

Calm Design Lab
Attentional Materiality Matrix

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Attentional Materiality Matrix

A tool for close, comparative reading of works of art, spaces, or interfaces, surfacing the material and discursive strategies that shape how an experience is felt. Not a checklist for scoring your own work: it's a lens for analyzing existing work, worth by worth, looking for what recurs.

Applied across multiple works, these criteria surface discursive recurrences, repeated material choices that let us describe genres and styles: concrete, repeatable ways of making that produce predictability and a shared grammar an audience can recognize.

How to Use the Matrix

The Attentional Materiality Matrix is a tool for close, comparative reading. It is not a checklist for evaluating whether a work is good, calm, accessible, or successful. Nor is it intended to be completed exhaustively. Its purpose is to help you notice the material and discursive strategies through which a work organizes perception, action, attention, and experience. Use the matrix to observe first, interpret second, and compare over time.

A simple reading process

1. Choose a work

Select a work, space, interface, installation, object, or other designed situation to examine.

2. Observe before interpreting

Begin with what can be directly observed. Describe materials, spatial arrangements, sensory qualities, sequences, interactions, and other concrete characteristics before assigning meaning to them.

3. Follow what becomes significant

You do not need to fill every criterion. Record the qualities, relationships, tensions, absences, or repetitions that seem relevant to the work.

4. Move across levels

Use the four levels to gradually move from observation toward interpretation:

- Presemiotic — What is the work?
- Rhetorical — How is it materially and experientially constructed?
- Thematic — What ideas or assumptions about the world does it advance?
- Enunciative — Who does it address, and what relationship does it establish with its audience?

5. Look for relationships

Individual criteria are less important than the relationships between them. Notice where material choices reinforce one another, where they create tension, and where one strategy produces consequences across several dimensions.

6. Compare works

The matrix becomes most useful when applied to multiple works. Compare your observations across works rather than treating each analysis as an isolated assessment.

7. Look for recurrences

Ask what appears repeatedly.

Which material strategies recur?

Which relationships recur?

Which attentional conditions seem to emerge from them?

These recurrences can reveal patterns that are difficult to see when looking at a single work in isolation.

A useful principle

Do not ask whether a work is calm. Ask what it does with attention. The matrix provides a vocabulary for describing those choices before judging their effects.

Level 1 — Presemiotic

Basic identifying information about the work.

Criterion	What to look for
Title	The name given to the work or artifact.
Location	Where the work is sited or installed (gallery, public space, digital platform, etc.).
Author	Who made it.
Year	When it was made or presented.
Dimensions	Its physical or spatial scale.
Materials	What it is physically made of.
Description	A brief, neutral account of what the work is and does.

Level 2 — Rhetorical

How the work is materially and discursively constructed — its largest and richest level, organized into seven dimensions.

2.1 Relational Dimension

How the work's parts relate to each other and to their context.

Criterion	What to look for
Compositional elements	The distinct parts that make up the work and how they're arranged.
Predominant elements	Which parts or materials dominate the composition and draw attention first.
Spatial context	The physical or environmental setting the work occupies or responds to.
Interior–exterior relations	How the work handles boundaries between inside and outside, private and public.
Cooperative–contrasting relations	Whether elements reinforce each other or create deliberate tension or contrast.
Scale and relevance relations	How size differences among elements signal importance or hierarchy.
Spatial relations	How elements are positioned relative to one another in space.
Other relations	Any other relational pattern worth noting that doesn't fit the categories above.

2.2 Organizational Dimension

How the work structures movement, sequence, and understanding.

Criterion	What to look for
Navigation systems	How a person finds their way through or around the work.
Instructions	Any explicit guidance given — or deliberately withheld — to the audience.
Signage and locators	Visual or spatial cues that orient the visitor without full instructions.
Sequences	The order in which parts of the work are meant to be encountered.
Programs / selection processes	How the work structures choices or decision points for the visitor.

2.3 Sensory Dimension

How the work engages the body's senses.

Criterion	What to look for
Sight — Color	Palette and how it's used to guide perception or mood.
Sight — Reflectivity	How light bounces off surfaces and what that produces.
Sight — Transparency	The degree to which materials reveal or conceal what's behind them.
Sight — Brightness	Overall light intensity and its effect.

Touch — Temperature	Thermal qualities of the materials or environment.
Touch — Humidity	Moisture present in the materials or space.
Touch — Texture	Surface quality as experienced by touch.
Hearing — Tone	Pitch and quality of any sound present.
Hearing — Damping	How sound is absorbed or muffled within the space.
Hearing — Sonic spaces	How sound defines or shapes areas of the work.
Smell and taste	Any olfactory or gustatory elements engaged.
Other spatial/sensory aspects	Sensory qualities not covered above.
Other ways of experiencing matter	Any additional embodied or perceptual mode at play.

2.4 Formal Dimension

The material logic and form-making strategies at work.

Criterion	What to look for
Minimal inventory – maximum diversity	How much variety is produced from how few base elements.
Anisotropy	Whether the material behaves or reads differently depending on direction.
Heterogeneity–homogeneity	The degree of material or formal uniformity versus variety.

Hierarchical structuring	Whether elements are organized in a clear order of importance.
Fibers	Use of linear, thread-like, or woven elements.
Assembly	How separate parts are joined or composed together.
Form and function	How closely form follows — or departs from — function.
Computational shaping tools	Use of digital or computational processes to generate form.
Printed forms	Use of printing (2D or 3D) as a form-making method.
Other morphogenic strategies	Any other form-generating approach observed.

2.5 Interactive Dimension

How the work behaves in relation to a participant's actions.

Criterion	What to look for
Interactivity	Whether and how the work responds to the audience.
Interactive character	The overall quality or tone of that responsiveness.
Responsiveness	How quickly or directly the work reacts to input.
Predictability	How easily a person can anticipate what will happen next.
Action spaces	What kinds of actions the work invites or allows.
Control space / operations	What a person can actually control or operate.
Complexity	How intricate the interaction is to understand or perform.

Interface	The point of contact through which interaction happens.
Precision	How exact the input–output relationship is.
Representations and metaphors	What familiar concepts the work borrows to explain itself.
Center–periphery attention relation	Whether the work asks for focused or peripheral attention.
Object agency	How much the work itself appears to act or decide, versus simply respond.
Duration of interactions	How long a typical engagement lasts.
Number of simultaneous interactions	How many people or inputs it can handle at once.
Environmental interactivity	Whether the surrounding environment itself responds or participates.

2.6 Usage Dimension

The qualities of the lived experience of engaging with the work — includes what previously stood as a separate "Calm" dimension, folded in below.

Criterion	What to look for
Playability	Whether the work invites playful, exploratory engagement.
Seduction	How the work draws people in and holds their interest.
Anticipation	Whether it builds a sense of expectation.

Relevance and utility	How meaningful or useful the experience feels to the person.
Flexibility	Room for different ways of engaging with it.
Control / autonomy	How much agency the person feels they have.
Immersion	The degree to which a person feels absorbed in the experience.
Fluidity	How smoothly the experience unfolds.
Social action space	Whether and how it enables shared or social engagement.
Personal connection	Whether the person feels a personal, emotional link to the work.
Identity	Whether the work reflects or shapes a sense of who the person is.
Transparency	How clearly the work communicates what it's doing and why.
Efficiency	Whether it achieves its effect without unnecessary excess.
Elegance	Whether the solution feels economical and well-resolved.
Surprise	Moments that depart from expectation.
Ambiguity	Openness to more than one interpretation.
Parafunctionality	Elements that exceed or play with pure function.
Accessibility	How available the experience is to different bodies and abilities.

Requires minimal attention	Whether it can be engaged with peripherally, without demanding full focus.
Informs while creating calm	Whether it communicates without generating anxiety or urgency.
Functions even when it fails	Whether the work degrades gracefully rather than breaking the experience.
Minimum necessary to resolve the problem	Whether it avoids excess in service of its purpose.
Respects social norms	Whether it behaves appropriately within its social or cultural context.

2.7 Temporal Dimension

How the work shapes the experience of time.

Criterion	What to look for
Perception of time	Whether the work speeds up, slows down, or suspends the sense of time passing.
Time-out situations	Moments the work creates for pause or withdrawal from ordinary time.
Pauses and interruptions	How rhythm is broken up within the experience.
Other temporal aspects	Any other time-related quality observed.

Level 3 — Thematic

The broader ideas the work advances or assumes.

Criterion	What to look for
Predominant world ideas	The broader worldview, values, or ideas about reality that the work seems to advance or assume.

Level 4 — Enunciative

Who the work addresses, and what stance it takes toward its audience.

Criterion	What to look for
Implied user	The kind of person the work seems to address or assume, whether or not stated.
Artist/designer positioning	The stance or role the maker takes in relation to the work and its audience.
Proposed communicational situation	The kind of exchange or relationship the work sets up between itself and the audience.
Universal meanings	Meanings likely to be understood broadly, across cultures or backgrounds.
Learned meanings	Meanings that depend on specific cultural or contextual knowledge.
Character	The overall personality or tone the work projects.
Evoked emotions	The feelings the work tends to produce.
Value	The worth or significance the work seems to claim or generate.

From Observation to Attentional Grammar

The value of the matrix does not lie in completing every criterion. It lies in what becomes visible across multiple readings.

When the same material strategies, relationships, and experiential qualities recur across different works, they begin to form patterns. These patterns can help us describe how particular works, practices, or environments organize attention.

The process can be understood as:

Observation → Recurrences → Patterns → Attentional Grammar

An attentional grammar is a recurring way of organizing the conditions through which attention becomes possible. It may involve material choices, spatial arrangements, temporal structures, sensory qualities, interaction patterns, forms of communication, or assumptions about the person encountering the work.

For example, a series of works might repeatedly combine: peripheral rather than focal attention, low instructional density, slow temporal transitions, spatial openness, and ambiguous rather than directive communication. Taken together, these are more than isolated characteristics. They describe a recurring way of constructing an attentional situation.

The purpose of comparative analysis is therefore not to produce a score or a universal model of good experience. It is to develop a more precise vocabulary for describing how works make particular modes of attention possible.

From materiality to attention

Materiality is understood here broadly. It includes not only physical matter, but also spatial, sensory, temporal, computational, interactive, and discursive conditions. Attention emerges through relationships among these conditions. The matrix makes those relationships more visible.

Final questions

After completing several analyses, ask:

What kind of attention does this work make possible?

And then:

What material and discursive choices make that possible?