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The Cartography of Ambiance

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Abstract. *This paper explores the spatial practice of the cartography of ambiance as a means to parametrically generate ambiances that enable ‘wayfounding’, i.e. the ability to ‘keep your bearings’ in contemporary hypermobile environments. It presents an experimental process led by the author at architecture schools in France and in Japan.*

Keywords: *cartography, ambiance, wayfounding, parametric*

Lost in the media forest

In the words of Toyo Ito, ‘Tarzans’ now live immersed in ‘media forests’, i.e. fluid environments of bits and atoms (Ito, 1999). Under conditions of hypermobility – mobility amplified by information technology – movement implies ever greater degrees of displacement. In our ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000), notions of ‘identity’, ‘home’ and ‘place-making’ (Morley, 2000; Abbas 2011) become a central concern for ‘Tarzans’ or, more generally, neo-nomads – the physically, mentally and digitally mobile creatures of today (Abbas, 2011). ‘Wayfinding’, the ability to navigate *solid* spaces inherently afforded by the ‘imageability’ of built environments (Lynch, 1960), transforms into the need for *wayfounding* – the capability to trailblaze in the ‘media forest’, to ‘keep your bearings’ in *fluid* spaces, either liquid or gaseous – to moor momentarily in a dynamic milieu and make sense of its floating constituents.

Grasping ambiances, as Jean-Paul Thibaud reminds us, relates to spatial ‘embodiment’ in that it considers how space mobilises the body, the aesthetic practice of moving through and processes of inhabiting space, and the relationship between motion and emotion (Thibaud, 2015: p. 45–62). In this sense, ambiances accommodate *wayfounding*.

What then are the parameters of ambiance, how do we decode the ways they describe and determine how we interact with (in) spaces? And how can we parametrically generate ambiances to best enable *wayfounding*?

This paper outlines a process of architectural experimentation led by the author at the Ecole Spéciale d’Architecture (2013–2015) and the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d’Architecture de Paris-Malaquais (2016) in France and Kyoto Seika University (2015) in Japan that explored the cartography of ambiance as a spatial practice through iteratively ‘practising the landscape’ (Thibaud, 2015), drawing from memory, gathering data, and decoding and encoding ambiances.

Liquid and gaseous spaces

Fluid architecture – either liquid or gaseous – is dynamic. It embodies movement, transforms architecture into ever-evolving ‘milieus’ in which creatures – human and non-human – move and interact through space and time. In describing the biomorphic architecture of the media forest (the Sendai Mediatheque, specifically), Ito draws on the Japanese concept of ‘ki’ or ‘spirit’ in which ‘each creature in the cosmos is given a certain form, but creatures are all fluid and constantly changing. They continually undergo phase shifts from gas to liquid to solid, while remaining linked to the world’ (Ito, 1997: p. 121). Thus Ito alludes to both the connection of architecture to its wider environment and its ephemeral nature – revealing an innate potential for sublimation, a phase change from solid to gas.

Liquid architecture is often characterised by smooth spaces whose shapes are generated according to movement (Novak, 1991). Liquid architecture also seeks to offer immersive environments. For example, Nox Architects’ ‘HtwoOexpo’ interactive water pavilion (1997) overlaid electronic and physical spaces to augment the experience of moving through the building: the program, the shape, the digital projections within the interactive space filled with sensors and the use of materials like rubber and water in the form of mist and ice, triggered the senses and destabilised bodily perception (Carpo, Ed., 2012: p. 111–116). In liquids, where Archimedes law of buoyancy counters the force of gravity, the sensory experience is that of weightless bodies immersed in a changing panorama of floating beings.

Gaseous architecture further expands the interiority of architecture and the effect (in) visible particles have on an environment and on people traversing it. Gaseous architecture is less concerned with the envelope – a gas occupies any void available – than by corporeal experiences. To Philippe Rahm, the movement and transformation of air by means of ‘radiation’, ‘conduction’, ‘convection’, ‘pressure’, ‘evaporation’ and ‘digestion’ inform how his ‘meteorological architecture’ affects the body (2009)¹. Diller and Scofidio’s Blur building (2002) renders indistinct the building’s envelope, merging skin and flesh, and encourages people to experience finding their way through the cloud-like fog assisted by smart raincoats.

The environment of Pierre Huyghe’s retrospective exhibit at the Pompidou Center resembles even more closely what we understand as an ambiance that affords *wayfounding* – performing as place in a dynamic sense, where temporaneous conversations enable visitors to dwell in space by creating their own journey². The exhibit reads as a milieu of changing ambiances in which heterogeneous elements serve as props for a variety of situations, some mobile and others fixed, some human (an ice-skater and the visitors themselves), some non-human (bees, ants, an aquarium hosting an hermit crab housed in a shell resembling Brancusi’s sleeping muse), some sensory triggers (the sound of an electronic game reminding us of a cash register in a suburban mall and the cold air surrounding the ice-skating rink), some analog (drawings) and some digital (videos), all contributing to directing our movement. Visitors ‘practiced the landscape’, roaming from one moment to another, mentally linking them to make personal and playful sense of the whole.

1. Philippe Rahm Architectes: www.philipperahm.com (Last accessed May 8, 2016)

2. Pierre Huyghe, Pompidou Center, September 25, 2013 to January 6, 2014

Always in a sort of conversation, albeit muted at times, elements within the exhibition operated as hypertexts of a story yet to be written.

Practicing the landscape

‘Practicing the landscape’, in essence, means conversing with a site. In the documentary film *Stones and Flies: Richard Long in the Sahara* (Haas, 1988) one witnesses the process of dialoguing with a landscape: Long stamps or shuffles his feet until a line is formed on the ground, removes similarly sized stones from a circular area and relocates them to form the perimeter of a circle delimiting the area emptied of stones. Long’s work of land art relates to Francesco Careri’s view of walking, which he emphasises as an ‘aesthetic practice’ in *Walkscape*: ‘Walking takes on a symbolic form that has enabled man to dwell in the world’ (Careri, 2002: p. 20). Experiencing a site by ‘practising the landscape’ means to move consciously through it with the ‘eyes of the skin’ open (Pallasmaa, 2012). This has been a key first step in initiating the cartography of ambiance: students experience, traverse and converse multiple times with an existing urban site. A collaboration with the poet Michaël Batalla taught students how to take notes as the basis for creative writing, reinforcing the importance of not only ‘practising the landscape’ but also attributing words to memorable feelings and impressions that are not immediately palpable. There is, as Tim Ingold reminds us, a strong relationship between moving through space, storytelling and memory (Ingold, 2012: p.27).

The research and graphical analysis of the Garden of Versailles by Catherine Szántó (2010), which was inspired by the notation system developed by the dancer Rudolf Laban, further reveals the importance of choreographing spaces to leave memorable impressions of sensorial immersion. Following the footsteps of Louis the XIV, students visited the Garden to experience firsthand the rhythm of ambiances, by paying attention to the progression through space, the sensory clues – visual (openings from which one sees an element that one would arrive at later), sound (fountains) and smell (the rain expressing the odours of the soil and leaves) – that lead to experiential surprises.

Drawing from memory

Maps drawn from memory highlighted the most memorable impressions of the site – areas of studious or playful atmospheres, zones of smells, agreeable and disagreeable. Produced in groups, they offered a spatial and collective emotional point of view that framed further research. In exploring early maps that link ‘motion to emotion’ such as the ‘Carte du Tendre’, the 17th-century map representing the various landscapes of the territory of love, and the ‘psychogeographic’ maps of the situationists, Giuliana Bruno highlights the power of these drawings, including their inaccuracies or omissions, in invoking the imaginary (Bruno, 2002). Additionally, it is worth noting that the ‘cartographies influencielles’ of Guy Debord had ambition to become a repertoire of noteworthy situations and ‘unités d’ambiances’ whose ‘psychogeographic data’ could eventually be used to create ‘exciting cities’ (Marcolini, 2012: pp. 98–103). In the same line of reasoning, and in light of advances in computing technologies, is there a way to compute a sort of ‘unités d’ambiances’ based on a curated collection of parameters?

Gathering data

Deciding on the set of data to gather is nontrivial. For example, what factors contribute to creating the upbeat ambiance of a given market or what conditions invite users to purchase train tickets from one vending machine instead of another? Focusing initially on a single set of data proved easier for students to grasp. For example, to investigate 'comfort', students curated a set of data including airflow direction and speed, light, temperature (measured both in degrees Celsius and on a 0 to 4 scale of perception). To this data set, one can add the factors of color, reflectiveness of the material environment or frequency at which a door opens and closes (which depends on the movement of people), introducing drafts of cold air. To record a set of data, students used analog or digital tools (e.g. cameras and mobile phone applications) such as meters, lux meters, anemometers, and thermometers. Students documented the time of which they collected data as a way to account for changes over time. They gathered data at equidistance, using an evenly spaced grid or regular points on a linear path, to capture diffuse aspects of a given ambiance in their spatial progression. This step is an important form of composition that exposes the meaning of the data through the close proximity that comes with precision and therein opens up opportunity for creating architecture from a curated collection of ambiances.

Decoding ambiances

Designing operative maps is the most rewarding part of the process. Amongst the speculative drawings presented at the exhibit 'Drawing Ambiances: Alvin Boyarsky and The Architectural Association, Prints, Drawing and Photographs' (2015)³, one could find the drawings for the Parc de la Villette (1985) by Bernard Tschumi, the architect who later explained in the 'Architecture of Disjunction' his interest in integrating techniques of notation to transcribe programmed activities (Tschumi, 1994). For Boyarsky, drawing is operative because it projects an ambiance as an image of what could be, and is therefore architecture regardless of buildability. In his seminal essay on the 'agency of mapping', James Corner highlights the map's potential as a ground to reveal realities: 'As a creative practice, mapping precipitates its most productive effects through a finding that is also a founding; its agency lies neither in its reproduction nor imposition but rather in uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds' (Corner, 1999: p. 213). By depicting the interplay between parameters and their effects, mapping as a form of drawing decodes ambiance in order to suggest ways of encoding ambiances in the built environment.

Usually the first iteration of the map is only illustrative. It shows the raw data collected along the path or the grid and on a number of different layers. It is not yet an analysis of how the factors and parameters of ambiances play together. The first iteration, however, serves the purpose of uncovering connections. For example, a team of students observed that people in a train station chose to wait for others in certain spots – against a wall, near a column, protected from the wind. Interestingly, the first map produced revealed the architecture without depicting its plan. These

3. *Drawing Ambiances: Alvin Boyarsky and The Architectural Association, Prints, Drawing and Photographs*, Rhode Island School of Design Museum, April 24 to August 2, 2015

observations led students to consider ‘architectural attractors’ as a variable for a second iteration of a map using parametric modelling software. Going through several iterations of the map allows for thinking through the interwoven factors that manifest an ambiance.

Encoding architecture

The final step in the process involved modelling architecture using the principles highlighted in the maps. Students who explored the cartography of ‘smellscapes’ (Henshaw, 2014) using as parameters the origin points of odours, their intensity and persistence in the air, temperature differentials (which affect how odours are expressed), the role of the wind in diffusing them, and the role of the built environment in directing airflow, produced a series of sketch models that explored how spaces could calibrate the presence and movement of smells by causing odours to linger or to flow. Similarly, the cartography of ‘intimacy, retreat (“replis” in French) and calm’ led to create spaces using folds (also ‘replis’ in French), while the cartography of ‘perfect equilibrium’ guided design of spaces to induce sensuous ‘shivers’.

The cartography of ambiance operates to transform data into parameters that can be translated into architecture. This experimental process, starting from ambiances perceived as feelings and impressions, before progressing through data-driven visual analysis of situational complexity, led to an experimental architecture that is not meant to correspond to a specific context. Even though each investigation began by analysing a real site, the cartography of ambiance generated through abstraction models for architecture that can adapt to a range of contexts. Sensory parameters collected from ambiances that form an impression can in concert contribute to *wayfounding* – generating fluid and dynamic spaces of affect/effect, an architecture that responds to displacement.

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