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# *Installing an Atmosphere*

Jean-Paul Thibaud

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## **Introduction**

Luce Irigaray published *L'Oubli de l'Air – The forgetting of Air* – in 1983. 'Always there, the air is neither absent nor present,' she wrote in the book's final pages (p. 148). This is certainly one of the reasons why western philosophy disregarded air for so long. Too constant to be worthy of note, too evanescent to be grasped, too insignificant to merit attention, there was no reason to investigate it. So it was quite simply overlooked.

But the situation has changed in the past 30 years. With the growing volume of work on the sensory – what some call the *sensorial turn* – the next step is to make room for the fragile, transient entities we refer to as atmosphere, ambiance or climate. It is time to open our senses to the atmospheric existence of the world, to give consistency to the sensory environments in which we are constantly immersed. Or in other terms, the current urban ecology is increasingly underpinned by explicit strategies to sensitize lived and inhabited spaces. Air, sound, light, fragrance, warmth, smell and other sensory streams are thus becoming the focus of creative and experimental endeavour, debate and theory-building. An aesthetic of the immaterial, the ephemeral and shapeless is gradually supplanting the ontology of things and substance. Humans are in the process of becoming 'designers of atmospheres' (Desroches, 2011).

So what can be said about the sensory fabric of contemporary territories? How are we to account for the staging of atmospheres in urban spaces? What happens when the goal is not only to design a space but also to install an atmosphere?

## **Learning to unfocus**

To start with, we need to learn to unfocus and recognise the fundamentally pervasive, vague and evanescent nature of an atmosphere (Thibaud, 2004). The following description of the night space by Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) is instructive in this respect:

"When, for example, the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished, our perceptual being, cut off from its world, evolves a spatiality without things. This is what happens in the night. Night is not an object before me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses, stifling my recollections and almost destroying my identity. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines." (p. 283)

Just like the night, an ambiance has no outline, no clearly defined shape, no exact limits. It is more of an indistinct sensory backdrop, before which the world presents itself and is

experienced, a tonality which colours the whole situation. We may learn a great deal too, from a brief detour via the 'viewing chambers' of artists such as James Turrell. With his work on space constructions and arrangements of elementary materials, the artist has shown time after time that light is not just a matter of illuminating objects, but also the power to instil tactile qualities which mobilize the whole body. In his experimental works, light gradually becomes denser, palpable, saturated and homogeneous. Combined with a suitable spatial treatment – no objects in the room, an enclosed space, attention to borders and edges – Turrell reveals the atmospheric power of light (Didi-Huberman, 2001). As the artist puts it himself, we move from 'looking at' to 'looking into'. We are no longer in front of discernable objects but part of a compact luminous field with no sense of depth.

These borderline experiences make manifest the sensory atmosphere, in which we are immersed in daily life, by intensifying it. They reveal that the ambient space cannot in any way be reduced to an objective space, geometrical and divisible – in the manner of *partes extra partes*. On the contrary it is more an enveloping milieu of the intensive and dynamic order. In the terms of Merleau-Ponty, ambiance involves a 'spatiality of situation', rather than a 'spatiality of position'. Turrell's viewing chambers also teach us that an ambiance only has a temporary, situated existence, and that it necessarily brings into play a built environment, some material device which contributes to its installation.

With ambiance, it is a matter of working on a milieu-orientated architecture, which is concerned about what happens between things and edifices, taking an interest in intervals, streams and interstices, rather than objects themselves. Various propositions by the new phenomenology have confirmed the pervasive, unassignable character of an ambiance. Gernot Böhme (1993) quite rightly emphasized the ecstatic nature of things and people, their capacity for overflowing, radiating around themselves and thus affecting their immediate environment. Hermann Schmitz (Schmitz, Müllan & Slaby, 2011) has developed the idea of surfaceless space and Tonino Griffero has looked at quasi-things which 'appear and disappear, without the possibility of asking oneself where and how they exist when they are not perceived' (Griffero, 2013). Think, for example, of wind, silence, fragrance or the weather. All these ambient phenomena defy strict delimitation and localization, necessarily unfolding in time. So to learn to unfocus we need to develop new ways of relating to space, without immediately trying to take control of it or projecting any prior intention on it. Two main conditions play a part in this attitude of letting go which favours the installation of an atmosphere.

On the one hand, we must make ourselves available to our surroundings, and really recognise the existence of margins, horizons and fields of perception. Juhani Palasmaa (2014) has perfectly demonstrated the importance of peripheral perception in our experience and conception of a sensory space. As he so aptly puts it:

"Peripheral perception is the perceptive mode through which we grasp atmospheres. The importance of the senses of hearing, smell, and touch (temperature, moisture, air movement) for the atmospheric perception arises from their essence as non-directional and embracing character." (p. 244)

The pervasive attention one practices in psychoanalysis, the floating observation developed by ethnography and the distracted perception of the flâneur are all techniques which contribute to opening our attention. Nor should we overlook the importance of bodily sensations, tactile, kinaesthetic, proprioceptive, and vestibular impressions, which help fully experience an ambiance, even if they are subconscious most of the time. In this respect Richard Shusterman (2010) advocates developing somaesthetics to take full account of the qualities which make up an atmosphere.

Furthermore we need to let ourselves go with the flow of events rather than trying to halt them. In so doing we may take an interest in transient phenomena, in transitions and progressions, rather than scrutinizing one or other component, or concentrating on a particular stimulus. Unfocusing therefore requires us to be available to what is going on, to become part of time unfolding, to agree to take a moment and open ourselves to what may occur. This means quite simply that an atmosphere has only a temporary existence, that it can only give rise to an experience according to a dynamic, a rhythm, a quality of duration. We can only experience viewing chambers if we leave them enough time to upset our senses.

### **When it is time to install ...**

I have chosen *Installing an atmosphere* as the title of this article. The verb, 'install', is of prime importance when we start looking at how an ambiance or atmosphere emerges. It enables us to pinpoint the nature of the processes which play a part in the existence of an ambiance. We should start by noting that installing means to 'establish (a person, etc.) in a place'. It is an action which necessarily involves a place, drawing on its resources and testing it in some sense. The place is not an epiphenomenon, simply a framework for installation; it is a constituent part of it. In other words, installing an atmosphere involves both taking place and giving place, becoming part of a place and transforming it, making do with it while also animating it. Any ambiance is at one and the same time spatialized and spatializing.

We should also note that installing is not the same as creating or imposing. In drawing a distinction between installing and creating, I wish to question the idea of *ex nihilo* production. An ambiance does not emerge out of nothing but always supposes a previous ambiance, an ongoing motion, an already-there on which to build. This entails admitting that there cannot not be an ambiance, that it is omnipresent and that it constitutes the *basso continuo* of our existence. As Gabor Csepregi (2006) explains very clearly:

"Wherever we are, in a small room or in the middle of the ocean, we are constantly exposed to a particular atmosphere. Even though we do not always notice it, the contact with an atmosphere is just as much a fundamental feature of our existence as are consciousness and language." (p. 42)

Installing an atmosphere therefore always means coming to terms with an existing atmosphere, and finding ways of inflecting and transforming it.

In drawing a distinction between installing and imposing, our aim is to take the opposite course to any action that might be too peremptory or limited in time. As we shall see later in greater length, installing an atmosphere supposes a relation to time which is not necessarily of the order of an event, but involves a process characterized by discretion and nuance.

Focusing on the term 'install' thus enables us to underline that staging an ambiance involves basically a situated set of actions, always based on a process already underway and characterized by discreet effectiveness. To make this general framework more specific, we may emphasize three main features. Installing an atmosphere implies both an art of accompaniment, an art of impregnation and an art of tonalization.

### **An art of accompaniment**

The art of accompaniment draws attention to the fact that the world is always changing and that installing an atmosphere is achieved firstly and above all in a gradual, indirect way. As I said before, it is not so much a matter of creating an atmosphere from scratch as of acting on the conditions of its possibility, feeding the processes which make it possible, and sustaining the factors which favour its emergence. In this respect the built environment plays a part in the conditioning process, creating holds for actions and perceptions which in return affect it. We might say that any piece of architecture sensitizes a lived space. In this way we might develop a sensory ecology of affordances which would show how material devices play a part in staging the ambiance of a place and lend themselves to the emergence of a sensory atmosphere.

The philosopher François Jullien (1996) analysed this rationale of ambient effectiveness, which involves accompanying the world as it unfolds. Instead of a conception based on direct, finalized action, we encounter the idea of the "potential of a situation", which allows us to activate available resources, play with circumstances, exploit propensities and prime processes. There is no decreeing an atmosphere, it cannot be forced upon a situation; it gradually establishes itself extending the motion and dynamics already at work. Jullien cites the example of agriculture, which could equally well apply to atmosphere:

“We cannot force a plant to grow, nor can we leave it to get on by itself; but, by freeing it from whatever might hold back its development, it must be left to grow.”  
(p. 112)

Under such circumstances, the concept of the architect as a demiurge or a self-sufficient designer no longer stands up; on the contrary it is a matter of seconding the world. 'Seconding the world'. This fine expression, which comes from Kafka's journal, recently gave rise to an instructive commentary by Pierre Zaoui (2013), a specialist on Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze. He writes:

“What matters is to second the world, to accept in other words not being the first, not being at the centre nor at the origin, yet supporting what exists, serving not oneself – a humbug, chimera or lie – nor the Other – a tyrant or fantasy – but each thing, each being and each instant.” (p. 24)

This is exactly what is going on with the installation of an atmosphere. We are seconding the world at an everyday level, for the duration, while acknowledging that an ambiance is a common good and a collective work essentially anonymous in character. So we must pay attention to particulars, from one day to the next, discreetly and permanently, by recurrent gestures, little nothings which make all the difference. The aim is not to go down in history, to mark the town with a memorable event, but to take care of the ordinary permanences of a territory. In short, we shall not focus exclusively on the scene, the most obvious, spectacular components of a space, but just as much, if not more, on a territory's background and what makes up its texture and depth.

The art of accompaniment to which I refer requires a certain permanence in the sensory transformations underway. As Hannah Arendt (1958) says, this supposes that we should be "surrounded by things more permanent than the activity by which they were produced, and potentially even more permanent than the lives of their authors" (p. 96). On this depends our collective ability to look after places and take care of them.

To sum up, insisting on an art of accompaniment enables us to highlight the importance of constant, collective care in the installation of an atmosphere. What matters here is not so much the rationale of a one-off event but rather a slow, continuous relation to time, prolonging the world as it is making itself. Obviously our insistence on gestures of installation and upkeep should not be taken as a strategy to keep a territory just as it is. There is no question of freezing the city or preserving it in a particular state. Rather, I wish to convey that the urban world is in constant flux and that such changes are continuously at work, deep down. Rather than trying to create novelty out of nothing, such processes should be accompanied. This is how an ambiance is installed in time, by seizing on opportunities and acting on the conditions of the possibility of development action itself. One way of summing up this operation would be to cite Sun Tzu (1999), who refers to 'controlling the factors behind changing circumstances'.

### **Art of impregnation**

I shall now turn to the second point, the art of impregnation. What we need to understand here is our porosity to the ambient milieu, emphasizing our dual capacity to inhabit a world and be inhabited by it, to incorporate and inflect tiny modulations in the sensory space. This involves a joint movement of impression and expression, incorporation and incarnation, of embodiment. From this point of view, any work of impregnation consists in developing complicity with the things surrounding us, adjusting to our environment and adjusting it in return through our movements. Merleau-Ponty refers to 'knowledge of familiarity' in this respect. What we see, hear, touch, feel, at such and such time and place, does not immediately leave us; on the contrary it plays a part in what we are and become. In the words of Jean-François Lyotard (2000): "We inhabit a place, a milieu, when our way of being is shaped by frequenting it" (p. 200). Witness the bodily habits we acquire when we are immersed for a long time in the same milieu. Gestures are fashioned, styles of conduct formed, which respond immediately to ambient situations. Or indeed, think of the phenomena of involuntary memory described by Marcel Proust, when a

present sensation meets another from the past, and transports the narrator to Combray, Balbec or Venice. In short, the installation of an atmosphere brings into play a climatic force which, though pervasive, is nevertheless operative. A memory of the body is activated, adding to the sediment of past experience, favouring the acquisition of new skills and shaping our practical, sensory relation to the world around us.

I am emphasizing here our capacity to be inhabited by the milieu in which we live, but I should also take time to show how our ways of being, our everyday actions and gestures also play a part in this art of impregnation.

It is important to understand that this phenomenon of impregnation is the result of a discreet influence on beings and milieus. It is all a matter of immersion and infusion, and of *tiny connections* (Laplantine, 2003). Much as a novel transports us with a stream of words to another world, or music imperceptibly carries us away with its movement; we are living in the novel, we belong to the music. We could build a whole lexicon to try to put words on the slight, but vital relation to the ambient milieu: from a fragrance to a stroke, from a breath to floating, from exhaling to inclination, from the unobtrusive to the evasive, from *je ne sais quoi* to almost nothing. Proceeding most of the time by light brushstrokes, small inflections and subconscious phenomena, impregnation is by nature pervasive, underground, infra, unsaid. Think of the continuous sound of ventilation which we end up erasing from our field of consciousness or the smell of pollution we no longer notice, it being so omnipresent in the town where we live. One day the ventilation stops, or we return from a trip and notice something that was already there. The habituation to the milieu in which we live, also plays a part in the relative invisibility or imperceptibility of impregnation.

But here again, if impregnation remains at a subconscious level, at the limit of what is perceptible, it is also because we are dealing with low-intensity phenomena. If impregnation generally goes unnoticed, it is because it works through infinitesimal, interstitial vibrations which combine with one another to produce a continuous experience. Leibniz referred to 'little perceptions', referring to perceptions so microscopic and so mixed with each other that we have no distinct awareness of them. He liked to take as an example the roar of the sea, made up of the sound of an infinite number of barely audible ripples, which we would have difficulty picking out, but which nevertheless affect us. In a quite different context, William James, later, drew attention to the 'fringes of experience' which establish a continuity between experiences. This is one of the main argument of radical empiricism advocated by James (1912), for whom, "life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected" (p. 87). So it is not just the infinitesimal nature of phenomena which needs to be emphasized here, but also their power of connection and transition. These micro-phenomena build imperceptible bridges from one state to the next and, to do so, blend with one another.

To the microscopic, transient nature of impregnation, we must add its fundamentally diffuse character. By this we mean that if ambiance has an underlying force, it works in an overall, pervasive, disseminated way. Just think of the effect of rain or mist in installing an ambiance. Fernando Pessoa's *Book of Disquiet* contains superb evocations of such barely

noticeable variations in atmosphere, when the mist envelops the Tagus or drizzle conceals the Baixa neighbourhood of Lisbon. It is impossible to position an object precisely, or identify a single signal, thought to be the cause of this atmospheric effect. The whole situation is requalified, the entire perceived space reconfigured. François Jullien (2009) develops the idea of 'silent transformations' to designate the continuous, overall changes which go unnoticed most of the time.

Summing up, this art of impregnation contributes to developing the world of nuances Roland Barthes craved. It is a matter of small inflections and tiny graduations which colour experience. It is also important to emphasize the significance of continuous streams rather than discreet signs, discontinuous signs, as an ambiance establishes itself in a space. This enables us to make a distinction between context and atmosphere. As Fernando Gil (2000) points out:

"This [the context] is visible and can be reduced to a set of relations or signs. It can be semiotized, whereas the atmosphere is infra-semiotic and unfolds in a continuum." (p. 16)

We may posit, that this constitutes a shift from an aesthetic of forms to one of flux.

### **Art of tonalization**

I now come to the last point, the art of tonalization. It should by now be obvious that installing an atmosphere is not just a question of controlling the physical parameters of a particular setting, but also involves endowing a place with an overall quality which lends it a certain physiognomy. For this reason, we can sum up an ambiance with a single word, such as joyous, morose, electric, friendly, peaceful or worrying. In this respect an ambiance pulls together diverse strands giving the same character to everything which appears. Anne Cauquelin (2006) explains that every atmosphere is the result of a complex conjunction of heterogeneous data:

"If I try to remember a moment in my life, a fragment of experience, this recollection is mixed with places, people, the weather and time of day, the words exchanged: a fragile fabric, which tends to unravel if you look at it too closely, its consistency depending largely on its fluidity. What emerges from this exploration is an atmosphere, an air, an envelope of odours, flavours and, here and there, a few distinct, more sharply defined items." (p. 6-7)

On this depends the capacity of an ambiance to give a situation a particular consistence and to weave together a large variety of components.

Any lived space is therefore marked by a dominant tonality, an emotional charge and by the pathic relation we entertain with the world. We should keep in mind that the term ambiance originally had a protective connotation, connecting to the idea of a 'warm embrace'. What matters here is to acknowledge our capacity for being affected by the ambient world and for responding to its solicitation. Gaston Bachelard analysed this very well in his *rhythmanalysis* project and his poetics of dreaming. By proposing the idea of tonalization, using the image of the Eolian harp, he shows how our bodies enter into



resonance with beings and objects, demonstrating real motor-imagination. We should therefore accept that we are not outside of, or indifferent to our surroundings, rather that we resonate with, in and through them. Adding an affective thread to the sensory no doubt helps to highlight the difference between environment and ambiance. One might say that ambiance is what breathes life into a setting, giving it an emotional value and a force of attachment.

But more specifically, what can be said about the affective experience of contemporary cities, and the way it plays a part in installing an atmosphere? The idea proposed by Jean Ladrière (1973) of an 'existential inductor' could well be useful here. For him:

"The city is an affective essence, in so far as it is an affective inductor, or an existential shifter, in other words in so far as we can recognize in it, through resonance, a certain affective tonality which qualifies our existential movement." (p. 155)

The notion of affective tonality is of prime importance here. It enables us to query the classical dichotomy between object and subject, material and immaterial, real and imaginary. This means that an ambiance is both objective and subjective, indistinctly a feeling of me and of the world. As Pierre Sansot (1984) says in his *Poétique de la Ville – Poetry of the City* – in a city you can never tell "who in the night has a fever, whether it is the city lights or the busy passers-by" (p. 19).

Following this track we may consider the city as a remarkable resonator of affective tonalities, regardless of whether they take the form of warm conviviality, measured urbaneness or feelings of insecurity. So installing an atmosphere involves coming to terms with various affective tonalities and activating the tonalizing potential of inhabited spaces. If we consider the conditioned environments of shopping malls or the planted areas of eco-neighbourhoods, the heritage-oriented historic town centres or the privatized gated communities, the new scenes of the creative city or the functional atmosphere of transport hubs, every effort seems to be made to channel our feelings and make us experience a specific *Stimmung*. Many authors have tried to qualify the dominant tonalities of the contemporary urban space. Whereas modern urban life were marked by hyperstimulation (Simmel, 1976) and an aesthetics of shock (Benjamin, 2006), contemporary western megacities tend to be described in terms of detachment from reality, leading to an uncanny feeling (Vidler, 1994), an almost hallucinatory experience (Bégout, 2002), anaesthetized perceptions (Ingersoll, 2006) or a preponderance of feeble sensations (Koolhaas, 1995). It very much looks as if the urban environment is animated by a twin movement, programming festivity and enforcing security, covering a broad spectrum reaching from the ecology of fear (Davis, 1999) to that of enchantment (Ritzer, 2005). What needs to be developed is a proper political ecology of affects, which would show how stage-managing the ambiance of urban territories requalifies the urban experience and its contemporary evolution.

## Conclusion

I shall now conclude with just few words. First of all, atmospheres belong to a precarious domain, a fragile form of existence which needs to be treated with the greatest care. In these times of rampant globalization and cross-the-board standardization, it is vital to develop our sensibility to the nuances of experience and the small marks of attention which sustain our social life. Or, to put it differently, the notions of ambiance and atmosphere lend themselves to a socio-aesthetic of lived spaces.

Secondly, installing an atmosphere prompts us to develop a new design posture, made up of modesty, caring and interdisciplinarity. This new way of designing a space, requires the separations between disciplines to be removed, making room for cross-breeding between specialities. With ambiance we are at the crossroads between architectural and urban design, human and social sciences and art. To borrow something Deleuze said, it is a matter of taking things by the middle, *par le milieu*, of looking for horizontal connections between built forms, sensory forms and social forms; at the meeting point between the work of designers and everyday life of inhabitants. It is also important to acknowledge the degree of indeterminacy and incompleteness in any built space, because an atmosphere is not a finished object but much more fundamentally a process of becoming.

Lastly, is there any need to say how much ambiance as we understand it differs from some cosmetic notion? Far from being a simple additive procuring comfort or luxury, no more than a marketing ploy, it helps us conceptualize the existential side of human experience. Atmosphere anchors the world of the senses right in the middle of dwelling, constituting a condition for its possibility.

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