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A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Ambiance Change Triggers in an Urban Context

***Abstract.** This paper focuses on the issue of ambiance change indicators. A series of guided photo tours was carried out in Nantes (West of France). During this guided tour, inhabitants had to identify the changes in ambiance that they are experiencing. We aim to analyze the indicators that trigger a change of ambiance in an urban environment connected to the density or diversity dimensions that characterize the urban environment. The results show that three levels of understanding of urban environments can be identified: a first level shared by all, a second one shared by social groups, and a last one related to the individual. These three-levels of the inhabitants' definition of urban ambiance anchors enable us to question participation in urban planning.*

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Keywords. *Urbanity, Ambiance Change Triggers, Guided Commentary Tours*

Introduction

This paper is based on Ph.D. work defended in 2019 on the issue of “the sense of urbanity: a geopsychological approach.” For Lévy (1993, 1997, 2003), urbanity is a combination of density and diversity, regarded as both morphological and functional or social. In this context, the ambiance is also part of urbanity, because of this combination which can help to characterize it.

However, this definition of urbanity is insufficient. The individual and his specificity are denied. Then a concept needed to be built to approach at the same time morphological, functional or social aspects of the city and individual perceptions of it. Indeed, cities are “building frame that becomes lived personal and collective experience” (Thibaud, Thomas, 2004, 102). The “sense of urbanity” involves these individual perceptions of the density/diversity combination that creates urbanity. This “sense of urbanity,” as an emotional state, is also very permeable to urban ambiance, influencing collective and individual urban representations. The urban ambiance results from the matching of a built setting and an environment, and those who inhabit it as the “sense of urbanity.” Consequently, the urban ambiance is composed of multiple interlocking forms, such as morphological and cognitive elements. Three levels allow to understand the “sense of urbanity”: a collective one, shared by all the people - a social one, shared by groups of people with common characteristics (age, socio-professional category, housing) - and an individual one, which depends of individuals (Bisson, 2019). The main hypothesis here is that the social and cultural framework where the individuals live conditions their perception of urban spaces and then their interpretation of urban ambiances. The question of changes can be studied here perceptive transitions which are according to Thibaud “another mean to account for manifest changes”

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(about ambiances) by “asserting intensity differentials or variations in quality [...] [transitions] make it possible to characterize the articulation of places at the sensitive level” (Thibaud, 2003, 124). So how and why do individuals feel ambiance changes? Here, we focus on the collective level as representative of an inhabitant’s consensus about urban ambiance.

Method

The method of guided commentary tours (Thibaud, 2001), which is particularly used to approach urban ambiance (Thibaud, Thomas, 2004; Thomas, 2010; Thibaud, 2015) was used in the city of Nantes with a variety of inhabitants. The choice of city-place to go along were previously identified in a series of interviews which allowed us to identify Nantes as a recurrent representative city and to select potential “high places” of urbanity², such as the river banks, the historical squares, the commercial streets, or the multi-modal poles. This method captures in-situ individual feelings that are built by urban ambiance.

The Routes

Three routes in Nantes were selected. They have been configured so that they vary in terms of the urban ambiance and according to the combination of density and diversity (morphological, social and functional).

The three route sections were travelled by all participants³.

Instructions and Investigation Conditions

Because of the comparative approach, all the participants were individually surveyed and followed the same instruction.

“We are going to walk from [...] to [...]. You have a camera and we are going to make a route of approximately 2 hours. During the guided-commentary tour, you will be able to photograph urban situations which are representative of a city in general for you and then you have to explain why you photographed this specific urban situation. You will also be able to tell me when you feel an ambient change and describe it.”

Here we focus on the second part of the instruction connected to urban ambiance.

Results

195 ambiances changes were collected.

Collective Level

The collective level of apprehension of urban ambiance means some ambiance change triggers which are shared by almost all the people, regardless ages or social belonging. Here, it is interesting to note that the ambiance change triggers noticed by the respondents are mostly focused on morphological or functional dimension. Social ambiance changes triggers as “the Versailles island square is quieter than the inner-city area, with less social density” (Hbt 15) are rare. This relative lack of social density triggers is also relevant in the results of the guided commentary tours to

2. Results from 21 interviews carried out with researchers in different disciplines social and territorial sciences.

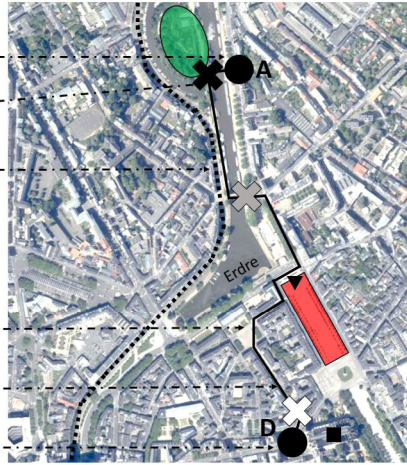
3. 52 tours have been completed in 2015 - with 12 men and 30 women - living in different areas of Nantes.

characterize what is the city, but it is more surprising for the ambiance. The collective level is mostly characterized by sound and morphological aspects. If we analyze each route, we can identify different places which are iconic to a collective apprehension of changed ambiance.

Route 1

Contextual highlights

- Quai Barbuse, with barges, end of first route
- Versailles island pedestrian bridge
- Banks of the Erdre, reorganized at the early nineties – coexistence of tram, pedestrian, bikes, cars
- Roger Salengro square, prefecture square, parking
- King Albert street, cosy residential building
- Cathedral square, beginning of the course



I - Interesting points

- St Peter cathedral
- St Peter square, carnival in spring and autumn
- ▼ War Memorial
- Versailles Island Park
- Tram line 2

II - Iconic places of atmosphere change in the results

- ⊗ Entrance into King Albert street from the cathedral square
- ⊗ Arrival on the St Mihiel bridge – opening on the Erdre
- ⊗ Entrance on the Versailles Island Park from the banks of the Erdre

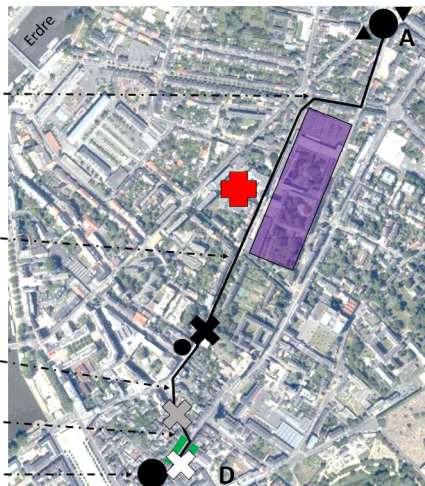
Figure 1. Route 1: Inner city-centre

Here three places are raised by the respondents to identify two thirds of the ambiance change on the inner city route. For these three places, it is the entry into these three places that triggers the discourse about ambient changes. For the King Albert street, it is always the calmness felt in the streets compared to the cathedral square. For the St Mihiel bridge, it is the presence of the river with the wind and the green connected to it. And for the Versailles Island park, it is the quietness of the park compared to the Erdre banks. In the first and the last cases, the ambient change is mostly connected to the reduction of urban noise. And for the second case, it is connected to a morphological change, with a large opening in the urban landscape.

Route 2

Contextual highlights

- Desaix street, busy street lined with trees
- Bonnefoy and Ronarc'h streets, residential streets
- Drouet street, transition between commercial street and residential area
- Joffre street, commercial street
- Foch square, beginning of the second route



I - Interesting points

- Joffre street, commercial street, event « Le Voyage à Nantes » in July and August
- Bar « Le Brocéliande »
- Livet highschool
- Brétéché clinic
- ▲ Equestrian statue of Jeanne d'Arc
- ▼ St Donatien church, that burned in June 2015

II - Iconic places of atmosphere change in the results

- ⊗ Joffre street
- ⊗ Drouet street
- ⊗ Bonnefoy street

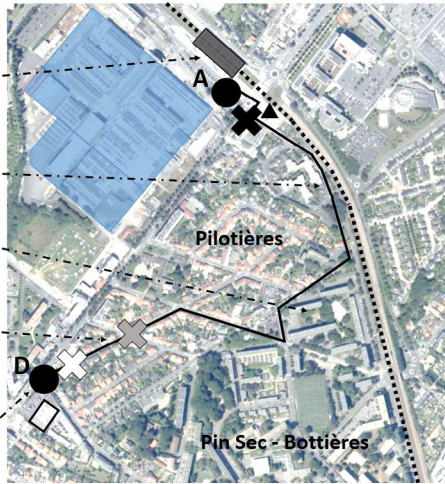
Figure 2. Route 2: Nearby city-centre

The first iconic place is here the Joffre street (departure of the second route). Here the respondents noted the Joffre street as an important ambient change compared to the first route. This changes are especially related to significant trade concentration in the Joffre street, with a high diversity of shops. After the two other important places are part of a gradation of exit of the city center and entering in a more residential area. For those streets, the main important markers of ambient change are (again) the reduction of noise and the morphological form (individual housings after the old building of inner city center). These major ambient changes are all localized at the beginning of the second route. Indeed, from the Bonnefoy street, the second route is localized in residential streets without major ambient change.

Route 3

Contextual highlights

- Haluchère, end of the routes
- Robic street, building of the 80's and 90's
- Pin Sec, large housing estates of the 60's and 70's
- Nancy street then Pilotières boulevard, individual housing, residential streets
- Jules Verne boulevard, beginning of the third route



- I - Interesting points**
- Mall, Lidl
- ▲ Wasteland, old station of Haluchère
- ⋯ Tram, line 1
- Multi-modal terminal of Haluchères (bus/train/tram/cars)
- Batignolles factory
- II - Iconic places of atmosphere change in the results**
- ⊗ Chocolaterie bus stop
- ⊗ Nancy street
- ⊗ Haluchère multimodal terminal

Figure 3. Route 3: Far city center

Lastly, we can note on the third route a rupture between this route and both first routes. For inhabitants, this route is as an intermediate place between city and something else, where they perceived ambient changes. The perceived ambiance is very different with a low density of urban construction and then a low level of noise. Except the third important place, the Haluchère multi-modal terminal, which is associated with a human density and noise. On these tour, it is quite strange to note that the Pin-Sec Bottières area with its important buildings of the 60's are not much cited. Then the collective level of apprehension of urban ambiance is here highly connected to morphological-sensory combination connected to the noise of the city (noise produced by a more or less human density and by the mechanical noise of the transport - tram, cars, train).

This collective level is probably the most interesting for the urban planning. From these results, and taking into account the necessary precautions, it seems that the inhabitants are very sensitive to the issue of calm, heard in an appreciative sense. The combination density/diversity is mainly focused on a cognitive soundscape composed of a combination of morphological, sensitive and functional elements. The functional elements (commercial street or residential street - with their morphological and sensitive components) are also a strong ambiance trigger for the inhabitants.

Discussion: The Lack of a Social Level?

The results of ambiance change triggers analysis do not reveal a social level of apprehension. Here it seems that the social level is strongly connected to the collective level. The weight of this collective level is stronger than social level. It implies a form of consensus in the apprehension of the urban ambiance changes and appreciation of it.

However, the individual level represents the part of fragility of urban ambiances (Thibaud, 2018). Here, it is mostly connected to appreciative experiences of the places, or to an unexpected event. It is particularly connected to the places of life of individuals, “from this point we enter in my stronghold” (Hbt 8 when we enter in the Bonnefoy street). It is also for example a participant who reports “I don’t like Joffre street ambiance, it’s dirty and it stinks” (Hbt 52) while another individual notes that “Joffre street ambiance is very pleasant, I often come for a drink, it’s like if we are in Paris” (Hbt 12). This level is also related to personal experience of the ambiance. It is here the example of the inhabitant 26 on the second route sensitive to ambiance “in Bonnefoy street we enter in a posh street, two years ago I kept a little girl on this street and it was a posh family.”

The discovery of a new area is also noted by the inhabitants in term of ambiance. For example, the inhabitants 32 in the Bonnefoy street noted that “from this point I am ‘out of geography’ as we say in the Sables d’Olonne, I don’t know this area then I am pleasantly surprised by the ambiance, it is calm and nice.”

Then individuals are themselves actors of the changes of ambiance that they feel.

Conclusion

The results of this survey, by focusing on the collective and shared dimension of the perception of ambient changes may be discussed on two points. First, the relative lack of social distinction in the perception of urban ambiance seems to reveal a kind of consensus on urban ambiance changes. This approach shows the same results of a consensus on positive urban ambiance than other works (Dominique, 2010). By referring to the different theoretical schemes valuable to understand urban ambiance and its apprehension by the inhabitants these results are more in line with the hypothesis of a social consensus on the positive apprehension of calm in the urban ambiance. In this theoretical framework, this consensus built in the 19th century corresponds to the birth of a “bourgeois culture” that is generalized to the whole population (Dominique, 2010, Corbin, 2016). Nevertheless, this consensus does not prevent the individual from being himself creator of his own urban atmosphere by referring to an appreciative dimension or his lived experience.

Then guided commentary tours to apprehend urban ambiances could be useful in concertation process to access to the inhabitant’s representations “in-situ » and not by an interview or a focus group. Indeed, an ambiance is always located from a spatial and representational point of view (Thibaud, 2018) and to approach it in urban planning requires adequate means (to do individual guided commentary tours) and times, that are often missing.

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