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# A few words about the International Ambiances Network

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the International Ambiances Network

[www.ambiances.net](http://www.ambiances.net)

## A research network on atmospheres?

The International Ambiances Network was launched in 2008 during the First International Congress, 'Faire une ambiance – Creating an atmosphere'. The network was then coordinated – under the direction of Jean-Paul Thibaud – by a small team of researchers, PhD students and research staff who belonged to the Cresson and Cerma research groups (the former names of the current Ambiances, Architectures, Urbanities research unit<sup>1</sup>) in Grenoble and Nantes, . Initially, the network essentially represented existing research partnerships, and its first 'members' were mostly colleagues, located in France and abroad, with whom we already worked within research programmes on atmospheres.

From the outset, the steering committee of the network wanted it to favour multisensoriality and pluridisciplinarity (human and social sciences, architecture and urban planning, engineering and applied physics). It is open to a wide variety of profiles and includes research activities as well as design, teaching or artistic activities. The network's goals are:

- to organise the field of architectural and urban ambiances;
- to develop a synergy between research and design activities;
- to promote research collaborations and cooperation;
- to link research and pedagogy; and
- to enhance research related to ambiances.

After eight years of existence, having witnessed the continuous growth of the number of members, partnerships, actions and events, and on the occasion of the network's Third International Congress on Atmospheres, we still consider the following questions to be fresh and up-to-date:

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1. [www.aau.archi.fr](http://www.aau.archi.fr)

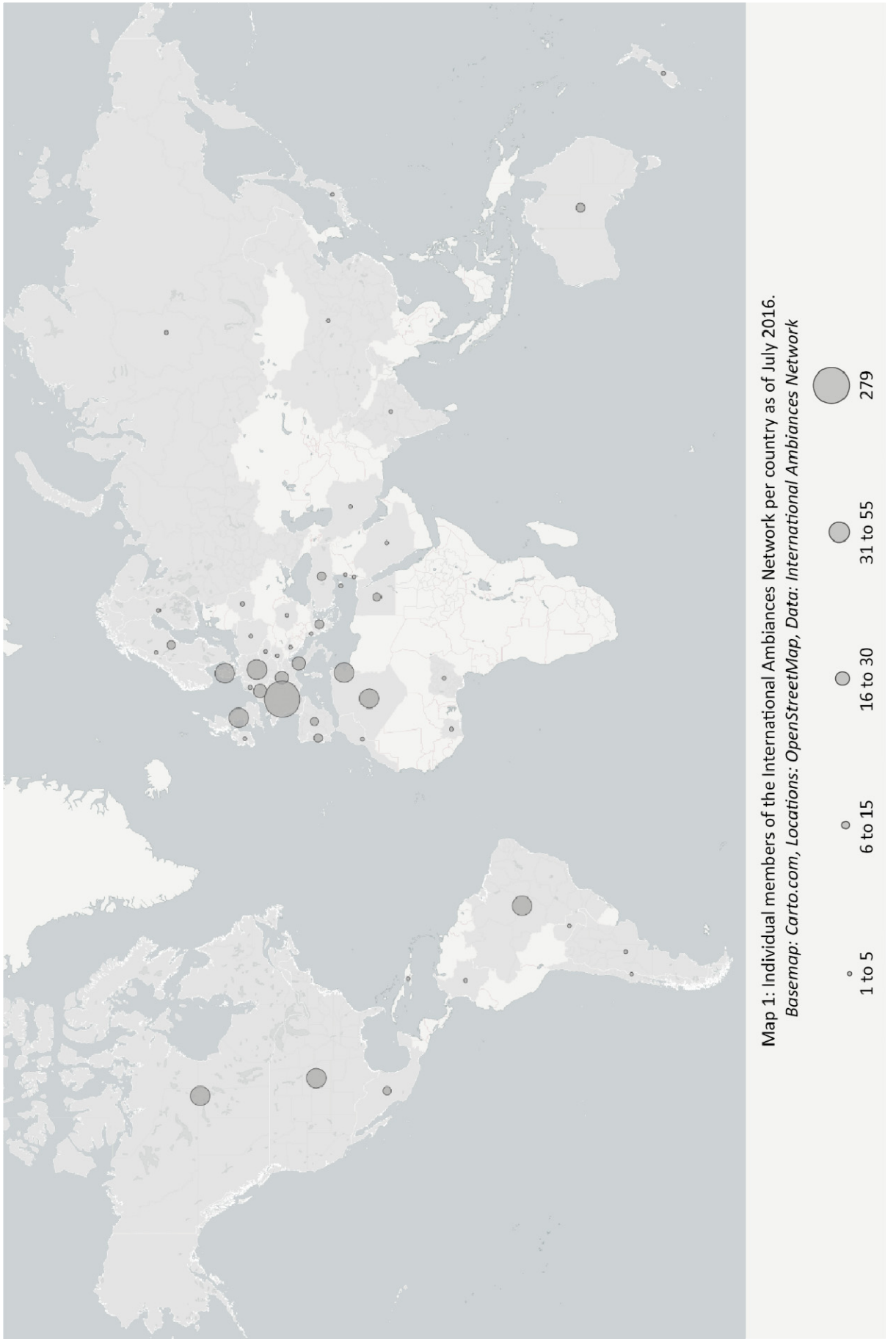
- What is a research network?
- What is it supposed to do?
- How might it work?

Instead of trying to weave a complicated – and almost certainly boring! – genealogy of research networks among various disciplinary fields and at different times, or else trying to answer the abovementioned questions by formulating a manifesto that proclaims the role of research networks in a changing world in which researchers and research institutions experience uncertainty on a daily basis, we instead intend to answer pragmatically. In doing so, we will describe the International Ambiances Network experience by focusing on three main topics: its members, its actions, and the topics it addresses. Following on from that, we will suggest some new perspectives for the network to investigate in the future.

## **Members**

As of mid-July 2016, the network has 824 members, with the membership including almost as many women as men. There are members from 50 countries and all the continents are represented. Europe, which accounts for more than 67% of members, the Americas (more than 15%) and Africa (more than 13%) are particularly well represented. However, these three continents do not feature an equal distribution of members across the constituent countries. In Europe, for example, the Eastern continental countries, as well as the Baltic countries and Scandinavia (except for Sweden) together account for less than 3.7% of all European members. Members located in the Americas are almost exclusively found within three countries: Brazil (5.2%), Canada (4.7%) and the USA (3.8%). We have nevertheless observed a growing interest in Latin America, with a growing number of members distributed from Mexico to Argentina. The vast majority of members from Africa are located in Algeria and Tunisia, two French-speaking countries that are particularly tied with France in terms of student exchanges, which account for more than 87% of all African members. Recently, we have witnessed new subscriptions coming from Egypt (seven people). However, non-French-speaking African countries, as well as the Asian (2.4%) and Oceanian (1.4%) continents, remain underrepresented.

The distribution of individual International Ambiances Network members across the world shows an extension of the strong research and teaching partnerships that existed prior to the creation of the network, most notably in France, Maghreb and Brazil. It also shows that the huge numbers of members located in Germany, Denmark, Canada, the USA, Italy and the United Kingdom are more recent subscribers (starting consistently from 2012). Further, they are linked to new research partnerships between existing and new members of the network, as well as to specific network events in those countries. The growth in membership has also been linked to a deeper and growing interest in atmospheres in the fields of architecture, the arts and social sciences within the Anglo-Saxon world.



The membership database does not include precise statistics regarding members' professional status or their disciplinary field, which would be useful as the network intends to foster relationships between researchers, practitioners, artists and students, as well as aiming to defend interdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, we can determine that more than three-quarters of all members referenced an organisation, with more than 80% of those organisations being research institutions and universities. Clearly, the network's members are first and foremost researchers, PhD candidates and college students.

In addition to individual members, the network has 31 team members,<sup>2</sup> which are concentrated in a few locations: 18 are in Europe (nine of them in France), 11 in the Americas (four in Brazil, with the rest distributed between Canada and the USA) and two in North Africa. We can therefore note that there are no clear links between individual member distribution and teams affiliated with the network, which are – for the large majority anyway – often associated with the network because of the will of a few people who already had a personal interest in the network.

To sum up, we are happy to confirm that individual membership has continued to grow since the creation of the network, while the number of affiliated teams remains stable. In both cases, membership of the network gives the possibility of being recognised and listed on the network's website and databases. Membership is free of charge and open to everyone, which favourably distinguishes the International Ambiances Network from many other international associations and learned societies. In addition, we hope that the recent creation of a forum<sup>3</sup> for members will enhance dialogue between members, as well as encouraging new collaborations between members that are not necessarily driven and/or funded by the network.

## Events

The International Ambiances Network promotes international events that enable teams from several countries to be gathered together around issues related to ambiances. The events organised and co-organised by the network relate to the main contemporary issues relevant to the evolution of the field. Three major types of event are supported, namely international congresses (every four years), conferences (one per year at least), and seminars or workshops.<sup>4</sup>

### *International Congresses*

Organised every four years, the international congress is the network's main event, an international gathering of researchers, artists and players engaged in analysing the ambiance-related dimensions of the built environment and the sensory construction of the contemporary world. Grenoble 2008 (France) was the first such congress. It was chaired by Jean-François Augoyard on the theme of 'Creating an atmosphere' and it garnered attendees from more than 60 countries worldwide.

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2. For more detailed information, visit: <http://ambiances.net/network/team-members.html>

3. [mailinglist@ambiances.net](mailto:mailinglist@ambiances.net)

4. See <http://www.ambiances.net> for more detailed information.

Montreal 2012 (Canada) was the second congress, which was chaired by Jean-Paul Thibaud and Daniel Siret on the theme of 'Ambiances in action'. It attracted more than 180 participants from numerous countries over four days at the premises of the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). This second congress was particularly focused on the implications of ambiances in the processes of transformation of inhabited spaces, including the dimensions of experimentation, politics and forward thinking.

Volos 2016 (Greece) will be the Third International Congress on Ambiances, revealing the maturity of the field in relation to atmospheres and ambiances in the research on architecture and urban spaces.

### *International Conferences*

The International Ambiances Network seeks to co-organise at least one international conference per year, except in congress years. Since 2008, six conferences have been co-organised by team members from the network:

- *Linear Parks and Ambiances* (Cairo, 2015), with the Department of Urban Planning and Urban Design, Faculty of Engineering, Ain Shams University.
- *Animer l'espace public : pour une esthétique de l'éphémère ?* (Saint-Étienne, 2015), with the Centre Max Weber (UMR CNRS), the Graduate School of Art and Design of Saint-Étienne, and the Graduate School of Architecture of Saint-Étienne.
- *Ambiance as a key issue in the contemporary Mediterranean public space* (Tunis, 2014), with the Graduate School of Architecture of Tunis.
- *Ambiances and Atmospheres in Translation* (London, 2013), with the University of London.
- *Urban Design & Urban Society. The emergence of urban atmospheres between design practice and social invention* (Munich, 2011), with the Department of Geography, University of Munich.
- *Ambiances en partage : culture, corps et langage* (Rio de Janeiro, 2009), with the Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro.

### *Seminars and Workshops*

In addition to the congresses and conferences, the International Ambiances Network supports smaller events such as seminars and workshops. For instance, the CRESSON's Winter School, the MOBANCE workshop (Mobile & Ambiances), the seminars organised by the CNRS GDRI programme 'Ambiances in Translation', a seminar on ambiances and video, etc. The network has also supported sessions focusing on atmospheres that are situated within broader disciplinary or thematic conferences (e.g. the three '*Researching and Representing Ambient and Atmospheric Geographies*' thematic sessions organised within the Association of American Geographers Conference).

The following table lists all the events organised or co-organised by the International Ambiances Network, along with their types: CG stands for congress, C for conference, S for seminar, and W for workshop.

Year	Type	Place	Topic/Name
2016	CG	Volos, Greece	<i>Ambiances, tomorrow</i>
2016	W	Grenoble, France	<i>CRESSON's Winter School</i>
2015	C	Cairo, Egypt	<i>Linear Parks and Ambiances</i>
2015	W	Nantes, France	<i>MOBIANCE #2</i>
2015	S	Montreal, Canada	<i>GDR Seminar #2 Translating Ambiance</i>
2015	S	Chicago, USA	<i>Researching and Representing Ambient and Atmospheric Geographies</i>
2015	C	Saint-Etienne, France	<i>Animer l'espace public : pour une esthétique de l'éphémère ?</i>
2015	W	Grenoble, France	<i>CRESSON's Winter School</i>
2014	S	Grenoble, France	<i>Le quotidien filmé. Archives filmiques et Espaces publics</i>
2014	S	Nantes, France	<i>GDR Seminar #1 Translating Ambiances</i>
2014	C	Tunis, Tunisia	<i>Ambiance as a key issue in the contemporary Mediterranean public space</i>
2013	W	Nantes, France	<i>MOBIANCE #1</i>
2013	W	Nantes, France	<i>Simulation of ambient environment, virtual reality and urban design</i>
2013	C	London, UK	<i>Ambiances and Atmospheres in Translation</i>
2012	CG	Montreal, Canada	<i>Ambiances in action</i>
2011	C	Munich, Germany	<i>Urban Design &amp; Urban Society. The emergence of urban atmospheres between design practice and social invention</i>
2011	S	Grenoble, France	<i>Vidéo et Ambiance</i>
2010	S	Aarhus, Denmark	<i>SoundActs</i>
2009	C	Rio de Janeiro, Brazil	<i>Ambiances en partage : culture, corps et langage</i>
2009	S	Lyon, Grenoble, Paris, France	<i>Ambiances urbaines en partage. Expérience du dépaysement</i>
2008	CG	Grenoble, France	<i>Creating an atmosphere</i>

Table 1. Events organised or co-organised by the International Ambiances Network since its creation in 2008

The network is open to all proposals for the co-organisation of international conferences, seminars and workshops in any field related to ambiances.<sup>5</sup>

## Topics

The range of themes that have been discussed at the events supported by the network is quite large. Without engaging in an in-depth analysis of the programmes

5. Any member of the network can propose an event (and ask for funding) simply by using the contact form available on the [ambiances.net](http://ambiances.net) website.

of all the events or a detailed analysis of all the papers presented since the formal birth of the network, this short overview will indicate how some topics have a broader presence within the events of the network. However, it is important to note that the titles of the two prior congresses have only a formal character and that the congresses themselves were fairly open events that aimed to bring together the entire community interested in atmospheres.

The sonic dimension of atmospheres holds an important place in the activities of the network, not only because of the SoundActs conference in 2010, but also due to the CRESSON Winter Schools, which always focus on the question of sound. In terms of the spatial dimension, the list of events shows an important focus on urban and public spaces, since both were the topic of various seminars or conferences. Additionally, the question of creating atmospheres has been the topic of various network events under the term 'design' on the one hand and 'animating' on the other. Translation is a further topic that appears in the titles of three events. Its prominence in the work of the network is related to the pluriannual research activity of the network, which operates with quite a significant understanding of translation. Two events focused on the filmic representation of atmospheres, although the goals of the two were quite different. One event focused on a methodological question, while the other focused on the representation of everyday life through films.

The titles of the events indicate that there are – besides the thematically open character of the congresses – two kinds of logic in the design of network events. On the one hand, there has been a small number of workshop events (MOBIANCE #1, Linear Parks and Ambiances, Ambiances and Video) that focus on a very specific topic in the field of research on atmospheres. On the other hand, the seminars, which have the character of small international conferences, are organised around themes such as 'culture, body and language' and 'urban design and urban atmospheres'. This indicates that research about atmospheres is still at the early stage, where it is difficult to organise larger international conferences on specific topics.

## Perspectives

- In conclusion, we might answer the questions asked at the beginning of this text by stating that the International Ambiances Network acts in two complementary ways by: consolidating existing relationships, mostly in relation to research and teaching, so as to permit the maintenance of dialogue and exchanges between people that last longer than the limited duration of research or teaching projects; and
- creating new relationships, mostly through the organisation of events, which clearly act as a game changer since we witness how the actions of the network have led to the funding of research projects, as well as to the creation of a peer-reviewed journal<sup>6</sup> and a book series.<sup>7</sup>

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6. *Ambiances: International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture, and Urban Space*. [ambiances.revues.org](http://ambiances.revues.org)

7. The series, which is named the *Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Space Series*, is hosted by the publisher Routledge. More information is available here: <https://www.routledge.com/Ambiances-Atmospheres-and-Sensory-Experiences-of-Space-Series/book-series/AMB>



We might also note that the short existence of the network already points to some directions that will need to be investigated in forthcoming years, most notably:

- consolidation, which is a challenge during times of shrinking budgets and the diversification of funding;
- opening the field by mobilising more and more organisers of events to come from outside the core membership of the network;
- geographic integration of people located in Asia, Africa and all the currently unidentified countries that host people interested in atmospheres;
- practical integration of artists and practitioners who play a role in atmosphere making in mundane spaces, but who remain underrepresented amongst the membership;
- weaving new connections with other research networks in order to learn from their practices and enhance the dialogue with new research, practice, design and communities;
- thematic confrontation with neighbouring concepts such as affect, resonance, climate, etc.; and
- diversification of actions by welcoming new forms – that need to be invented – of practices and events.

In sum, the International Ambiances Network is an ongoing process through and about which we learn continuously and empirically. However, what the network will ultimately become remains in the hands of its members.

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Damien Masson is a lecturer in urban studies at the University of Cergy-Pontoise, where he is also the head of the History and Geography Department. His research interests concern mobility, atmospheres, security and surveillance.

Daniel Siret is a researcher for the French Ministry of Culture and Communication at the Graduate School of Architecture of Nantes. He is currently the head of the CNRS laboratory AAU (Ambiances, Architectures, Urbanités).