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# The backstage of urban ambiances

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I propose to explore a new way of designing and experimenting with the city. How are we to conceptualize the changes in contemporary cities on the basis of their ambiances? What about the sensory and emotional production of urban territories? What happens when our aim is no longer just to design space but also to install an atmosphere? Such questions are situated at the intersection of issues of a social, aesthetic, urban, ecological and political nature. I should like to advance a hypothesis: we are currently witnessing what I call the ‘setting of ambiance’ in urban spaces. To give an account of this phenomenon, I do not intend to offer a formal definition of what an ambiance may be, but rather to show from what it proceeds, on what it is based, what it produces and transforms in urban life. Several ambiance operating modes in the province of urban design will be the focus: establishing the sensory as a field of action, composing with affective tonalities, giving consistency to urban situations, maintaining spaces over time and playing with imperceptible transformations.

**Keywords.** *atmospheres, urban ambiances, sensory environment, affective tonality, urban design, perception*

In this paper, I propose to explore a new way of designing and experimenting with the city. How are we to conceptualize the changes in contemporary cities on the basis of their ambiances? What about the sensory production of urban territories? What happens when our aim is no longer just to design space but also to install an atmosphere? Such questions are situated at the intersection of issues of a social, aesthetic, urban, ecological and political nature. I should like to advance a hypothesis: we are currently witnessing what I call the ‘setting of ambiance’ in urban spaces. Consider the conditioned environments of shopping malls, the planted areas of eco-neighbourhoods, the process of ‘heritagization’ of historic town centres, the privatization of gated communities, the new scenes of the creative city, and the functional atmospheres of public transport facilities: in each case, every effort is made to create an ambiance, to channel sensations and to make people feel a particular *Stimmung*. In talking about setting ambiance in urban spaces, I hope to better explain how changes in contemporary cities proceed and pervade everyday life. The sensory domain may have some relevance in this respect, primarily because it is one of the most manifest and immediate expressions of changes in our environment. To give an account of the sensory ecology of the city, I do not intend to offer a formal definition of what an ambiance may be, but rather to show from what it proceeds, on what it is based, what it produces and transforms in urban life.

Because it is an undefined, vague object, ambiance does not appear to be something that is easy to analyze or to circumscribe. And by challenging the distinction between object and subject it even casts doubt on the possibility of its own objectivation. Maybe a certain degree of bias needs to be introduced, or an indirect approach adopted in order to reflect this essential component of dwelling. The question would no longer be “what is an ambiance?” but “what does an ambiance make it possible to be, to do, to perceive and to share?” In other words, positing ambiance in terms of potential, by demonstrating that it makes it possible to reflect upon the transition from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, or from the ill- to the clearly defined (Kaufmann 1977). In some ways, ambiance may be considered as the basis through which the sensitive world is configured day to day, or the field from which phenomena emerge and split up. Here, we are concerned with how the world is conferred with memorable and recognisable forms that also serve to give it a familiar face.

Several ambiance *operating modes* in the province of urban design will be the focus: establishing the sensory as a field of action, composing with affective tonalities, giving consistency to urban situations, maintaining spaces over time and playing with imperceptible transformations.

***Establish the sensory as a field of action***

We should start by noting the growing attention paid to the sensory dimensions of urban space: lighting plans and sound design; systems to deploy sounds, illumination, air conditioning, ventilation and odours. All these devices work on the sensory matter itself and make the medium the prime basis of design. To put it differently, today's urban ecology increasingly relies on explicit strategies to sensitize inhabited space. Something we might have taken for granted and certainly occurred in the background – air, sound, odour, heat and light – is becoming one of the basic stakes in urban transformation. Urban development no longer only concerns built forms and spaces, but also sensory environments and climatic envelopes.

This approach, in which the body and senses are allowed to exist, scorns strict disciplinary divisions and operates within a very broad scientific spectrum. Whether one wants to study the fit between the sensory and the social (Augoyard 1979 ; Sansot 1986 ; Sauvageot 2003, Laplantine 2005 ; Haroche 2008), update cultural perception schemata (Stoller 1989 ; Classen 1993 ; Howes 2003, 2004 ; *Communications* 2010), write a history of sensibilities (Chartier, Duby, Febvre, Francastel, Mandrou 1987 ; Corbin 1998), take measure of lived space (Frémont 1976 ; Tuan 1977 ; Seamon 1979 ; Rodaway 1994 ; Berque 2000 ; Light and Smith 2004), design architecture for the senses (Pallasmaa 1996 ; Holl, Pallasmaa, Perez-Gomez 2007 ; Zumthor 2006 ; Rahm 2009 ; *Faces* 2010), decipher the sensory dimensions of urban spaces (Lynch 1990 ; Sennett 1994 ; Zardini 2005 ; Paquot 2006, Lucas and Mair 2008 ; *The Senses & Society* 2007 ; Lucas & Mair 2008), rethink the place of the senses in philosophical thought (Serres 1985 ; Berleant 1992 ; Abram 1996 ; Guenancia 1998 ; Rancière 2000 ; Stiegler 2005), derail common perception through artistic performance (Jones 2006 ; Storr 2007 ; Johnstone 2008), focus on the notion of *ambiance* (Augoyard 1995 ; Amphoux 1998 ; *Les Cahiers de la Recherche Architecturale* 1998 ; Amphoux, Thibaud, Chelkoff 2004 ; Thibaud 2002, 2004 ; Augoyard 2011 ; Thibaud & Siret 2012) or *atmosphere* (Böhme 1993, 1997 ; *Daidalos* 1998 ; Sloterdijk 1998, 1999, 2004), all involve reference to lived experience and pay particular attention to the sensory register. In brief, a whole collection of paths are open, which intersect and complement each other in the development of a sensory ecology of everyday life in the widest sense of the term. It is as if we are witnessing a fundamental shift that is redefining how we think about the current ambient world.

The notion of *medium* is of prime importance here and has been widely developed in communication (McLuhan 1964), psychology (Gibson 1986), philosophy (Coccia 2010) and anthropology (Ingold 2011). It refers to air, sound, light, odour, etc., in other words all the elements of our surroundings which enable us to perceive. It should be perfectly clear that the medium is not what we perceive, not the object of our perception. The medium is the means by which we perceive, it is what makes perception possible. Renaud Barbaras (1998) also demonstrates how sensitive thinking purports to operate a shift: an ontology of the object is replaced by an ontology of the element. Thence “*the element is not subjective, nor is it what is perceived. It is the dimension through which perception takes place*” (p. 222). There is no vision possible without light, no audition without sound, without a medium for it to propagate and pervade... For example, I do not hear in the same way in a space with a lot of reverberation or, on the contrary, in one that is very muffled. My hearing is not the same underwater or in the open air. I do not see in the same way in a sunlit square as in a thick fog. For perception to occur, there must be a third term between the perceiving subject and the perceived object (Böhme 1992). The medium is the intermediate place starting from which an object becomes perceptible, visible, audible.

By stressing the sensory dimension of *in situ* experience, the idea of place is forged around a critique of abstract and objective space. Unlike the perception of space as a

homogeneous, continuous and divisible expanse along the lines of *partes extra partes*, a place emanates from a corporal engagement that is indissociable from its powers of guidance and expression. In other words, while there can be no disembodied place, and although body is instantly bound up with place, the latter may not be reduced to a purely formal receptacle nor a system of geographic coordinates. An approach based on embodied place replaces a theory of feature-less space (Casey 1998). Such a venture restores all of the importance of the argument of *the intensive* and in doing so uncovers one of the features of ambiance. Whereas space is generally perceived as an ensemble of extensive magnitudes, place reintroduces the notion of intensive magnitudes<sup>1</sup>. So, space is populated with discrete, enumerable objects or plots: a bench, a door, a wall, a bus shelter, a telephone booth, etc. In terms of number and summation, it is bound up with extensive magnitudes. Its unity arises from a successive juxtaposition of distinct components. Conversely, place engages with sensitive qualities whose varying importance may increase or decline: brightness, heat, roughness, etc.

By acknowledging the existence of the medium and the importance of the intensive, we gain the means to reveal a new field of urban intervention. Henceforward urban design no longer just focuses on objects but also on what is between the objects. It is no longer just a question of designing buildings or megastructures, but also what surrounds them. The medium is consequently not a given, a pure state of nature, but a construct present at every level of design: from ergonomics to architecture, from urbs to territory. In short our purpose is to transform not only a world of built objects and forms, but also a world of air and perceptible atmospheres. It should be clear by now that the whole of the sensory universe is at stake here, not only the strict register of vision.

I stress the present importance of the perceptible domain because it brings into play at least three types of stakes very different in their nature. Setting the ambiance of a space brings into play social and aesthetic issues relating to the quality of life and the well-being of inhabitants. The aim is to create the conditions necessary for a city which is habitable for everyone. But setting the ambiance of a space may also be part of strategies concerned with urban marketing and commercial competition. Sensory marketing or the new scenes of the creative city are good examples of this economic stake. Lastly, setting the ambiance of a space is also an opportunity to contribute to a sustainable environment. In ecological terms, the medium par excellence is air, as in heat pockets and global warming. There is good reason to wonder to what extent the medium's three modes of existence are compatible. How can the air of urban well-being, the air of commercial conditioning and the air of atmospheric pollution succeed in meeting and agreeing?

### ***Composing with affective tonalities***

The second operation involves introducing the province of the affect to the composition of urban space. The aim here is to realise the difference between environment and ambiance. In simple terms we might say that ambiance is what gives life to an environment, what confers upon it a value of attachment. To set the ambiance of a territory, we not only need to control the physical parameters of a built environment, but also to endow the territory with a certain character, a specific mood, an emotional and existential value. Any ambiance stirs up past experience and ways of being together.

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<sup>1</sup> The distinction between extensive and intensive magnitude has been developed in particular by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of pure reason* [1781]: “All similar-type reality has a degree (of resistance or weight) that, without any decrease in its extensive magnitude or number, can diminish through infinitely smaller degrees and fade away into nothing. In this way, a dilation that fills space, such as heat, may – without leaving the smallest portion of this space empty – decrease in infinitely smaller degrees, without actually ceasing to fill the space by smaller and smaller degrees, as well as any other more extensive phenomenon.”

In other words, the medium to which I referred before is never neutral; rather it always involves specific affective tonalities. We may speak of a ‘soothing sonority’, an ‘unbearable brightness’, a ‘heady odour’, or ‘stifling heat’. All these qualities may contribute to ambiance, putting us in a certain bodily and affective state, and engaging our senses. Similarly we may talk of a ‘lively’ square, a ‘gloomy’ neighbourhood, a space with a ‘chilling’, or preferably, ‘warm’ atmosphere. The keyword in this operation is no longer medium but *resonance*. Thanks to resonance we are not outside or indifferent to our surroundings, rather we vibrate with, in and through them (Nancy 2007). This resonance is the basis on which unfolds our capacity to affect others and in turn to be affected by them, and more broadly by the ambient world. In other words, ambiance is indistinctly the feeling of self and of the world.

We then need to characterise the notion of ambiance *vis-à-vis* neighbouring notions. Distinguishing the notion of ambiance from the ones of “landscape” and “situation” stems from a pragmatic approach that is still at the drawing board stage. This is how the chiasmus of ambiances emerges: landscape theories reflect the sensitive qualities of the urban world but remain inoperative most of the time for analysing its practical effectiveness; conversely, action theories stress the practical character of perception but remain immune to its pathic regime.

The advantage of current research into the landscape is that it provides a theoretical framework for analysing the sensitive relationship with the surrounding world. A number of approaches now probe the aesthetic dimension of contemporary urban experience by no longer confining themselves to an analysis of the “natural” landscape and a focus on pictorial representation. The perceptive organisation that accompanies the constitution of a landscape does not consist of a purely cognitive activity but also involves feelings. Even though it is closely associated with Romanticism, the idea of *Stimmung* neatly expresses the intrinsic relationship between the perceptible unity introduced by the landscape and its constitutive feeling (Simmel 1988). *Stimmung* denotes the overall tonality of a portion of the visible world and ensures the internal coherence of components otherwise considered as disparate and heterogeneous. This focus on the pathic facet of perception and on the world’s affective tonalities brings the notion of landscape closer to that of ambiance. However, most aesthetic theories of landscape tend to neglect the practical implications of situated perception as though the experience of landscape necessarily neutralised perspective in action. Placed in a representational space, landscape appears to be based on an essentially contemplative attitude structured around a single fixed point that supposes some necessary perspective *vis-à-vis* the perceiving subject. However, some research proposes a number of welcome deviations from this dominant conception by tracing alternative perspectives that test the relationship between acting and feeling. Such perspectives are often developed by shifting the modern landscape aesthetic. So, for example, the focus on Japanese culture and landscape design reintroduces mobility and sociability into landscape aesthetics. Notions of “point of mobile perception” highlighting experiments in landscapes in motion, and “flexible conjunction” pointing up appropriate rules and *mitate*, indicate the use of references setting out shared bases of perception that put the categories inherited from Western philosophy into perspective (Nakamura 1995). A dynamic approach that introduces public participation as a fully-fledged component of the landscape replaces a world vision founded on the idea of the subject. Another way of analysing the recognised categories of modern landscaping consists of testing them using a different, non-visual sensitive process. So when we wonder what a soundscape is, other defining criteria quickly emerge. For Jean-François Augoyard (1995), sonic environment is based more on variable combinations of figure and background than on any stable and

lasting relationship (metabol), it engages disjointedness rather than spatial continuity and homogeneity (“discretisation”), and it challenges subject / object dualism in favour of a near/far dynamic. Factoring in the temporal dimension and expressive force of sound favours an impression of immersion of the perceiving subject *vis-à-vis* its supposed perspective. Lastly, certain poetic approaches introduce the place of the body into landscape experience and invention (Lassus 1995). To a certain extent, this is about rediscovering the immediacy of the relationship with sensitive matter by breaking away as far as possible from the representational world. The focus on a poem’s rhythm, intonation and melody demonstrates how the body handles affects and makes itself available to the landscape (Callot 1997). Such perspectives trigger and pave the way for a return to “landscape-centric” thinking: motion tends to replace a fixed point, the social replaces the individual, the corporal replaces the visual, and immersion replaces distancing. Although landscape is usually perceived in contemplative vision mode, these recent contributions have left their mark on action plans and paved the way for a “landscape-in-practice”-type approach (Ingold 2000 ; Joseph 1998).

On the other hand, theories of action, particularly those drawing from Anglo-Saxon sociology, are developing as part of dual trend: the increasing focus on the everyday aspects of situated perception and the exploration of street-like behaviour as a research topic. These approaches propose a praxiological model of perception by seeking to understand how everyday situations play out and are conferred with structure and meaning (Coulter and Parsons 1990). The issue of the relationship between acting and perceiving arises once we attempt to describe social life in terms of its practical accomplishments. These two categories comprise two complementary and indissociable facets of the activity insofar as all theory of practical action inevitably revolves around a conception of situated perception. Conversely, by treating the practical dimension of perception as a priority, this posture tends to neglect its pathic facet. In some ways, theories of action tend to neutralise the phenomenal and qualitative dimensions of the surrounding world.

Nevertheless, certain research provides pointers that could help to get us beyond this aporia. For example, the increasing focus on the role of emotions in how daily exchanges play out aims to get beyond an excessively intellectual view of action (Paperman and Ogien 1995 ; Katz 1999). From this standpoint, the traditional action/passion dichotomy would appear to be under severe strain. Regardless of its interest, such an attempt reflects an essentially cognitive approach and attributes little importance to the whole question of sensitivity. Other research in neuroscience proposes thinking about action in terms of movement (Berthoz 2000). This process sets out to grasp the link between the conative and the cognitive by focusing on the sensory-motor schemes that underpin action. Although returning to this basic level of action facilitates thinking in terms of the affective dimension and the malleability of the gesture, this is at the price of a necessary reduction in the complexity of concrete situations. As such, the micro-ecology of social activities proposes an analytical scale that is definitely suitably adapted to everyday experience (I refer here in particular to the masterful work by Erving Goffman). It not only makes it possible to analyse the material and perceptive framework that structures social interaction, but it also helps distinguish situations according to their affective value. So we refer to “tense” or “relaxed” situations, “embarrassing” or “soothing” situations, “peaceful” or “fraught” situations, etc. However, by giving primacy to expression and human activity, this approach tends to neglect the sensitive components of the built environment. It is as if the sound, light, olfactory or thermal qualities of the ambient milieu play only a small role in the emergence of the affective tonalities of a given moment.

These few short references show how certain approaches that draw upon theories of action are by no means unrelated to ambiances. By raising the question of emotion, sensory-motor schemes or style of interactions, each in their own way moves towards what we may summarily term the “*feeling of the situation*”.

Based on this appraisal, we may situate ambiance at the juncture of an urban space aesthetic and “pragmatic”. The underlying hypothesis is that the notion of ambiance makes it possible to incorporate this dual facet of experience in order to tackle the relationship between acting and feeling from a new angle. Or, to put it more precisely, this ambiance chiasmus consists in striking a balance between the *landscape in practice* and the *feeling of the situation*. Such a project necessitates reconsidering how we perceive aesthetics and pragmatism. On the one hand, rather than thinking of aesthetics in terms of taste judgements, we need to do so in terms of *aisthesis*, i.e., as a discipline focusing on sensoriality itself - on any type of sensitive experience. From this standpoint, it is the relationship between the environmental qualities and human sensitivity that needs to be analysed (Böhme 1997). On the other hand, although pragmatism does indeed deal with human action, it does not have to presuppose an “activist relationship with the world”. This version of pragmatism must make it possible to incorporate passivity, sensitivity and receptivity within the same action (Joas 1996). In a nutshell, the notion of ambiance involves rethinking the relationship between the human organism and its environment by “sensibilising practice”.

Setting the ambiance of a space consequently means playing on its affective value. In strictly urban terms this raises the question of the types of affective tonalities to which contemporary urban spaces lend themselves. Today’s cities seem to display a dual concern creating a festive spirit while integrating law and order, covering a broad spectrum ranging from the ‘ecology of fear’ (Mike Davis) to the ‘ecology of enchantment’ (Christine Boyer). Aesthetics is consequently a major issue for urban governance, the challenge being to find ways of instituting commonality and living in a shared world. In this case, ambiance seems to operate like a two-faced Janus: on the one hand it puts us in contact with others, a condition for the possible feeling of living together; on the other hand it may ‘redistribute places and identities’ (Rancière 2004) – always bearing in mind that resonance is both consonance and dissonance. Some talk of clean urbanism or a new hygienism, to highlight the extent to which the present concern with setting ambiance tends to sideline certain ‘undesirable’ social groups and affirm the predominance of a particular segment of society. Be that as it may, there is every indication that collective ways of feeling are becoming increasingly directed and supervised.

### ***Giving consistency to urban situations***

We have just seen how ambiance differs from environment. We may now explore the pervasive character of ambiance. Any urban situation is made up of a very diverse set of components: ways of walking and talking, games glancing at others or avoiding eye-contact; the prevailing weather and season; built forms and developed space; sound and light quality of place, odours and heat. It is obviously impossible to draw up a complete list. Ambiance does not arise from one or several of these components, nor is it just the sum of their parts. Ambiance cannot be reduced to a type of light or a way of walking, a building material or rainy weather, even if each of these inputs plays an active part in it. Ambiance is more a matter of linking the various components to one another, making them work together and integrating them by giving the same tonality to all that appears. As



we may learn from the art world, working on sensory matter consists in giving the world a singular face, a certain overall physiognomy, a particular colour scheme. Thus a single adjective may qualify an ambiance, as being joyful or gloomy, electric or congenial ...

The keyword here is *coalescence*. Saying that ambiance gives consistency to urban situations means affirming the movement of coalescence of the various factors making up a situation. But it is essential to realise that ambiance cannot be precisely located because it has more to do with a pervasive field. It requires an effort to blur our focus, to achieve a floating attention attentive to the way in which a territory weaves links and takes on an internal consistency. The designers of shopping malls are well aware of this, doing everything they can to establish a merchant ambiance: playing carefully prepared background music, maintaining a constant average temperature, with even lighting for optimal showcasing of products, strict control over the rules of behaviour and ways of being, direction of pedestrian streams and spatial layout of merchandise, and so on. All these forms of expression combine, react with and interpenetrate one another to set the ambiance of the place. In this case every effort is made to neutralize the perception of passing time and the existence of a city outside. There reigns a general sense of floating wholly directed towards selling and purchasing.

An ambiance simultaneously summons up all of the senses and distinguishes itself in relation to each one. Should ambiance be expressed in the singular or in the plural? This question has not been resolved at all and highlights the current limits of our understanding of the matter. We may draw upon certain psychological findings to put forward the idea of an original layer of feeling prior to the division of the senses. For instance, Daniel Stern's research into the development of the infant (1985) highlights the existence of traits common to different senses bound up with "vitality affects". Based on a completely different perspective, some research into the ecology of perception challenges the notion of a possible separation of the senses (Stoffregen and Bardy 2001). This tends to support the contention of amodal or synesthetic perception. However, each sense possesses a specific spatio-temporal logic that connects us to the world in a specific way. It is therefore impossible to totally undifferentiate sensory registers and to act as if they were all equivalent. On the other hand, can we not consider that each of the senses refers a given ambiance back to a preferential relationship basis? For Eugène Minkowski (1999), ambiance "echos" through hearing, "spreads" through the olfactory, "touches" us through the tactile, etc. Erwin Straus (1966) also demonstrates how each sense has its own specific form of spatiality. Should we not admit that on each occasion, ambiance performs a specific, particular summary of the senses? Everything would then become a matter of style. Every way of being could be interpreted as a possible formula for sensitive unity. In this case, if ambiance is actually conjugated in the plural, this plural refers more to styles than to senses. In other words, each ambiance proceeds from a rhythm that gives it its real consistency. It is reality of a rhythmic and energetic order, bound up less with a logic of inclusion than of exposure. By setting the body in motion and then affecting and seizing upon it, ambiance demonstrates powers of impregnation that prevent those who experience it from remaining intact (Ghitti 1998). Everything then becomes a question of force and tension, of degree and intensity, of a specific quality of movement that engages each time our rapport with the ambient world and expresses the affective tonalities of the moment within the body itself.

### ***Maintaining spaces over time***

The fourth operation consists in paying attention to the ordinary condition of urban spaces. In this respect we may distinguish two ways in which ambiance is involved in the

composition of a territory. On the one hand it is possible *to drum up* an ambiance (*mettre de l'ambiance*) thanks to occasional, exceptional, extraordinary events: a music festival, a sporting event, a street carnival, and so on. Each instance is an opportunity to make the town buzz and to give it a festive character. But it is also possible *to set* an ambiance (*mettre en ambiance*) by taking care of the relevant spaces on an everyday basis and over the long term. In the second case, attention does not focus exclusively on the city as a stage, on its most visible, most spectacular components, but also the backdrop, the wings and all that makes up its texture and depth. The keyword here is *upkeep*.

A small shopkeeper in Tunis sweeps the pavement outside his store every morning, sprinkling it with water to keep it cool. It is a sign of welcome to others which contributes to the upkeep of a shared space and to the overall tonality of the street. So it is not just a question of laying on something outstanding, a memorable event which leaves its mark on the city, but also of paying attention to the little details of a place and taking care of the permanent features of a territory. All too often neglected, urban services play a strategic role here and certainly deserve to be recognized for their full value. A good ambiance is also achieved by efficient management of urban waste, a long-term concern for the state of the road and pavements, constant care for parks and gardens, and so on. Much as with the Tunisian shopkeeper cited above, these services are the guardians of the everyday quality of urban life, all the more important as they are taken for granted.

It should be apparent that this operation which consists in installing an ambiance in a lasting way depends just as much on residents as it does on developers. Ambiance is a shared domain in which professional activities and inhabitant practices are tightly meshed. But caution is required: putting the accent on this often neglected dimension, which hinges on the upkeep of a territory, should not be taken to imply any intention of maintaining a territory in an identical state. There is no question of fixing the city or preserving it in the same state. On the contrary, our concern is to assert that the urban world is undergoing perpetual transformation and that these changes operate in depth, continuously, in an underground manner, accompanying processes at work rather than creating novelty *ex nihilo*. As Tim Ingold (2002) puts it most accurately: « 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. » (p. 200) Taking lasting care of urban spaces consists in keeping them in shape, nourishing sustainable potential, feeding existing resources, bringing together conditions which favour desirable actions, regardless of whether such actions concern urban development professionals or residents. This is how a lasting ambiance may be installed.

It is important to understand that the sensory domain is not an isolated, autonomous domain, disconnected from social practices. On the contrary, any setting of ambiance depends on inhabiting practices which update the resources of the built environment. Everyday activities are a constituent part of ambiance, they contribute to the internal dynamic of an ambiance by revealing the sensory potential of places. But care is nevertheless required: all urban spaces are not identical in this respect. We might refer to the degree of control exerted by and upon an ambiance, in other words its capacity to be responsive to inhabiting practices and expressions. Some urban spaces are more open than others to the public's variations and improvisations. Some leave little room for human manifestations and tend to operate according to a strictly controlling and conditioning rationale. What is at stake here is the capacity of a place to integrate, intensify or neutralize the expressive power of social activities. The well known English anthropologist Gregory Bateson spoke of the necessary 'ecology of flexibility' (Bateson 1972).

### ***Playing with imperceptible transformations***

The final operation brings into play an ambiance's power of immersion. The aim here is to show not only how we inhabit a space but also how a space inhabits us. The keyword is *impregnation*. In simple terms, setting the ambiance of territories consists of a process of impregnation. We would need to develop a complete lexicon to attempt to express this slight but nevertheless vital relation with the ambient environment: from a fragrance to a caress, from a breath to a fleeting touch, from infusion to inclination, from the discreet to the evasive, from *je-ne-sais-quoi* ('I don't know what') to *presque-rien* ('almost-nothing') would say Vladimir Jankélévitch (1980). It is certainly easier to illustrate this operation with examples from the art world, when for example a novel transports us with a stream of words to a world of its own, or when music imperceptibly carries us away and infuses us with its atmosphere. We are in the novel, we belong to the music.

As should now be apparent, the process of impregnation is in no way peremptory, massive or final. It is more a matter of engaging in a relation with time and space, a relation made of nuance, slowness and constancy. Let's read the wonderful description given by François Jullien (2011, 49-50):

« When I travel from Paris to Brittany, I often look out of the window of the train as I come closer to the great modification I anticipate. But it always eludes me. At Le Mans we are still in the dependency of Paris and the legendary 'basin' where the landscape remains open. But at Laval we have definitively slipped into a strange, remote land, one that has become secret, in spite of its flatness. And yet there is no demarcation between the two. Is the mutation read in the passage, in the subsoil, from limestone to granite, or from the tiles to the slate on the roofs of the houses, or in the greenness of the meadows, or in the form of the bells or even in the skies, no longer tenderly 'veiled in pink vapours' (Baudelaire), but where the clouds are from that point on structured in dizzying forms, so sharply chiselled by the setting sun? When therefore has the marine element started to appear in the atmosphere or in the life of people? One thing is certain: even if nothing indicates it in the relief, everything has changed before our eyes, without its being perceived, and even to the way the sun sets behind the clouds. A great shattering has occurred in the course of the journey without there being a crack to betray it. It is as if nothing has happened. Because this expectancy, or this ambiance, this 'atmosphere', are not demarcated in terms of properties and are therefore impervious to our ontological engagement. »

Here we are on the threshold of the perceptible, of what escapes conscious attention, what Leibniz called the 'little perceptions'. The nub of the matter is that ambiance makes us feel rather than making us perceive.

We may now distinguish impregnation from two other relations to territory, injunction and invitation. Injunction is based on a set of manifest constraints, duties and rules, whereas there is nothing immediately explicit about impregnation. Proceeding most of the time by light touches, small inflections and micro-phenomena, impregnation is much more of the order of the pervasive, the infra, the obvious, the already-there. It is as the continuous sound of the ventilation system which I finally erase from my field of consciousness or the stink of pollution which I end up no longer noticing, because it is so omnipresent in the city where I live. All that is needed is for the ventilation to stop or for me to return from a journey to regain awareness of what was already there. Impregnation can also be distinguished from invitation – what James Gibson calls *affordance* – which operates as a set of resources open for action. Invitation relates to what we are able to do in a specific environment whereas impregnation relates to how one feels within a specific ambiance. It works on the porosity that exists between inhabitants and their surroundings, within our capacity to experience and incorporate small modulations in a perceptible space. Here again, if the sensitive is to be felt, it is above all in a diffuse manner, in terms of

affective tonalities. On the one hand, an affective tonality colours the whole of the current situation by conferring it with a certain physiognomy. On the other hand, an affective tonality does not necessarily take hold suddenly and brutally. It proceeds little by little, by slight impregnations made up of minute variations. From this perspective, it is hardly necessary to note or to be aware of it for it to leave its mark on our everyday acts and gestures. So affective tonalities are diffuse because they are non-localisable and infra-conscious.

### Conclusion

To sum up the various processes which contribute to setting the ambiance of urban spaces, we might say that it is a question of ‘setting the tone’ of territories. This expression strikes me as fundamental to the questions that concern us, which is the creation of an atmosphere. I have tried to show that setting the tone involves at the same time an art of defocusing, an art of accompaniment and an art of impregnation. What is at stake here is a new way of transforming together a familiar, vulnerable world.

As the notion of ambiance becomes a key component in architectural and urban research, it has become urgent to clarify this notion as much as possible. Although every attempt at building up a field of research is necessarily based on an obscure background that cannot be fully explained<sup>2</sup>, it is still possible to develop an overview of the related issues and debates. The emergence of this new domain illustrates the increasing interest in sensoriality to think about and produce the built environment. One promising avenue for the notion of ambiance is to offer possibilities for linking and developing a fit between normally disjointed fields. On the one hand, the traditional opposition between experienced-space and designed-space is replaced by a dynamic approach focusing on sensorial methods of structuring space and time. From this standpoint, ambiances analyse spatialisation processes at work in everyday urbanite experiences and in the act of architectural creation. On the other hand, the distinction between theory and practice tends to be attenuated by highlighting the knowledge and know-how of designers as well as by considering the operational impact of scientific approaches. From this standpoint, ambiances summon up diverse models of intelligibility of the sensitive *vis-à-vis* their practical dimension. The profound changes in urban life bring into play new ways of making territory. Should we not seek in ambiance an alternative to the ontology of things and the primacy of substance? We are surely entering an age of atmospheric phenomena, perceptible envelopes and modified air. May we therefore not speak of the ambient becoming of the contemporary world?

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Eugen Fink (1959) has observed that “*immediacy is always in action in the most extreme forms of reflexivity. Thought itself is based on what we do without hesitating or reflecting. Its productive momentum derives from the unreflected use of these concepts covered in shadows.*”

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