Geoforum 54 (2014) 103–110

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Human activities at the frontiers of ambient climate control: Learning from how UK shoppers and sport spectators currently talk about air-conditioning

Russell Hitchings *, Ryan Surrage, William Atkinson

Department of Geography, UCL, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 June 2013
Received in revised form 7 April 2014
Available online 13 May 2014

Keywords:
Air-conditioning
Everyday life
Climate control
Shopping
Sports spectatorship
Energy consumption

ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with ambient climate control as an increasingly common means of managing the degree to which local weather conditions and seasonal temperature changes are allowed to complicate human activities. Our focus is on summertime shopping and sport spectatorship in the UK as activities that, though often still imaginatively associated with the outdoors, may increasingly take place in comparatively controlled indoor environments. We begin by arguing for an examination of these activities according to the many ways in which those involved might relate to climate control when the experience of air-conditioning has often been studied in terms of thermal comfort. Then we present the findings of two interview projects that developed this argument. The first involved shoppers on the Oxford High Street in view of how retail air-conditioning entails a growing amount of energy use in this country. The second focused on spectators at the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament in view of how one court there now boasts a retractable roof that renders match conditions newly controllable. We find that these respondents connect climate control to ideas of societal progress and effective scheduling more readily than to any desires for greater personal comfort. We end with the implications for those hoping to encourage less energy hungry societies and for researchers interested in how best to study the relationship between climate control and everyday life.

Introduction

> "Deprivation of spatial context is most palpable in the sterile modern ballpark, culminating in the domed stadium, which cuts the spectator off from both nature and neighbourhood architecture. The mall exaggerates this spatial isolation and adds to it temporary and social insulation. Its architecture and environment tend to be the same, regardless of geography, climate or regional building design. In the mall, our senses are dulled by the muffled light and sound as well as by the rhythms of effortless movement and shopping"
>
> [Kupfer (1990:319)]

The places in which many people now shop or watch sport can evidently be painted as emblematic of how some societies have come to furnish their members with environmental conditions that are far from the ideal. Yet those who designed our enclosed shopping spaces and sports stadia presumably did not start with the deliberate intention of engineering the dystopian situation bemoaned above. Rather they were probably juggling a range of commercial and practical imperatives along with imperfect information about what those they were hoping to attract may actually want. It may therefore be worth questioning how the shoppers and spectators currently found within these environments feel about the experience and seeing what this tells us about the best means of moving forward from here. One way of doing so would be to ask them about ambient climate control. Do those who spend time inside air-conditioned sports and shopping spaces really feel 'cut off' and 'isolated' from the outdoor environments to which they should properly be connected? Perhaps they would characterise climate control as an effective means of making the experience more reassuringly predictable. Or would they discuss it in other terms entirely?

These are the questions that we attempt to answer in this paper. We do so because studying the mundane experience of ambient climate control stands to provide new evidence to help in the fight against ever more resource intensive ways of life. In this respect, we would position this paper as adding to a growing body of work

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: r.hitchings@ucl.ac.uk (R. Hitchings).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.04.007
0016-7185/

that questions the subtleties of how different social groups have come to live with air-conditioning in an attempt to identify the most effective means of discouraging them from becoming increasingly dependent upon it. Our starting contention is that this work could benefit from considering activities that may be on the move in terms of whether they are understood as rightly taking place within regulated bodies of 'indoor' air or whether it is still acceptable for them to be subject in some way to the more variable 'outdoor' conditions. We characterise these activities as occupying the 'frontiers' of ambient climate control and we argue that studying them provides a valuable perspective on the changing ways in which societies live with air-conditioning.

In doing so, we draw on UK summer interview projects that report back from two such frontiers. The first involved shoppers on the Oxford High Street in view of how retail air-conditioning entails a growing amount of energy use in this country. The second focused on spectators at the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament in view of how one court there now boasts a retractable roof that renders match conditions newly controllable. We start with the relevant wider literature on air-conditioning and everyday life and some recent geographical research questioning the indoor–outdoor distinction according to how identified activities become assigned to one or other of these two categories. Here we make the case for examining climate control in a way that is sensitive to the many possible cultural registers in which it may be discussed when the experience of air-conditioning has often be studied in terms of thermal comfort. Then we detail our central findings. For both the shoppers and spectators with whom we talked, ambient climate control was more readily connected to a range of ideas about societal progress and effective scheduling than to any desires for greater personal comfort. After briefly examining what this suggests about the effective promotion of energy conservation, we end with the implications for other researchers hoping to challenge the drift towards a more fully air-conditioned social future. Here we argue against prematurely attaching ourselves to questions of thermal comfort when doing so obscures other ways of relating to climate control that could be engaged with more directly.

Understanding thermal comfort and the control of human conditions

Though studies have reported people feeling 'comfortable' in ambient conditions that range from 6 to 30 °C (Nicol et al., 1999), the temperatures that many of us expect in many parts of our lives appear to be 'converging' globally around 22 °C (Shove, 2003). How do we explain this? One way would be to point to how commercial interests aligned to make certain ambient temperatures seem modern and desirable as a means of creating a market for mechanically conditioned air where none existed before (see, for example, Cooper, 1998). Another would be to highlight how thermal comfort has been studied and the implications of attempting to define and provide 'standards' of ambient temperature that should be comfortable for all (see, for example, van Hoof, 2004). Either way, those who design and manage many social spaces now often find it more straightforward to furnish occupants with these temperatures than to second guess at what they would make of more variable conditions (de Dear, 2012).

Such developments are concerning for several reasons. First there are the vast amounts of energy required to air-condition human environments (Isaac and van Vuuren, 2008). Then there is the suggestion that becoming accustomed to climate control in one context could make people soon want it in others (Moezzi, 2009; Parkhurst and Parnaby, 2008). Pushing this suggestion further, we can discern the spectre of future 'indoor societies' (Hitchings, 2010) that no longer venture outside because they feel incapable of dealing with ambient variation under a new regime of 'thermal monotony' (Healy, 2008) and 'air-conditioning addiction' (Candido et al., 2010; Brager and de Dear, 2003). It is with such ideas in mind that some scholars have demonstrated the varied adaptations that people continue to display (de Dear and Brager, 2001; Nicol et al., 2012). As they highlight, those found in different parts of the world continue to possess quite different ideas about the most 'comfortable' ambient temperatures and quite different skills for living with their local climates. This is valuable work in fighting against the processes of convergence described above. Yet these engineers and building scientists have also tended to undertake larger quantitative surveys. Such studies provide valuable evidence of persistent variation in the conditions people deem comfortable but say less about the cultural changes that encourage some ways of keeping warm or cool to spread and others to become increasingly obsolete. This leaves us with more to learn about the 'moving target' (Nicol and Roaf, 2005) of tolerable ambient temperature as different social groups come to achieve thermal comfort in some ways instead of others.

It is here that the qualitative methods more popular amongst sociologists, anthropologists and human geographers have started be drawn on since these research strategies are well suited to exploring the changing role of air-conditioning in everyday life. Recent projects in this vein have extended historical accounts of the rise of air-conditioning in America (Cooper, 1998; Ackermann, 2002) where this has reshaped a number of routine social practices (Prins, 1992; Arsenault, 1984) by examining the cultural changes linked to its subsequent international expansion. These have highlighted how air-conditioning supports new forms of domestic sociability in Australia (Strengers, 2008), how not having to endure heat in India has become a marker of middle class distinction (Wilhite, 2008), and how recent trends in Asian interior design are predicated on the assumption of artificially cool indoor conditions (Winter, 2013). Then there is the case of young Singaporeans who believe protracted exposure has made them more physically sensitive than their forebears (Hitchings and Lee, 2008) and London professionals who are rendered relatively oblivious to the outdoor environment because they are busy and their ambient conditions are unchanging (Hitchings, 2010). There are also studies of Australian office workers who feel they have different thermal needs by virtue of their originating country (Healey and Webster-Mannison, 2012) and those who have retired from the UK to Spain for whom air-conditioning is one of many possible strategies for coping with comparatively hot summers (Fuller and Bulkeley, 2013).

Explicitly or otherwise, these studies are often indebted to the argument that we may benefit from defining 'thermal comfort' differently (Chappells and Shove, 2005). The contention here has been that, if we understand thermal comfort as a 'scientific matter' of human physiology, as has often been the case, we often find ourselves drawing more general conclusions about the ideal temperatures for people. This naturally positions building managers as those who should cater to what cannot help but appear as relatively docile sets of imagined occupants. Instead it may be better to understand comfort as a 'cultural matter' with regard to how different social groups come to desire it to various degrees and achieve it through various means. The value of this redefinition stems from how it immediately repositions comfort as the responsibility of a much wider range of constituents and promotes creative thinking about how we might best influence the varied ways in which people currently keep warm or cool (see, for example, Shove et al., 2008). However, though this conceptual move has broadened the air-conditioning debate and prompted some original ways of researching this topic, it is also true that keeping the focus on 'thermal comfort' obscures the many possible reasons why climate control might be understood as both a positive and