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# Ambiance as an instrument to link the tangible-intangible aspects of heritage

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**Abstract.** *I explore how the notion of ambience<sup>1</sup> can help integrate the tangible-intangible divide in heritage urban landscapes (HUL). Ambiances are both subjective and objective and thus involve people's lived experience as well as their physical environment (Thibaud, 2011). The concept of ambiances occupies the space between subject and object (Bohme, 1993). Given its dual nature, ambiances can link disparate dimensions in heritage literature: past-present-and future events; individual and social memory, and instrumental and symbolic meanings (Alves, 2015).*

**Keywords:** *heritage, tangible – intangible, ambiances*

## The UNESCO World Heritage Convention tangible-intangible division

According to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention (adopted in 2003), for the Safeguarding of the Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage, tangible heritage refers to 'buildings and historic places, monuments, artefacts; and objects which bear significance to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture' (UNESCO, 2014a). Intangible cultural heritage in its turn includes inherited traditions from the past but also social practices of contemporary cultural groups. Intangibles have been defined as referring to 'traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts' (UNESCO, 2014b). This paper focuses on exploring the link between the concept of ambiances and intangible culture.

## Intangible culture and the concept of 'ambiances'

We perceive our surrounding world directly as we perceive what places, objects, and people afford to us in terms of action (Gibson, 1979). Our perceptions are fashioned in spaces that are not only of a visible and measurable reality, but also of an immaterial and ephemeral condition. Landscapes therefore are both material and immaterial; both concrete spaces and a system of symbols. The main characteristic of ambiances is that they are neither material nor immaterial but both. Ambiances range from climatic, acoustic, emotional, kinetic, etc. but one of its common features

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*1. Ambiances and atmospheres are used in the literature but in this paper, I have used the word ambiances by drawing from the work of French authors, such as Thibaud.*

is that they are part of an either/or dimension which shapes our ecological way of perception (Thibaud, 2012). The notion of ambiances makes us realise that our immediate perceptions of the world have both visible and non-visible components and thus requires the consideration of all senses and their interplay in the process of perception. In this respect, cultures which do not rely primarily on the visual mode of perception may perceive ambiances diversely than groups that rely primarily on visual modes of perception. Researchers argue that despite different theoretical approaches underlying the examination of ambiances, the concept subsumes three main aspects: social, affective, and political (Thibaud, 2015; Böhme, 2005). These three aspects are directly relevant for the study of historic urban landscapes. However, little has been written on the link of ambiances and HUL. The notion of ambiances may be relevant to enquire about the role of emotion and imagination in heritage studies – and thus contribute to the study of intangible culture and its relation to tangible culture (as defined by UNESCO).

## **Ambiances as a connecting tool**

Given the neglect in heritage studies in addressing intangible culture (convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage adopted only in 2003), ambiances may serve as a tool to integrate unresolved conflicts in the study of HUL:

- Past-present-future events;
- Individual and social memories;
- Instrumental and symbolic meanings

## **Past-present-future**

In the first case, we need to consider the categories of time people employ to make sense of their past, such as the idea of time as non-linear and non-cumulative. Time seen as continuous has the possibility of linking traditional and modern societies. Ambiances may be used to analyse experiential and non-experiential contexts in the present and in the past. Current heritage management has difficulties dealing with the old-new dimensions and integrating them. One possibility is to consider experiential and spatial dimensions (i.e., centre, direction, transition and area) and how they could serve to integrate ordinary and new landscapes with UNESCO protected ones (Thwaites, 2001). In relation to ambiances of past landscapes, Sørensen (2005) has demonstrated that their study is made possible by analysing the architecture of tombs. We can see from these research examples that the interplay of embodied experience with the material environment gives us a glimpse of the ambiance of a place and helps to link past-present-future events and landscapes.

## **Individual and social memories**

In the second case, there is need to link social and individual memories through the notion of ambiances. The work on urban farming can illustrate the point that social-ecological memory acts as a carrier of knowledge and practice in the processes between people and nature. Research has demonstrated that collective memories carry experience from the past and as such are a main source of experiential knowledge (Barthel et al., 2011). For example, in Istanbul layers of history have been 'preserved' in the form of gardens (i.e. *bostan* gardens). It could be advantageous to

take hold of these in-built processes to promote community building and sustainable heritage management in this city. However, the current situation is that the Theodosian walls were recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985, but not the Yedikule gardens – even though these 1,500-year-old gardens carry a tradition of land usage encompassing Byzantine times through the Ottoman period to modernity.

## **Instrumental and symbolic meanings**

In the third case, there is a need to uncover symbolic significance beyond the limited notion of the historic centre. Instead of reinforcing the separation of activities and segregation of spaces, ambiances can structure the examination of transitional spaces; those spaces that create integration between what is considered ‘historical’ from that which is ‘not historical’. The ambiance of transitional spaces may reveal the symbolic value of everyday spaces in addition to those landmarks of outstanding value. For instance, it is common for festival marketers to design activities that provide memorable experiential products and services for attendees based on the dimensions of experience economy. The staging character of ambiances is of relevant in this context to convey relevant meanings (Bille, Bjerregaard, & Sørensen, 2015).

## **Ambiances and management of heritage**

In trying to integrate these three aspects of heritage studies (past-present-future; individual/social memories; and instrumental/symbolic meanings) through the concept of ambiance, we are at the same time enquiring how ambiances can contribute to people’s quality of life (Alves, 2015).

It is a challenge in heritage protection to manage spaces that acknowledge the experiential quality of places. In the context of heritage and cultural tourism, the task of transforming existing spaces while retaining their ambiance is still a great challenge. Part of this challenge is related to a lack of specification on how intangible cultural heritage is related to living cultural practices. Ambiances may help link the use of everyday urban spaces (with their varied ambiances) and historic urban landscapes – by bringing to the front people’s practices and activities and the meanings attributed to them.

In order to manage preservation and change in HUL and to create a ‘good ambiance’ is necessary to joint efforts from different disciplines to devise ways of ‘protecting’ intangible culture in face of dramatic urban pressure. The debate on HUL preservation also needs to take into account different ambiances. Thus, a cross-cultural examination of ambiances is necessary to account for the cultural richness of human experience and to assure the ‘preservation’ of this richness for the future. It may be possible to set up ambiances by means of taking care of everyday spaces over the long term. An ambiance approach needs to include poor and rich landscapes, green and grey, aesthetically pleasing and unpleasing, large and small to reach a more integrative understanding of people’s perceptions and experiences and thus contribute to their quality of life.

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Susana Alves is an environmental psychologist whose research examines how landscapes can be used to promote health and psychological well-being. She is currently an assistant professor at Okan University in Istanbul, Turkey. Her research focuses on environment-behaviour interactions, the perception and use of natural environments, and ageing environments. A major concern of her work is to link research to design and contribute to quality of life and psychological health by the use of nature-related activities.