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Atmosphere and Social Aesthetics

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Social aesthetics can also be seen as a mandate to develop a humanistic medicine that is not only concerned with the 'whats', but which instead focuses on the 'hows'. The call for the implementation of social aesthetics in practice necessitates a paradigm shift in the treatment of mental disorders. The focus should then no longer only be just upon the effectiveness of treatment, but also, and quite fundamentally, on the attractiveness of treatment, in particular as making treatment objectives and programmes more attractive will lead to reduced drop-out rates, in turn improving treatment effectiveness. The challenge in the therapeutic process is not only to recognize the significance of the pathology but to find ways out of the imagined impossibilities by opening up new possibilities and uncovering potential that has often quite literally been buried. In this context atmospheres play a major role. 'Atmosphere' is the elusive and almost indefinable 'air' that imbues and envelops a given situation, the global awareness of that situation. In the clinics of mental disorders, the concept of 'atmosphere' applies both to what is felt by the patient (e.g., 'existential feelings') and by the clinician (e.g., 'atmospheric diagnosis'). The relationship between the two is controversial. This is the central element of the Orpheus Programme that has been developed at the Anton Proksch Institute in Vienna. In contrast to the principles of former deficiency oriented treatment programs the Orpheus Programme focuses on opening up spaces and creating atmospheres in which it becomes possible for the ill individual.