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# *Urban Ambiances as Common Ground?*

Jean-Paul Thibaud

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I would like to start with an expression: “sharing ambiances”<sup>1</sup>. There are at least two meanings underlying such an expression.

On the one hand, we can *question whether it is possible to share ambiances* and ask ourselves whether an ambiance can always be shared, whether certain conditions must be met for an ambiance to be shared, whether what is “shareable” takes on a particular expression when it is viewed through the lens of ambiances... These are what we can call “experienced ambiances”, ambiances as they are experienced by the senses.

But we can also *share conceptions about the idea of ambiances* and test the extent to which it is possible to agree on the notion of ambiance, initiate a debate on the meaning and contribution of such a concept, experiment with types of dialogue between different disciplinary fields, etc. We can call these: “reflective ambiances”, i.e., ambiances as they are addressed by thought.

To question the shared experience of an ambiance and open up the notion of ambiance for debate is quite simply two sides of the same coin: the two facets of sharing ambiances. This involves the potential crossover between the field of sensory experience and that of reflective thought, the continuity between empirical and theoretical realms. Here, we are already at the heart of the enigma since ambiances play on both sensing and knowing, and involve a certain “*I-do-not-know-what*” (*je-ne-sais-quoi* as commented by Vladimir Jankélévitch, 1980) that can never be fully resolved. Like Saint Augustine with time, everyone has experiences with ambiances in everyday life and yet we have a lot of trouble explaining exactly what they are. In order to avoid an overly general and abstract argumentation, I will rely on short descriptions, lived experiences and concrete situations throughout the text. This bridge between experienced and reflective ambiances will enable me to approach this very intangible and quasi-indefinable domain.

The aim of this paper is to point out various arguments which question ambiance as a common ground of everyday urban experience. This foray into the problematic modes of existence of ambiances offers proof of both the great diversity in this field of research (Thibaud & Siret, 2012) and of the unique precautions necessary when addressing the topic. Indeed, ambiances demand special attention and require that we nurture them, otherwise they disappear or become subsumed into the broader fields of the environment or the landscape. Timothy Morton (2007) even proposes to develop an ambient poetics, a special attention to the writing of aesthetic experience, “a way of conjuring up a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world” (p. 22). Without doubt, ambiances are a fragile and unstable research topic and one that can be broached only after a lot of preliminary research. Ambiances bring to life the world around us; they make it truly inhabitable and conjure up extremely sensitive aspects of our human

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been presented at the International Conference *Atmosfera. Tra etica et estetica / Atmosphere. Between Ethics and Aesthetics*. Università degli Studi di Torino, Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna Roma, Museo Hendrik Christian Andersen, Sensibilia. Roma, September 27th-28th 2013. It relies on a previous draft published in French (Thibaud, 2013).

condition. What would a world devoid of ambiance be like? Simply asking the question makes it clear that now more than ever we need to nurture this vital aspect of living space and living together.

### **1- Bringing the sensory to the forefront**

Using the notion of ambiance allows us to test ordinary cultures from a sensory perspective and to reframe social challenges through the lens of aesthetic issues. To do so, it is necessary to expand the usual frameworks of perception. Urban life is multi-faceted and relies on a diversity of sensory universes and ways of experiencing them (Diaconu & al., 2001). Here, we are clearly close to an ethnographic approach which involves distancing ourselves from what seems obvious – non questionable – in order to allow alterity to emerge. This is similar to using unfamiliarity – breaching experiment – as a method and as a means to shift focus, like field anthropologists trying to give meaning to what they observe. Any investigation into urban culture as such, involves an attempt to dissolve stereotypes, an effort to shake up established categories, a certain “derangement of the senses” (Rimbaud). As Bernard Waldenfelds (2009) highlighted, phenomenology maintains close ties with ethnology because both test and deal with the pathic dimension of experience. I will return to the heuristic value of unfamiliarity and strangeness later. For now, let me just emphasize the importance of developing an approach that enables us to question the taken for granted and vary the way we deal with the world. In other words, dealing with urban cultures requires an ability to spur interaction between and amongst different ways of being in the world.

A second important element that brings us even closer to ambiance involves learning the lessons of an approach that is tuned into the forms and expressions of social life (Augoyard, 1979). We know that using the senses in everyday life invariably means perceiving things, identifying objects, interpreting scenes and engaging with the world. And yet alongside such *perceiving* – such practical and cognitive perceptive activity – there is another, equally important facet to the sensory world that is: *sensing*. The sensing underlying an aesthetic experience is more about our ways of feeling the world; it is related to affective tonalities and ways of being together in a situation. In such “ambiental aesthetics” we are in the pre-reflective dimension of an experience, one which involves above all a bodily experience and an immediate sensation. Erwin Straus (1989) identified this nicely when he distinguished between the “pathic” (affective) and “gnostic” (cognitive) aspects of our relationship with the world. In our everyday lives, however, perceiving tends to, at least partially, obscure or mask sensing.

The challenge, therefore, is to bring the latter back to the forefront. In this respect, the notion of modal anthropology developed by François Laplantine (2005) is a good way to incorporate ways of sensing into research on urban life by advancing the idea of a rhythmic epistemology. As he has noticed with regard to Japanese culture, the goal is not only to describe the sensory world based on the discontinuity of signs (which need to be interpreted as best they can), but also on the continuity of rhythms (which instead need to be modulated and varied). Such is the project of rhythmanalysis developed by Henri Lefebvre in his last book (2004). In other words, there is a shift here from semiotics to fundamental aesthetics, that is capable of returning to in-situ sensitivity.

This is of central importance since it is one of the conditions for work on ambiances: the notion of ambiance loses all meaning if this sensing dimension is not acknowledged. As Gabor Csepregi (2006) declared: « *To detect a particular atmospheric quality means to reach beyond the factual, the objectively given: to hear, beyond the sound, the timbre of a voice, and to see, beyond the shape, the glimmer of a colour* » (p. 43). Forays into

the study of other cultural spheres, unsettling or disruptive experiences, focusing on unusual or extreme states of existence, and the careful study of breaches of everyday life, are all destabilising situations that bring us closer to the sensory, affective and atmospheric immanence of urban experience.

As we can see, we are currently moving towards a new research approach – shared by sensory anthropology and the aesthetics of ambiances – which allows us to understand culture as a lever for sensitivity, and urban cultures as diverse expressions of the sensory world in the making. Virginie Milliot (2013) gave a very good example of this argument with her thorough ethnographic study of the Goutte d'Or in Paris: « *Anyone who goes to Goutte d'Or for the first time has the distinct impression that they are entering a very singular type of territory. It is not somewhere that you just stroll through, flitting nonchalantly over the surface. It is a neighbourhood that captivates the passer-by, plunging them into a sensorial world that resonates with emotions and reactions. Both the inhabitants and those who know it well refer to a highly-specific "ambiance" – that it is difficult to put your finger on - to account for the conflicting feelings of attraction or repulsion and familiarity or strangeness that the neighbourhood evokes.* »

This line of thought involves the socialisation of sensory experience, the continuous learning and day-to-day creative processes at work within the human *sensorium*. Thus, it is not strictly limited to the artistic sphere since it shapes and renews itself more broadly alongside and according to everyday environments. If we wanted to push this further, we could say that contemporary urban space becomes the ideal place for shaping new modes of sensing. This argument has already been developed concerning the modern city. Georg Simmel (1976) focused on the over-stimulating character of the metropolis, Walter Benjamin (2002) emphasized the experience of shock and loss of aura and Siegfried Kracauer (1995) noted the various phenomena sustaining a culture of distraction.

But such thinking requires us to move beyond the practical and functional aspects of everyday life, and not focusing solely on the cognitive and interpretive angles of the perceptive experience; rather, they demand that we allow the human sensorium to flourish and be fully recognized as such. Under such conditions, sensory cultures emerge where feeling and acting come together, at the meeting point of *praxis* and *aesthesis*.

## **2- Putting common experience into perspective**

Ambiances allow us to shed new light on the issue of being together by initiating a dual dynamic of socialising the sensory and sensitising social life. What happens to the distribution of the sensible when it is framed in terms of ambiance? How do different sensitivities deal with an ambiance? How do ambiances change the way we think about sensory forms in social life? It is worth pointing up two fundamental aspects of ambiances here which will help us address this issue.

First, as Gernot Böhme (1993) has clearly established, atmospheres are not only internal, they are also external, they involve a sensory medium, a third term between me and the world. Far from being a strictly personal experience or limited to a purely subjective mood, ambiances never cease to make affective tonalities *public*. They display affective tonalities as a common sensory domain to be seen, heard, smelled, touched and sensed. In other words, they make them perceptible to the eyes, ears and skin of everyone. Like the choir in the theatre of Ancient Greece, ambiances make the

tonality of current situations perceptible and accompany our shared life.

Second, ambiances are the site *par excellence* in which sensing occurs and as such are inherently bound up with an empathetic relationship with the world. In other words, ambiances assume a means of synchronising and immediate integration into the surrounding environment. The *public nature* of an ambiance's tonalities and its *empathetic power* are two essential aspects at the root of the issue of common experience.

Numerous attempts have been made to clarify the unifying movement at work in an ambiance. Here, we are dealing with phenomena involving resonance, empathy, contagion, imitation, syntony, and sometimes even unison and fusion. Marc Breviglieri (2013) perfectly described the "spark of feeling" (*étincelle du sentir*) involved in assistance to the homeless persons in borderline states such as profound drunkenness, the sleeping mode or being chilled to the bone: « *the borderline situation requests at first to find a complicity with the floating worlds of perception of the homeless person and to generate simultaneously threads of mutual echo. But then, the question is how the atmosphere spreads and reaches the context, undoing the insensible and bringing the sensitive to the foreground* » (personal translation). From this perspective, ambiances are part of an atmospheric in-between, an enveloping – a means of connecting – that highlights our ability to gel with others, to partake in a social situation. This is due to its all-encompassing nature and our ability to be submersed in a shared ambient milieu, regardless of how fleeting or established it may be. The famous Russian dramaturgist Anton Chekhov (1991) formulated it very nicely: « *Let us take another example: a catastroph on a crowded street. How many different personal moods are there? One person is afraid, another full of compassion, the third burns with a desire to help, a fourth is indifferent, but the objective Atmosphere of the horror of the catastroph prevails over all the people concerned, regardless of their personal moods.* » (p. 31)

While this vague background is part of any shared experience of an ambiance and in some respects constitutes its experiential basis, it must not mask the fact that we live in a diverse world and that our relationships with an ambiance are many and varied. We can therefore be all plunged together into a single ambiance (an atmospheric in-between) whilst experiencing different ways of feeling submerged. To say that “we are not in the ambiance” (*ne pas être dans l'ambiance*) means that one's lived experience is not necessarily in perfect harmony with the dominant tonality of a situation. Beyond the empathetic relationship underlying any experienced ambiance – I cannot not be attuned to the here and now of a sensory situation in which I find myself – is another level of experience that is related to my sense of presence in the situation, which can be more or less pronounced, more or less tinged with familiarity or strangeness. It is as such not simply a matter of being present together in a single situation, but of more or less feeling this shared presence. Rainer Kazig (2013) coined the term “cultural resonance ambiances” to designate a specific form of shared ambiance when people belonging to the same cultural background meet in particular public places such as bars, galleries, concerts.

A third aspect of common experience involves the form of the experience itself. Indeed, although we tend to assimilate ambiances with convivial collective experiences – saying that “there is ambiance” (*il y a de l'ambiance*) usually means that a situation is lively, even friendly – they may just as easily be tense, heated, awful or conflictual. The full range of forms of sociability can be described in terms of ambiance. Here, too, we are still in the realm of common sensory experience, it is just that such experience may

be problematic and unresolved, loaded with instability and precariousness over the make-up and cohesion of the group itself. The goal is not to conjure up a subjective feeling but rather the movement and flow of a social situation described by an affective tonality that is more or less positive and cohesive, euphoric or dysphoric, consonant or dissonant, and which is quite likely to evolve over time in one way or another (towards a resolution or deterioration).

In a nutshell, ambiances lead us to think about common experience within a complex web comprised of an “existential” dimension (empathy with the ambient world); a “contextual” dimension (degree of presence in the situation) ; and an “interactional” dimension (forms of sociability expressed in the tonality).

### **3- Initiating a political ecology of ambiances**

Ambiances are part of current changes to lived-in spaces and are involved in the processes transforming urban territories. While ambiances provide an original way of thinking about inhabitant experiences, they also involve extremely important design and planning issues. What are the socio-political consequences of ambiance-based urban design? How can we test and implement the critical strength of the notion of ambiance? How do ambiances change the way we design everyday environments? When we ask such questions, it is not only the ambiance as a given or pre-existing milieu that is under the microscope, but also the creation of ambiances, the *ambientação* according to the delightful term used in Brazil. Such interest in the processes, conditions and means of creating ambiances in urban space is a precursor for a possible political ecology of ambiances.

Let me first note that if sensory issues are gaining in importance in practices and representations of the contemporary world – ranging from the private sphere to the public domain – it is necessary to have a basic shared understanding of the term, otherwise we run the risk of depriving it of the elements underlying its heuristic force and critical strength. While the sensory world has an inherent affective side, it must not be confused with the realm of sentimentality, an avatar of contemporary compassion mongering, with political sentimentality or other spheres of collective resignation. Moreover, the sensory experience bound up with ambiances is not the same as that encountered in the gratuitous luxury, facile comfort or contemporary cosmetics far too often found in advertising discourses and other commercial contexts (Augoyard, 2011).

Similarly, the current rise of augmented reality and embedded technologies can by no means claim to cover the field of ambiances and replace fundamental reflections into contemporary living spaces. Obviously, the notion of ambiance that I wish to promote cannot and must not be written off as a simple product of postmodern sentimentality, something of purely commercial value bound up with a strictly hi-tech environment. That said, a political ecology of ambiances cannot ignore the increasing development of means of instrumentation and instrumentalisation of the sensory world. This involves updating how the everyday sensory environment is framed, programmed and governed (Amin & Thrift, 2002). We may therefore ask how an ambiance-based approach positions itself, amidst the tension between planning strategies and inhabitant tactics, between the spheres of power and resistance movements. In brief, to what extent can an ambiance-based approach avoid addressing the ethical and political issues inherent to all urban and planning work?

This could be the starting point for a whole new field of research focused on deconstructing the deep meaning behind the aestheticisation of public places currently

underway (Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001). It would be necessary to point up the logic underpinning territorial and sensory branding, research the public and cultural policies underpinning sensory planning, and test hypotheses about the pacification (Sennett, 1995), sanitization (Thomas, 2013) and normalisation (Breviglieri, 2013) of shared sensory spaces. The goal would be to develop critical analysis of the current types of sensory implementation by combining a molar and molecular approach that aims to understand the socio-aesthetic issues embedded in the most ordinary urban contexts, and which would clarify the implicit distribution of the sensible that they mobilise or renew.

And yet, we must not forget or underestimate the regular, basic ongoing creation of urban ambiances by city dwellers themselves. Indeed, one of the lessons that ambiances teach us is that lived-in space is not a mere reflection of how designed spaces are received. Inhabitant activity itself – as witnessed in sensory perception, practical action, cultural expression and social interaction – is part of ambiance creation in urban spaces. While going about their ordinary lives, city dwellers configure the ambient environment, demonstrate multiple competences and activate diverse know-how (de Certeau, 1984; Joseph, 1991), and are at the centre of micro-resistance to space-time configurations seen as too restrictive or inhospitable (Dultra Britto & Berenstein Jacques, 2013).

There is already an abundance of scientific research that addresses this logic of opportunity, of *kairos*, of making-do. One less explored area, however, is the realm of ambiances itself. What exactly does it mean to acclimatise and become acclimatised to a situation? How do forms of social life set the tone of a territory? What are the vectors driving an intensification of experience? How much room should be left to improvisation in the creation of a sensory environment? Here too, lies a wealth of questions that could help us assess the breadth of everyday practices in the overall economy of urban ambiances.

Everything points to the fact that the notion of ambiance is in the process of becoming a key to the way we think about and understand transformations in the contemporary urban environment. Like Janus, ambiance appears to have two faces: it is the critical analysts and decoders of the most cutting-edge trends in sensory branding of all kinds; and it is a particularly efficient tool for conditioning and presenting diverse commercial and mercantile environments. This dichotomy is not of course as black and white as it appears, as illustrated by the place and role of artistic action, which can be both a sphere for the legitimisation of marketing logic and a space for destabilising the perceptively obvious. In other words, far from being neutral, the notion of ambiance appears to be bound up with the socio-aesthetic strategies underpinning changes to the sensory world of the future.

#### **4- Questioning what *in situ* is about**

As we saw previously, ambiances are intrinsically bound up with a relationship of immersion within the surrounding world. Describing an experience in terms of ambiance pushes us to define what it means to be submerged in a milieu and requires that we examine *in situ* issues under a new light. How can we think about situated experiences in terms of ambiance? What is the relationship between an ambiance and a situation? What role does the sensory play, given the contextual nature of shared experience?

A lot of research in the field of micro-sociology has emphasised the importance of

situation as a register for analysis and as a blueprint for experience (Goffman 1963; Joseph, 1998). An ambiance-centric approach is the most likely part of this general trend towards reassessing the micro-logic and contextual aspects of social life. Here too, we can schematically identify three research pointers which address *in situ* issues: the embodiment of situated experiences, the porous nature of sensory spaces, and the efficiency of equipment and the build environment.

- With regard to the embodiment of situated experience, we need to understand all of the consequences related to the fact that the body is the first site from which ambiances are experienced (Schmitz, 2011). The immediacy of sensing is experienced first and foremost in a physical experience and is part of what phenomenology describes as a pre-reflective experience. The immersion phenomenon is as such part of a dual movement of incorporation and expression, of physical feeling and sensory-motor phenomenon. We could perhaps talk about “ambient gestures” (Thibaud, 2007), meaning the basic sensory-motor patterns that make up an ambiance: an ambiance can be heavy or relaxing, stimulating or reassuring, energising or hypnotic... But while such sensing by the body provides an initial key for understanding immersion phenomena (in terms of sensory-motor solicitation), we also need to examine its social and imagined repercussions. This is where the intercorporeal comes into play, the “place ballet” (Seamon, 1980), the tacit interactions that occur for example between passers-by in urban public spaces.

Is it relevant then to talk about a “common body”? How can we collectively be as one with an ambiance? In other words, not only the body itself, but also intra-body, inter-body, and body-to-body experiences. Further, the sensory-motor level of experience is not limited to the immediate here and now; it also calls on other phenomena tied to involuntary memory which link up past experiences and transport the subject to previously experienced space-time configurations. A smell will take me back in time; a sound will remind me of another situation... This involves an imaginary opening of the ambient world which uses processes of sensory association, metaphorisation and sedimentation. In other words, immersion here involves the choreography of close bodies and the interconnection of experienced situations.

- With regard to the porous nature of sensory spaces, it is more a matter of the ways situations are filtered and how the public pays attention. For one, all ambient situations are like envelopes, “atmospheric skins” (Hasse, 2000; Griffero, 2013) or “interactional membranes” (Bordreuil, 2013) framing our relationships with the immediate environment. People involved together in a single situation – for example talking or walking together – share a special interaction which places them in an “interactional bath” or an atmospheric flow “that seizes them by encompassing them, directing the two of them together” (Tellenbach, 1992). Such experiences are not, however, impermeable to happenings and events in the surrounding environment (being questioned, an incident, etc.). The challenge is thus to describe the interaction and co-penetration that occurs between a social situation and an urban context, how situational commitments are shaped and modelled by what goes on, and the adjustments that take place between the tonality of a social interaction and that of an ambient milieu. And yet the shape and scope of types of attention are also of vital importance since they lead to subtle changes based on the possibility of playing on peripheral attention and attentional thresholds (distracted listening, unfocused vision, divided attention, fringes, etc.). As Juhani Palasmaa (2001) very accurately remarked: « *Peripheral vision integrates us with space and its events, while focused vision pushes us out of the space and makes us mere observers* » (p. 60).



- Finally, the efficiency of equipment and material apparatus highlights the active role of built environments in the production of immersive phenomena. This concerns how an ambiance is enveloped, and the sensory effects it produces. Depending on the morphological and material features of the built environment, the space is more or less open or closed, dilated or contracted, airtight or porous. A person's sense of being surrounded is more or less pronounced depending on the depth of their gaze, the extent of their movement or the range of their hearing.

Anne Jarrigeon (2011) well illustrates this overlap between the built forms, the social conducts in public and the atmosphere of the place: « *Les Halles [in Paris] aspire, they absorb the flows of encounter, the inhabitants commuting, the determined paths they catalyze before expelling them to the surface. It is a transit point for many: in Les Halles, we run, we go, we find ourselves and then escape, even without reaching daylight. (...) The general deprivation of perspective and the lack of articulation between spaces contribute to the production of a particularly tiring social life, subject to a requirement of fluidity. (...) Les Halles is indeed living in melee, in a general atmosphere made of voltage, acceleration, rapid intersections governed by a true performance of avoidance.* » (p. 264-265, personal translation)

More generally, however, we may wonder whether we are witnessing the emergence of new fields of design or new means and conditions for the production of the city. The intentionality of designers is not limited to the production of ground-breaking built forms and new sustainable environments; it also touches upon the intentional creation of original sensory environments. Urban changes appear no longer to be the sole product of physical planning; they are also based on the “atmospherisation” (Tellenbach, 1983) of living spaces and appear to benefit fully from the potentiality of the intangible world. In other worlds, more and more we tend to design also sensory atmospheres and affective tonalities.

Lastly, we should note that an ambiance-based approach affects the way we think about the role and place of inhabitants in the make-up of territories. This involves the question of living space present in any transformation of space. As a form of sensory life, ambiances place inhabitants at the very centre of urban debates. They also help point up how city dwellers contribute to shaping their living space on a daily basis through their most ordinary, everyday actions. In sum, ambiances contribute in two ways to thinking about embodiment and empowerment by making the sensory a showcase for different ways of living and helping inhabitants become ordinary experts of their living spaces.

So what can we say about the enigma of sharing ambiances? There is a constant search for new connections and other focuses (or better: defocalisation). There is a need to experiment, vary points of view, make art and science resonate, and to experiment with totally new types of writing. Do ambiances not sensitize of urban thought as well as social lifeforms?

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