kept on talking about mood and sensation, coming from the pop and consumer culture. Just think of the Pepsi pavilion in Osaka by E.A.T., this mirroring, fabulous, foggy architecture which is all about experience. In Europe, we have a tendency towards minimalism, honesty of the material, it's a very different agenda, two different types of atmospheric discourses. I think that's logical because atmosphere is so general and everywhere, and certain groups tend to focus on certain notions of it. That's why it can be so different and also so specific.

Thank you Kristina and Stefan!

soma is an Austrian practice run by Stefan Rutzinger and Kristina Schinegger.

Since 2007 they have been working on a wide range of international projects, from implementation of innovative cultural buildings to award winning competition entries, from urban master planning and social housing to exhibition design and installations. Completed projects include the Theme Pavilion for the Expo 2012 in South Korea, the travelling Art Pavilion for the Salzburg Biennale and the Austrian headquarters for the German firm TECE.

On 7 April 2021, Kristina Schinegger (KS) and Stefan Rutzinger (SR) were interviewed on Zoom by Paula Strunden, PhD Candidate, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

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a Sentient Body soma
b The Vague Formation Pavilion
c Milano's Museum Extension
d The Formless Pavilion
e Leonardo da Vinci's Point Cloud Stains

Image Credits: P. 8+11 Formless Pavilion P. 9-10 Competition Entry Milano, all images by soma