



Lighting up cosy atmospheres in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of light to stage atmospheres in a residential area of Copenhagen, Denmark. Both natural and electrical lights enable visibility but they also impart a certain sense of place that influences the way people behave and feel. The article investigates how light is about more than individual perception and plays a crucial role in orchestrating a sense of community, solitude and 'secureness' at home. Such staging of atmospheres, it is argued, importantly relies on cultural premises and notions of intimacy, informality and relaxation, encompassed in the Danish term *hygge*, or cosiness. Light frames such sense of secureness and cosiness by allowing for visual oscillations between separation and connection of people, places and things. In this way, investigating the use of light in shaping atmosphere offers a lens to explore how connections and networks of people, emotions and things, shape the home and links interior and exterior spaces.

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1. Introduction

The very essence of working with light is the relationship with people, with what they feel Lighting designer Roger Narboni

Laganier and Pol, 2011: 337.

In wintertime, the sun sets at around 3.30 pm in Islands Brygge, a residential area of the harbour close to central Copenhagen, Denmark. From the street, one can see how each apartment is illuminated as darkness descends. As the inhabitants return home from work, the neighbourhood is slowly illuminated and comes to life during the evening. First the light in the hallway is lit as people open the entrance door, then the kitchen, and the living room, perhaps augmented by a shifting coloured light from the television, only to be turned off again in each room as the evening draws on until, in the end, the light in the bedroom dims. Much the same procedure occurs in summer time, however, the role of artificial lighting is more pronounced during winter. At this time, people in Denmark on average triple their use of candlelight, while garlands of electrical lights decorate the balconies of apartments and mingle with the public street lighting. In an interview with Nicole, a young student living in Islands Brygge, she explains her view of this extensive use of light during winter, which sets a particular frame for social life:

It is of course a waste of energy, but I have to admit, that I find it really, really, cosy (*hyggeligt*), and I also have strings of lights on the balcony all winter long. From sunset and all night long, until early next morning, because I find it so cosy (*hyggeligt*), when a little bit of light reaches the inside from out there. In the same way, I love to see the light on the other side of the street and see that people are at home. In this way, there is a little bit of life around me, and I can see that I am not the only one awake around midnight. Light offers a sense of secureness (*tryghed*) and community (*fællesskab*).

Nicole knows the curtain design and flowers in the windows of the neighbouring apartments, but not the people. And yet when people on the other side of the street light their candles in the windows, she does the same and feels that in this way she is part of a larger community beyond the confines of her apartment (Fig. 1). Through her lighting practices, she feels that she helps bringing the inhabitants together as a neighbourhood by creating cosy atmosphere. This may not be the only reason why she lights candles and electrical lights, but a good bonus, as she explained. Her own personal presence would, in this sense, extend beyond the walls of the apartment, and the neighbours would, in turn, be present in her life. This intimacy made her feel that they had something in common despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that she knew none of them, often not even what they looked like.

Light is commonly conceptualised as a material and perceptual phenomenon, a medium through which the world appears (Bille

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Fig. 1. 'Candles in the windows in Islands Brygge'. Photo by Matilde Lykke.

and Sørensen, 2007; Ingold, 2000). Yet the question addressed in this article is whether there is not more to light than merely as a medium for subjective perception? More than simply the functional practice of increasing visibility for activities to take place, the article shows how lighting practices also create, shape, and express people's moods and ideas of domesticity, self and neighbourhood. How is light used to shape emotions *in* and *of* the home by questioning the limits of its extension? Following this is another question of how a sense of community is shaped through ideas of sharing a 'light culture' that make people feel at home, secure, and a part of something else. Light, it is thereby argued, is more than simply a medium of individual visual perception or visual norms, but further connects to issues of symbolizing well-being and community affiliation (cf. Helliwell, 1996). Pushing the analysis even further, it is also argued that light and luminosity instantiates a particular kind of affective presence (cf. Armstrong, 1971), which shapes social and material life by relating to the concept of atmosphere, as explored in this special issue. Attention to orchestrations of light in shaping the presence of the world hence also brings focus on the atmospheres that people are opting for and the dynamics through which they are engaging the world by tying together vision and cultural expectations, material culture, emotions, and bodily gestures and practices. In this atmospheric take on light and visibility, rather than a question of what is visible and what is not, the issue becomes one of how light continuously take part in tinturing the atmospheres that act as the invisible medium for expressing

and unfolding social and emotional life. The central argument put forward in this article is therefore inspired by the opening quote in that the essence of people's visual staging of their homes lies in the feelings that light stirs – feelings that are culturally informed and may also tie into ideas of partaking in a neighbourhood community.

To explore the role of light and atmospheres in shaping the sense of home and community, I will draw on anthropological fieldwork from the area of Islands Brygge, Copenhagen, covering 60 recorded interviews in people's homes, participant observation, as well as large amount of informal interviews addressing the use of light.¹

2. Atmospheres and social life

In a recent chapter of his book *Being Alive* (2011, chapter 10), Tim Ingold draws on Gernot Böhme's (1993) conceptualisation of atmosphere to argue that sensuous experiences are intrinsically a part of the material phenomenon, and not something we obtain from its 'surface'. The sky, in Ingold's example, cannot be separated from its luminosity, nor the waves from their sound; the light is the sky, the sound is the wave. Attention to atmosphere, as per Böhme, captures the co-presence of things, bodies and experiences. In sympathy with Ingold's argument, the foregrounding of light here as part of human perception is not meant to entail a separation of light from the experience of the object, as will become evident, nor aimed to reduce the relevance of the other senses to the experience of atmospheres. Light, especially that which can be artificially produced, is however a particularly effective means of 'toning' the visual experience, which does not exclude other sensual modalities. Immersed in the world of things, light makes things visible in a way that tinges the experience of a thing, while other things remain invisible.

Ingold's brief exploration of the term 'atmosphere', however, also focuses on the individual experience as evidence of an assumed universal experience, ignoring how atmospheres are dynamic, manipulated, culturally experienced and continually evaluated in people's lives, for instance through negotiating power, gender roles and a sense of community. Rather than merely encountering the sun, wind and waves, new technologies changes the quality of light, air, and sound. Such technologies are increasingly shaping our experience of spaces and thus offer new potentials for orchestrating the atmospheric engagement with the world. These technologies may precisely create an awareness of a separation of surface from object, when for instance fluorescent blue light in public toilets make drug injection difficult. Attending to atmosphere is hence also a critical project that highlights ways of staging architecture, behaviour and subjectivities. It goes beyond ideals of living in harmony or of individual experiences and instead tying in to the shared experience of co-presences, or even a lack of separation between mind, bodies, surfaces and material phenomena. With this in mind, I thus partly agree with Ingold's brief focus

¹ The informants range from young students to retired people of both genders, well-distributed across income class, from those on social welfare to CEOs. From 2008 to 2010 I lived in a modern apartment in Islands Brygge, where my university office was located in a mid-20th century office building, thus adding to an understanding of the everyday practices, beyond mere interviews. Contact was established by walking door to door, as well as acquaintances living there who started a snowball effect. Interviews were conducted from summer 2010 to winter 2012, all year round, although a large section was conducted in fall and winter. While the study is based on qualitative fieldwork from a small area of Copenhagen, it is not intended to provide "an ethnography of Islands Brygge". There are no special lighting practices occurring in Islands Brygge as compared to elsewhere in Denmark, although of course, the particular architectural styles may not be represented everywhere in such close proximity. The emphasis on subdued light and cosiness is, despite variations, a general trait in Danish lighting practices.

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