



HAL
open science

The three dynamics of urban ambiances

Jean-Paul Thibaud

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Paul Thibaud. The three dynamics of urban ambiances. LaBelle, Brandon and Martinho, Claudia. Sites of Sound: Of Architecture and the Ear, Errant Bodies Press, pp.43-53, 2011. hal-00995497

HAL Id: hal-00995497

<https://hal.science/hal-00995497>

Submitted on 10 Jul 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

The three dynamics of urban ambiances

Jean-Paul Thibaud

In *Sites of Sound: Of Architecture and the Ear Vol. 2.*
Brandon LaBelle & Claudia Martinho (eds.)
Errant Bodies Press, Berlin, 2011, pp. 43-53

Urban space provides numerous ambiances to be felt with all the senses. Whether we think of a lively outdoor marketplace or a dull parking lot, an attractive historical center or a casual subway station, the very way we relate to those places is based on the sensory experience they involve. It is a matter of light and colour, sound, smell, touch and heat, and also the manner we walk and talk, move and look, relate and behave. Urban ambiances operate each time a subtle interweaving of synaesthesia and kinaesthesia occurs, as a complex mixture of sensation and movement.

To put it in a few words, an ambiance can be defined as a time-space qualified from a sensory point of view. It relates to the sensing and feeling of a place. Each ambiance involves a specific mood expressed in the material presence of things and embodied in the way of being of city dwellers. Thus, ambiance is both subjective and objective: it involves the lived experience of people as well as the built environment of the place.

How is it possible to account for the sensory variations of a public space? In what respect are urban ambiances to be described as a process of continuous creation? In what way do sounds and social practices contribute to sensitizing the urban experience? By exploring such questions I aim to reveal the way in which an ambiance emerges and disintegrates. Two considerations prompt these questions: first, urban ambiances are never laid down once and for all, rather they are constantly evolving, always in production; second, they cannot be dissociated from the situated activity of city-dwellers. In other words our hypothesis is that the notion of ambiance makes it possible to conceptualise the mutual determination of the built environment and social practice.

We should start by pointing out that urban ambiances cannot be reduced to a simple backdrop providing a framework for the activity of city-dwellers. If that was the case *in situ* perception would only evolve as a form of disconnected contemplation, based on the subject's withdrawal from their immediate environment. On the contrary, by endowing the urban space with particular properties and qualities, ambiances engage passers-by physically, connecting them to the site. As we shall see in due course, ambiances prompt forms of movement, expression and perception that are an essential part of our public conduct. Far from being simple epiphenomena of practical action, ambiances place activities in a context and invest situations at a sensory motor level. In other words the urban environment cannot be defined as a homogenous, neutral container into which various practices fit. On the contrary it is a heterogeneous ecological habitat that shapes practices, which in turn affect it.

Furthermore, city-dwellers may use the resources of a site to accomplish their activities, but the resources are much more than just a receptacle. The way people behave in public itself contributes to an ambiance in so far as it amplifies or neutralises certain sensory phenomena, exacerbating or altering certain properties of the built environment. As we can see from everyday language, people can at one and the same time "soak up" and "create" an ambiance. From this point of view the sensory contexts of a city are only partly based on the formal, physical characteristics of the built environment. Such considerations have serious consequences because they confirm the relative non-completion of ambiances given their strict spatial components and encourage us to draw conclusions based on the expressive power of bodies in motion and related social practices.

As I shall show below we may distinguish between three main dynamics involved in the creation of an ambiance. In the first case, ambiance emerges as the place is brought into tune with the conduct it supports. I refer to this as a “tuned ambiance” in the sense that the sensory phenomena reflect the close affinity that has developed between impressions and expressions, between what is felt and what is produced, between the subject and the world. In this case ambiance is thematized in terms of the *Umwelt* and engages an ecology of the lived world. In the second case, ambiance involves slight variations of the sensory context of the place. I call this a “modulated ambiance” in the sense that sensory phenomena fluctuate over time and diversify in line with activities. In this case ambiance is more akin to an updating of affordances and engages an ecology of situated perception. In the third case, ambiance may emerge through conditioning of the place by social practice itself. This I refer to as a “framed ambiance” in the sense that sensory phenomena are subjected to a formatting process arising out of the accomplishment of the actions underway. In this case, ambiance becomes primarily an instrument for giving shape to social situations and is consequently covered by an ecology of relations in public.

I should stress that these various processes do not refer to different types of ambiance but rather to the particular dynamics by which they emerge. In this sense they complement one another and always work simultaneously. The proposed distinction is therefore above all of a heuristic order. This distinction aims to clarify three basic ecological processes that constitute an ambiance, involving respectively tuning, modulating and formatting. It should also be noted that each of these processes involves specific domains of thought and conceptual tools. It is consequently necessary to bear in mind that the three regimes that I have identified relate to three overlapping points of view all relating to the notion of ambiance.

Acclimatisation : tuned ambiance

Acclimatisation refers to a process by which ambiance and conduct are brought into resonance, with the result that it is no longer possible to dissociate one from the other. In this case the activity of city-dwellers is tuned as much as possible to the sensory context of the place, simply expressing in its way the existing atmosphere. In a sense the public becomes the ambiance, and *vice-versa*. This fitting proceeds from an immediacy that leaves little room for a reflective attitude, because subject and environment merge so totally, vibrating in unison.

Feelings. The process of acclimatisation involves background feelings that may be thematized in terms of affectivity. From this point of view an ambiance cannot be reduced to a sum of physical signals, nor yet a succession of distinct phenomena depending on the sensory mode being considered. Ambiance is more a synergy between the senses that involves the emotional aspect of a situation. A quality of sound, light or fragrance is sensed in a single movement that confers unity on the sensory world. It should be stressed that these affective dispositions are distinct from the six basic emotional categories identified by Darwin (fear, anger, sadness, disgust, surprise, joy) in that most of the time they remain pre-conscious and often go unnoticed. It should also be noted that these impulses operate below the opposition between subject and object. They simultaneously involve a sense of self and the world.

For example in places saturated with all sorts of stimuli, the ambiance may be felt to be dizzying, depressing, alarming, disturbing or frightening. These qualifiers indicate the place's dominant quality as well as a rhythmic tension calling into play all the senses. In other words the subject does not so much pick up on a particular noise as on the alarming character of the sound environment, not so much the brightness of an object or surface as the disturbing aspect of the light environment, not so much the presence of a smell as the upsetting effect of the olfactive surroundings, etc. In so far as it contributes to the emotional tone, an ambiance does not apply to particular objects or stimuli, but rather colours the situation in its entirety. Phenomena are conjugated with one another to give an overall aspect

to the space through which the subject is passing. The tendency to bustling activity and hurrying cannot be separated from feelings: the world is swarming, crawling with people in every direction, throbbing. Everything contributes to this excessive stimulation, to an overall tension, a sustained rhythm without it being possible to pin down a precise origin and clearly distinguish between the various phenomena.

In other places or on other occasions, the ambiance may be perceived as peaceful, restful, relaxing or tranquil. In this case an overall sense of unwinding is predominant, embodied in gentle lighting and filtered natural light, a subdued, sound environment, and relative freedom of movement and a slow gait, etc. Here again sensory phenomena overlap, joining up in a common rhythm that gives them a single tonality. Subjects experience a feeling of relief as they float, allow themselves to be lulled, immersed in or borne forward by the environment. Whereas the stressful atmosphere described above tends to be lived as a constraint, here we encounter an attitude of availability towards the surrounding world.

In short, we have here a form of receptiveness that links up with specific corporeal states and brings the senses into synergy. The two extreme cases we have just illustrated show that there are various ways of experiencing an atmosphere and being gripped by it. Obviously other types of context, no doubt more subtle in form, also trigger our propensity for being affected. Be that as it may, in their capacity as non-objectifying acts, that may be seen more as overall situations rather than finite objects, emotional tonalities seem to have a unifying effect on the various sensory registers.

Intercorporeity. Acclimatisation also involves the process of being-together that may be analysed in terms of "intercorporeity". It is here that the close entanglement of bodies comes into play, as if they were connected to each other by invisible, but very powerful threads. Individuals adopt shared rhythms and behaviour patterns, which may vary depending on circumstance and place. These common ways of being are based on collective forms of motivity.

In some cases the environment is so full of constraints that individual expression melts into and is diluted in a collective pool. Such dilution of identities occurs, for instance, when the subject can no longer hear their own sound output. Voices melt into the din, much as steps are drowned by the indistinct uproar. It is hard to tell who is producing what sound. Not only is human output all mixed up without any chance of differentiation, but human sounds may mix with mechanical noises too: the murmur of voices merges with the urban drone, the mass of conversations may be confused with the noise of a fountain or escalator, etc. Here, sonic ambiance defies any attempt to break it down into identifiable signals. It is more a sort of whole, a confused uproar or sound fog, leaving little room for single events or noticeable features. Similarly, at a kinaesthetic level the gestures of each person take part in an overall movement, driving each other. Crowd conditions thus tend to create a form of agitation from which the subject has difficulty escaping. In this case the imaginary of the milling and swarming expresses the relative lack of differentiation between individuals who move at more or less the same speed. The gestures of each person take part in an overall movement and drive one another. But more generally, social interaction can only occur if interpersonal behaviour is brought into phase.

The underlying mechanism of bodily adjustment consists in adapting one's conduct to suit local conditions and circumstances. Depending on where they are passers-by begin to whisper or, on the contrary, raise their voices. Some locations are places where one talks loudly, in others it is unthinkable to raise one's voice. It is as if the ambiance in question had to be extended collectively, as if some tacit injunction required the public to adjust its behaviour bringing it into line with that of others. In the same way urban spaces differentiate themselves by prompting different ways of walking. Some lend themselves to an ambling stroll, others are only fit to be crossed in haste. Passers-by vary their gait depending on the place in which they are, speeding up or slowing down, dragging their feet or walking briskly. They meander more or walk more gently when the tension drops or when time slows down. Whether we focus on sound output or the pace of movement, the problem may be posed in the same terms, the possible sharing of an embodied temporality. Or in other words, the

rhythmic agreement that develops in a given ambiance is due to bodies being brought into temporal phase, permitting the existence of a common world.

Variation: modulated ambiance

Variation refers to city-dwellers power to modulate urban ambiances, which vary depending on how a place is used and occupied. Public perceptions and actions may be interpreted at two levels: on the one hand they are accomplished as a function of the affordances offered by the environment; on the other they have the power to activate or deactivate some of these resources. Paradoxically although whole swathes of literature have addressed the way the built environment makes action possible, very little work has looked at it as a medium by which inhabitants may express themselves. Accomplishing an action is based to a large extent on data provided by our surroundings, but we should not forget that this is not achieved without simultaneously modulating the framework on which action is based.

Territory. The built environment favours certain practices by offering them suitable supports, but the practices themselves change the environment's properties. Just compare a place when it is busy or deserted, and it is immediately apparent how much the physical presence of the public changes territorial structure. For example the way the public fans out over a space affects the scope for movement across it. A densely occupied space may force passers-by to slow down or perhaps even make a detour. Human presence configures the room available for movement by creating areas of varying fluidity or obstruction and setting a specific rhythm for the space being crossed.

Favourite meeting points temporarily organise a place's sound. A sudden cry or the murmur of the crowd, the shouts of children or applause, can give new depth to a space, making audible a source that is still out of sight. Depending on its location and the manner in which it propagates, such sound output, linked to ongoing activities, highlights the existence of certain areas to the detriment of others. The sound actions of the public provide clues to their presence, while at the same time revealing the spatial morphology of the site. In short the different ways in which we occupy and frequent a space impact on the sensory composition of the urban territory. The production of a sonic territory often involves two or more spaces overlapping. The sound atmosphere is not just here, in the immediate proximity, nor yet only over there, at a distance, but simultaneously here and over there. From this point of view the built environment may be defined in terms of material systems, which furnish resources for action, modifying practice at the same time as they are updated to suit the usages to which they lend themselves.

The activity of city-dwellers may be seen as filtering or amplifying the practical possibilities that a space affords. Affirming the public's capacity to modify the sensory amenities of a place goes hand-in-hand with recognition of the modular and circumstantial character of the built environment.

Details. As we shall see it often takes very little, almost nothing, to change an ambiance. What may seem a minor detail or an anecdotal phenomenon of no great importance is sometimes enough to qualify the whole of the sensory environment.

Walking provides a remarkable illustration of this point, because it provides a way of modifying most of a place's sensory qualities. In close relation to the overall morphology of the site the ground surface plays an essential role here. Its various properties – smooth or rough, firm or soft, matt or reflective, absorbent or reverberating, etc. – are updated in and by a visitor's movement. The ground does not only provide an affordance for walking, but also the material basis for various gaits, revealing itself in its relation to sound and light. Some surfaces encourage us to drag our feet or make us step cautiously. In other cases we stamp, stumble or slide more easily. The various ways of walking resonate differently and qualify the place sound-wise by giving it a specific rhythm and duration. A place is consequently not atemporal, coming alive thanks to both distinctive qualities of motion and sound. It should also be noted that some surfaces are more sonorous than others, reverberating more, making it easier for walkers to express themselves in sound. In this respect walking is more

or less audible, depending on the place being traversed, with the ground and surroundings amplifying or dampening the sound of movement. Furthermore the manner in which the foot comes into contact with the ground depends on both the physical properties of the ground and the type of footwear. The body of the walker itself is endowed with attributes that play a part in modulating the sound atmosphere: stiletto or platform heels, for instance (but also wheelie suitcases or roller-skates, strollers or wheelchairs, etc.). Steps may crunch, squeak, click, scrape, rub, ring out or resonate. Sometimes footsteps produce an indistinct noise, a relatively continuous, dull murmur. In other cases they trigger unexpected events by revealing uneven patches of ground (a loose paving stone, a rocking manhole cover, etc.). They may even tell a story when each footfall is sufficiently clear for an observer to be able to follow a person's progress and visualize what is going on. Even if countless mechanical sounds invade the public arena in cities (escalators, fans, piped music), the lack of motor traffic in underground areas and pedestrian concourses helps to make footsteps stand out in the sound environment. The ground is thus an instrument of sound modulation in a place with which the public plays.

I have taken the ground as a paradigmatic example of the public's sensory variation. Other surfaces with which we come into contact, such as stairs or doors could be described in a similar way. Without going into detail, simply opening a door may reveal a view, add light, cause a draft, let in smells or sounds, etc. In any case, we should note that the material components of the space enable the public to modulate its sensory qualities with considerable subtlety. The tiniest detail of a built system may filter or neutralise the expressive force driving the activities underway.

Mark. The public does not often allow itself to be apprehended as an undifferentiated whole, as an indistinct mass investing an equally homogeneous space. Certain personal attributes and situated practices provide a way of making one's mark, of making a particular display or forming a distinct group.

Smells, smoke, heat and sounds are not only due to the built environment and its physical characteristics. They denote and express a human presence. The smell of perfume or cigarettes may mingle with others emerging from nearby shops. Smells tend to disappear into ventilation or air-conditioning systems or persist by impregnating fabrics, but they nevertheless sometimes emerge from the ambient environment. The trail left by a perfume or the area tainted by the smoke from a cigarette provide a sensory trace of past or present usage. Such traces, of varying evanescence or persistence, personality or anonymity, are the result of a place being used. But at the same time they requalify it. In the same way, heat varies as a function of a place's frequentation, a large number of bodies in movement generating a far from negligible output of calories. Whatever the scope for air circulation, a dense and lasting crowd tends to warm up a closed space and lend it a character it lacked earlier the same day.

Regarding sound, a child's shout fills a deserted, resonant place, exaggerating its presence, much as a group suddenly entering a square may produce a wave-like movement that reconfigures the whole of the sound space. In addition, though we demonstrated above that places tend to be embodied in shared rhythms, this is not always the case. It is enough for a single person to start running through a mass of slow-moving pedestrians, to falter and start looking for their way, or to stumble unexpectedly in the midst of the advancing crowd, for their presence to be noticeable and noticed. These little incidents or micro-events contribute to a place's ambiance, leaving room for improvisation and the unexpected.

Lastly some more or less spontaneous or ritual practices punctuate the atmosphere in public places. The increasingly frequent use of mobile phones, car drivers hooting their horns in celebration of a wedding, and even Saturday-night car-races are just a few examples of the sound events people may use to make their presence felt by others. Similarly the growing use of roller-blades, skateboards, push-bikes and other such wheeled devices significantly change the pace of contemporary urban spaces, enabling new categories of player to enter the arena. Increasingly equipped with roving technology city-dwellers have access to new forms of ostentation and self-expression, which leave their imprint on the urban ambiance.

To sum up, making one's mark consists in leaving an imprint on the ambiance of a place, depositing a perceptible trace or behaving in a singular or unexpected manner. From this point of view an ambiance cannot be reduced to the sum of individual output or self-expression. Rather it engages a continuous, back-and-forth movement between what is ordinary and what becomes remarkable. In this respect the micro-events of daily life serve as a reminder that at any moment an atmosphere may be requalified.

Alteration: framed ambiance

Alteration refers to the work done by the public to format a place's ambiance. The activity of passers-by is so powerful that it tends to form the main framework for this process. City-dwellers do not merely take advantage of the resources offered by a place, but reconfigure the sensory context on which they draw to complete their activities. In a way they produce the very conditions of their actions and transform ambiances into an essentially practical domain.

Field. Depending on how busy a space may be, the conditions of its perception may be affected. It is not so much the sensory qualities that are at issue here as the perceptible world itself, or in other words the scope for accessing, or not, wholly or in part, the surrounding space. More precisely human presence may affect the range of sight and hearing.

Reducing our field of perception and its reach impacts on sight and hearing. Regarding sound our access to distant sources is significantly reduced in a densely packed crowd (a demonstration, the rush-hour crush of pedestrians, busy city-centre shops or narrow streets, etc.). Not only do the bodies limit the propagation of signals over any appreciable distance by forming a screen, but, to an even greater extent, the noise produced (particularly voices and steps) by nearby people tends to drown out more remote sounds. In this case passers-by are immersed in a bath of sound, consisting primarily of scraps of conversation from the people following or preceding us, or coming the other way. In such a context it is above all the human presence and the sound output of the public that determines our range of hearing. Here, as in the case of sight, it seems impossible clearly to distinguish different planes or scales of perception.

Taking the measure of place consists in reconfiguring the spatiality of the place from a perceptive point of view. This concerns the materiality of bodies themselves and their capacity for acting as an obstacle to sight or hearing. Even if they pay particular attention passers-by suffer a restriction in their perceptive field, while at the same time being one of the main factors in this process.

Discernment. Passers-by use their senses to act and interact with others, but they must sometimes cope with problematic situations that cannot be grasped in their immediacy. Some of the information provided by the environment is perceived as incongruous, ambiguous or out of place. In this case the disparity between our perceptive expectations and the information actually received attracts our attention, obliging us to reframe it completely.

Such perceptive disturbances may be caused by the sound or visual environment, or more commonly by the separation of what we see and hear. At a visual level some reflections may multiply or invert views, producing optical illusions that are only resolved as we move forward. Contrary to what is usual, passers-by may see what is going on behind them, catch sight of bits of space upside-down or see the same object simultaneously from several points of view. In addition some light configurations may indicate a point of access that does not actually exist or give the mistaken impression that an exit exists. Passers-by thus tend to stray, only realising afterwards that they have been fooled by an illusion. With regard to sound some spaces are extremely ubiquitous, to such an extent that it is difficult to identify precisely the nature and origin of the sounds they are hearing. It is consequently difficult to rely on the sound environment to find their bearings or direct their course. Thought is required to solve this problem of interpretation. A double-take is sometimes necessary to

check, and perhaps correct, their version. The various anamorphoses of the perceived space require the subject to make inferences, or deductions, testing all of their cognitive skills.

Difficulties often arise due to the disparity between what is seen and heard. For example only a few people seem to be visible, whereas many can be heard. Or on the contrary we may see a group of buskers busily playing and dancing, without being able to hear the music that accompanies their movement. In another instance a historic monument, of great importance as a symbolically and a part of our heritage, only produces insignificant, banal sounds, that seem mainly related to our private lives and much too familiar. Such sounds seem incongruous or out of place, in the sense that they relate to another context. In short there seems to be a mistake on the soundtrack. We are dealing with a form of dissonance between what is seen and heard, with the decontextualization of sound from its visual frame of reference.

Showing discernment involves making sense of the surrounding atmosphere despite the perceptive enigmas encountered. The work of framing carried out by passers-by makes it possible to give a common sense to a shared environment and continue using a public space together. In other words scenic intelligibility is a basic component of public life in that it makes it possible to maintain the self-evident nature of familiar features by finding solutions to perceptive discordances and practical problems.

Conclusion

We have seen that an ambiance emerges from a triple process: acclimatization, variation and alteration. These processes are always at work simultaneously in an ambiance but their respective power nevertheless varies from one atmosphere to another. Some ambiances lend themselves to change more than others, and are more amenable to variation and improvisation. It is a matter of greater or lesser contextual opening or closure, or in other words the relative capacity of an ambiance to integrate, exacerbate or neutralize the expressive power of social activities. For lack of a better term, perhaps we may speak of "contextual oscillation", the ability of an ambiance to polarize, balance or alternate various types of relation to our environment.

Such result brings me to a few last remarks related to the built environment. It is obvious now that with architecture we cannot radically separate the material world from the immaterial one, the spatial forms from the temporal dynamics. Instead of speaking in terms of the beauty of an architectural object, I prefer to focus on the capacity of a built environment to intensify everyday experience and be responsive to its inhabitants. On the other side, architecture is animated, brought to life through our very ordinary actions, gestures and practices. It involves an aesthetics of engagement that is very much grounded on our sense of dwelling. To conclude on this never ending process of dwelling in the world, let me finish with the british social anthropologist Tim Ingold: "In dwelling in the world, we do not act *upon* it, or do things *to* it; rather we move along *with* it. Our actions do not transform the world, they are part and parcel of the world's transforming itself".