



The backstage of urban ambiances: When atmospheres pervade everyday experience



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 May 2013
Received in revised form
2 July 2014
Accepted 4 July 2014
Available online 31 July 2014

Keywords:

Urban ambiances
Atmospheres
Sensory environments
Affective tonality
Urban design
Ordinary experience

ABSTRACT

This paper explores a new way of designing and experimenting with the city. How are we to conceptualize the changes in contemporary cities on the basis of their ambiances? What about the sensory and emotional production of urban territories? What is at stake when our aim is no longer to design space but also to install an atmosphere? In order to answer such questions, rather than offering a formal definition of what an ambiance may be, I intend to show from what it proceeds, on what it is based, what it produces and transforms in urban life. The focus is exploring five ambiance operating modes in the province of urban design: establishing the sensory as a field of action, composing with affective tonalities, giving consistency to urban situations, maintaining spaces over time and playing with imperceptible transformations. Each of these operating modes can account for how a physical environment manages to become a lived ambiance, how a world of built forms manages to become a world of sensory atmospheres. Starting with the sensory environment itself, I show how it is increasingly becoming a domain of design and research. Then I emphasize on the role of affect in everyday urban situations and daily social activities. Thirdly I explore the pervasive character of an ambiance and question its capacity to unify an experience. I continue by pointing out the temporal dynamic of an ambiance and the necessity to sustain a sense of continuity of the environment. Finally I emphasize on the importance of micro-phenomena in the quality and immersive power of an ambiance. These five operating modes of ambiance enables us to focus on the very ordinary sensory fabric of urban life and its issues.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I propose to explore a new way of designing and experimenting with the city. How are we to conceptualize the changes in contemporary cities on the basis of their ambiances? What about the sensory production of urban territories? What happens when our aim is no longer just to design space but also to install an atmosphere? Such questions are situated at the intersection of issues of a social, aesthetic, urban, ecological and political nature. I would like to advance a hypothesis: we are currently witnessing what I call the 'setting of ambiance' in urban spaces. Consider the conditioned environments of shopping malls, the planted areas of eco-neighbourhoods, the process of 'heritagization' of historic town centres, the privatization of gated communities, the new scenes of the creative city, and the functional atmospheres of public transport facilities: in each case, every effort is made to create an ambiance, to channel sensations and to make

people feel a particular way. In talking about setting ambiance in urban spaces, I hope to better explain how changes in contemporary cities proceed and pervade everyday life. The sensory domain have some relevance in this respect, primarily because it is one of the most manifest and immediate expressions of changes in our environment. To give an account of the sensory ecology of the city, I do not intend to offer a formal definition of what an ambiance may be, but rather to show from what it proceeds, on what it is based, what it produces and transforms in urban life.

But before going farther, let me briefly present the context of the notion of *ambiance*. Obviously this notion is very close to the notion of atmosphere, more widely used in the English-speaking world. In the introduction for this special issue on *Staging atmospheres* Mikkel Bille, Peter Bjerregaard and Tim Flohr Sørensen develop the notion of atmosphere with precision and references to the previous work, so why should we use the term *ambiance* and not only *atmosphere*? The notion of *ambiance* has a long history in French research and one of its major origins lies in the field of architecture, as well as the important tradition of the Situationist thought, particularly that of Guy Debord. Closely involved in the built and

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material dimension of inhabited spaces and in the sensitive dimension of architecture and urban design, the domain of ambiances has grown steadily over the last twenty years (Amphoux, 1998; Amphoux et al., 2004; Augoyard, 1995a; Thibaud, 2004, 2012; Thibaud and Duarte, 2013).

Originally labelled '*maîtrise des ambiances*' (well-tempered environment), this classic discipline in architectural studies deals with the propagation of signals in the built space and with the built environment characterized from a physical point of view. This discipline gradually opened up to sensory perception, social practices and aesthetics experience (Augoyard, 2000; Thibaud, 2002). Thus, the notion of ambiance became more complex over time. It became also increasingly interdisciplinary, articulating built forms, sensible forms and social forms. Social sciences found their place and combined with design and engineering sciences. This model of intelligibility of ambiance gradually developed its own categories of analysis (sound effects, frames of visibility, ambient objects, sensitive formants), its *in situ* methods of investigation (commented city walks, recurrent observation, sound reactivation, sensitive ethnography) and its modeling tools (declarative modeling, morphodynamic models, inverse simulation). Numerous fieldwork has tested and expanded such research tools (Augoyard, 2011; Grosjean and Thibaud, 2001; Thibaud and Siret, 2012). As examples, areas as diverse as underground spaces (Chelkoff and Thibaud, 2000), spaces of mobility (Thomas, 2005), courthouse (Siret and Balaÿ, 2006) or sacred spaces (Peneau, 2007) were approached in terms of ambiance and in a wide variety of issues. Understandably, the domain of ambiance has never ceased to rely on fieldwork and to develop an operational dimension in order to become a research field in itself. It also developed instruments for scientific exchange as a bilingual interdisciplinary journal (<http://ambiances.revues.org>), an international network (www.ambiances.net) and a quadrennial Congress (*Faire une ambiance/Creating an atmosphere*, Grenoble, 2008; *Ambiances en actes/Ambiances in action*, Montreal, 2012). Hence, from a theoretical point of view the notion of ambiance is not fundamentally different from the notion of atmosphere (a more thorough comparison would however be worth investigating). It seems to be just a question of stressing particular aspects of subject-object relationships: ambiance tends to emphasize more the situated, the built and the social dimensions of sensory experience while atmosphere is more affective, aerial and political oriented. Also, ambiance already has a long tradition of fieldwork, interdisciplinary tools and design activity while atmosphere is more grounded on philosophical, ontological and geographical issues. Nevertheless, we can observe the meeting of two different traditions on the basis of the same area of questioning. In keeping the word *ambiance* in the following text I wish to establish a bridge between these two perspectives by using both French and English references, and also to highlight the operational character of the notion of *ambiance*.

Because it is an undefined, vague object, *ambiance* does not appear to be something that is easy to analyse or to circumscribe. And by challenging the distinction between object and subject (Böhme, 1997) it even casts doubt on the possibility of its own objectivation. Maybe a certain degree of bias needs to be introduced, or an indirect approach adopted in order to reflect this essential component of dwelling. The question would no longer be "what is an *ambiance*?" but "what does an *ambiance* make it possible to be, to experience, to do, to perceive and to share?" In other words, positing *ambiance* in terms of potential, by demonstrating that it makes it possible to reflect upon the transition from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, or from the ill- to the clearly defined (Kaufmann, 1977). In some ways, *ambiance* may be considered as the basis through which the sensitive world is configured day to day, or the field from which phenomena emerge

and split up. Here, we are concerned with how the world is conferred with memorable and recognisable forms that also serve to give it a familiar face.

The aim of this paper is purposely exploratory. I intend to question how the notion of *ambiance* can help us to move the focus from physical space – from the organization of architectural and urban elements – to what will be the affective or experienced space. Thus the contribution relates itself to a contemporary emphasis on experience design. The article does not directly address the urban designing but rather the characterizations of different perspectives on urban design. Several *ambiance operating modes* in the province of urban design will be the focus: establishing the sensory as a field of action, composing with affective tonalities, giving consistency to urban situations, maintaining spaces over time and playing with imperceptible transformations. Each of these operating modes can be considered as a general framework from which urban environments can be both experienced and designed. Starting with the sensory environment itself, I will show how it is becoming an increasing domain of design and research. Then I will emphasize on the role of affect in everyday urban situations and daily social activities. Thirdly I will explore the pervasive character of an *ambiance* and question its capacity to unify an experience. I will continue by pointing out the temporal dynamic of an *ambiance* and the necessity to sustain a sense of continuity of the environment. Finally I will emphasize on the importance of micro-phenomena in the quality and immersive power of an *ambiance*. Each of these propositions intend to go beyond the classical dichotomy between city dwellers and urban designers. The underlying argument is that *ambiances* can be considered as a common ground and a backstage which involve both and inextricably the activity of inhabitants and the one of professionals.

2. Establishing the sensory as a field of action

We should start by noting the growing attention paid to the sensory dimensions of urban space: lighting plans and sound design; systems to deploy sounds, illumination, air conditioning, ventilation and odours. All these devices work on the sensory matter itself and make the medium the prime basis of design. To put it differently, today's urban ecology increasingly relies on explicit strategies to sensitize inhabited space. Something we might have taken for granted and certainly occurred in the background – air, sound, odour, heat and light – is becoming one of the basic stakes in urban transformation. Urban development no longer only concerns built forms and spaces, but also sensory environments and climatic envelopes.

This approach, in which the body and senses are allowed to exist, scorns strict disciplinary divisions and operates within a very broad scientific spectrum. Whether one wants to study the fit between the sensory and the social (Augoyard, 1979; Haroche, 2008; Laplantine, 2005; Sansot, 1986; Sauvageot, 2003), update cultural perception schemata (Classen, 1993; Communications, 2010; Howes, 2003, 2004; Stoller, 1989), write a history of sensibilities (Chartier et al., 1987; Corbin, 1998), take measure of lived space (Berque, 2000; Frémont, 1976; Light and Smith, 2004; Rodaway, 1994; Seamon, 1979; Tuan, 1977; Whyte, 1988), design architecture for the senses (Holl et al., 2007; Pallasmaa, 1996; Rahm, 2009; Zumthor, 2006), decipher the sensory dimensions of urban spaces (Lucas and Mair, 2008; Lynch, 1990; Paquot, 2006; Sennett, 1994; *The Senses and Society*, 2007; Zardini, 2005), rethink the place of the senses in philosophical thought (Abram, 1996; Berleant, 1992; Guenancia, 1998; Rancière, 2004; Serres, 1985; Stiegler, 2005), derail common perception through artistic performance (Johnstone, 2008; Jones, 2006; Storr, 2007), focus on the notion of

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