At the Edges of the Phenomenal

The Design of Architectural and Urban Ambiances as a Reconciliation Between Ourselves and the World

Abstract. *The limits of sensory apprehension can take different forms: phenomena can be so tenuous that they do not necessarily reach consciousness; habit can bring them out as missing; they can also manifest only in a delayed manner, primarily through their sensory consequences; and finally, devices – such as a digital display – can bring them back into the realm of human perception. This paper first seeks to explore their integration into the lived ambiances, especially from the contemporary geophysical and climatological explanations. Then it questions how architecture and urban design can, through new attention to these limits of the phenomenal, contribute to the readability of the world and collective* response-abilities *at the time of the entry of humanity into the Anthropocene.*

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Discreet Things at the Time of Anthropocene

Peter Sloterdijk considers phenomenology as "the narrative science of the explanation of what could initially be given only in an implicit form" (2006, 65). The definition of a new geological epoch can only transform our sensory relationships toward space and time. Ambiances, as situations of specific interactions experienced at a given moment, then resonate with the new fields of knowledge relating to our planet balances.

The question here is how the integration into the lived atmospheres of these contemporary explanations is likely to influence or even transform the conception of places. Can 'discreet things' be considered as capable of opening vital successions or as having long staves' creative effects? At the time of intense and extended anthropogenic effects, discrete, absent, delayed, or revealed sensory events take on renewed importance as potential expressions of the global threat and as drivers of new human (re)actions. The major challenge is to make ourselves more reactive to the consequences of our lifestyles, to increase the relevance and to make felt as more urgent "the knowledge of the place where we reside and the arguments of our atmospheric condition" (Latour, 2015, 184). Drawing on this purpose, the design of places could consider the passage in the field of the explanation of phenomenal limits relating to Gaia's fragile balances.

From the Latent to the Manifest, at the Edges of the Phenomenal

The *Gaia hypothesis* is a way of designating the Earth as a shared world, unified by a power of "regulation of the physic-chemical environment within limits favorable to life" (Lovelock, 2001, 56). As an explanation, it questions our capacities of perception

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and understanding because it may include subtle local expressions.
The modes of attention and potential passages from the latent to the manifest indeed draw different limits, or edges, for the phenomenal, specific to each epoch and each human group. The *discrete phenomenal* corresponds to the tenuous sensations that we experience daily, to "an exposed, soluble, explorable atmospheric character attached to existence" (Sloterdijk, 2011, 126). While walking on a street, ground textures variations under our feet, alternation of light or shadow zones, as well as changes in air velocity on our face, are all tenuous sensations. Even if they often stay on the margins of our consciences, they participate in the pre-reflexive apprehension of the world, resonances of our relations with it. However, under its entry into the field of – ecological – explanation, this limit of the phenomenal is part of a temporal paradox: what is lived discreetly at the moment carries meanings relative to temporal scales (and spatial) so large that they are tough to apprehend.

It also happens that sensory phenomena disappear from our habitual sensory environments. These may include gradual disappearances, such as the clattering of horse irons on the cobblestones of cities at the beginning of the 20th century, or more brutal and episodic, such as the recent sound upheaval of cities hit by episodes of confinement. Here too, our sensory and explanatory interpretations are questioned. 'De-phenomenalization' is then part of the ambiance. It manifests itself *en creux* in the plain assessment of the experience *vis-à-vis* the reference to the usual. For example, when, for the first time, we use an electric car or an odorless wall paint, the new sensations are first manifested by shortcomings relating to the reference. Then again, at the time of the Anthropocene, the de-phenomenalizations far exceed the technological obsolescence of human realms, to concern ecological mutations, like changes in soundscapes related to transformations in bird species living in specific territories. The de-phenomenalization thus constitutes a present where all past moments and their variations resonate.

Moreover, within this limit of phenomenal, a paradoxical relation to time plays: the disappearance of some elements is the object of collective amnesia. The *shifting baseline* corresponds to the continuous movement of the normality thresholds: from one generation to the next, whole parts of the sensory environment are engulfed in oblivion. It results in tolerance of progressive environmental degradation (Soga and Gaston, 2018). The issue of new sensory readability, therefore, does not only concern our relations to geological times. It likewise includes the subtle sensory manifestations of the macroscales of what Bruno Latour often calls "Gaia's clutter" (2015).

On the other hand, there may be a time lag between lived experience and delayed sensory manifestations. Certain sensitive aspects of reality are revealed only after the fact, specifically through their physical or emotional consequences. Exposure to direct sunlight, for example, in addition to the immediate sensation of heat on the skin, has postponed consequences, from a change in skin color to long term accelerated aging. Emotions experienced in specific sensory environments can have long-term echoes[2] too. As a consequence, a 'trivial' sensory stimulus may cause an emotional reaction related to the past situation. This *delayed phenomenal*, emotional, or physical may be related to different time scales. In the same way, the pollution of an ecological environment by an ecotoxic substance can have sensory consequences, immediate (like visible dead plants) but as well in the longer term, such as the modification of its global ambiance (visual, sound, olfactory), resulting from the profound transformation

2. *For a description of this phenomenon of evaluative conditioning in the case of olfactory stimuli, see Zucco, 2013.*

of the local biotope (Dupouey and al., 1993).

With the phenomenal delayed, the present projects in the future consequences or refers to the past of what was discreet or unnoticed and could then pass as insignificant. It is, therefore, the 'after-the-fact' demonstrations that give it its meaning. Such displays, inscribed in the apprehension of the violent or more subtle transformation of our sensory environments, involve mental health issues[3]. *Solastalgia*, described by Glenn Albrecht (2005), corresponds, for example, to a melancholy relative to a place that has not been left but whose sensory manifestations are changed.

Sometimes, re-phenomenalization[4] devices are used to avoid the delayed consequences of specific first in-sensory phenomena. They can either work by "perceptibility rendering," for example, with the odorization of an odorless gas or by displaying measurements of the imperceptible element to be reported (a U.V. index, a fine dust pollution rate…). Through these processes, phenomenology becomes "a restoration of perception after its passing by observation using machines" (Sloterdijk 2006, 72).

Based on the same threat scenarios that led to the transition from latent to manifest for the potential toxicity of air, radioactivity, or microbe (Sloterdijk, 2006, 76), new issues of readability of the world related to our safety, not only bodily but also emotionally, emerge today (Zhong Mengual and Morizot, 2018; Charbonnier, Latour, and Morizot, 2017). The limits of legibility of sensory phenomena then raise new challenges for architectural and urban design.

Anthropocenic Design Issues of the Limits of the Phenomenal

The threats of our time assume that we would be able to integrate the understanding of our actions on the geochemical balances of our planet. It is then for us – humans – to manage to link the sensory and the meaning, to be brought to action. The design of our environment may play such a role, even if the stakes of phenomenological readability are played at scales hitherto unprecedented. These new scales of explanation lead, indeed, to new ranges for the phenomenal: the spatial and temporal shifts to be taken into account, the collectives to be considered to link (in)sensory phenomena and their consequences expand very strongly. As Bruno Latour points out, "the 'nature,' in the classical design, had levels, strata, and you could go from level to level with a well-ordered continuous zoom. Gaia subverts the levels" (2015, 141). Daily, the most discreet aspects of the atmospheres contribute to the spatial and temporal locating of each person. When *Gaia's cutter* is involved, the subversion of levels is active in the design of ambiances. To build with local materials, whether bio- or geo-sourced, is, for example, a way to transcend spatial scales, as earthen buildings have color and odor palettes specific to their territories. On the same line, lighting of today's cities can no longer be thought of in a luminous escalation. Beyond its energy consumption, it has a significant impact on local biotopes, even at a long distance[5]. Reducing the illumination in intensity as well as in temporality should then make it possible to integrate the non-living (reduction of energy consumption and its damaging planetary effects) and the living (the nocturnal fauna) in the overall conception of the night-time luminous ambiances. When no longer limited to human safety function, street lighting plays with the limits of human visual perception.

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3. Bruno Latour (2015, 23) evokes madness as an adequate description of the profound alteration of our contemporary relationship with the world.

4. Term borrowed from Peter Sloterdijk (2006, 99).

5. See for example the recent works of Touzot and her colleagues (2020) and of Shier and her colleagues (2020).

Regarding the tenuous phenomena, disappeared or delayed, the re-phenomenalization correspondingly presents significant stakes because they may express Gaia's intermingling. The implementation of such new re-phenomenalizations presents, in fact, the same relevance as when a gas is odorized or when one moves with a Geiger counter: it is a matter of warning so that appropriate actions can be put in place. Allowing humans to understand the extended consequences of their actions in the present is a way to put them in safety in the longer term.

Nevertheless, how environmental design can re-phenomenalize a phenomenon "of prime approach so far away, like the chemical composition of the atmosphere" (Latour, 2015, 185) and especially its evolutions? Some contemporary artworks may offer leads to give an apprehension of long times and help to re-situate individual actions in the collective. Gustav Metzger's pioneering self-destructive pieces are good examples of works that express "long" times. On the same line, the large-scale images of contemporary artist Yves Monnier in the metropolis of Grenoble, appear thanks to giant stencils, through the slow deposition of atmospheric particles and the appearance of lichen. At the other end of the re-phenomenalization spectrum, the city of Copenhagen so displays bicycle counts in its streets. These bike counters inform cyclists of their place in the number of those who passed by that day, relative to the total annual frequentation. Such a count makes it possible to read a collective action, tenuous on an individual scale.

Thus, the materialization of *Gaia's clutter* is a challenge for designers of the environment. For Alberto Pérez Gómez (2016, 175), "today's architecture, even though it is possible only through its past, denies history deliberately to be free of it, responding to Paz's definition of modernity as 'a tradition against itself.'" He calls for architecture to return to its historic role as a guarantor of society's psychosomatic health: "Such [historical] architecture operated by giving place to our embodied consciousness; it achieved this both emotionally and intellectually, by reflecting mimetically the picture of a purposeful universe" (2016, 4). It is not a plea for an architecture or urban planning without form, but on the contrary for (sensory) forms that are bearers of meanings. As Merleau Ponty points out about literature: "we are right to condemn formalism, but we usually forget that what is reprehensible in it, it is not that he esteems the form too much, it is that he esteems it too little, to the point of detaching it from the meaning" (2010, 126). Based on the observation of "the alteration *of the alteration* of relationships to the world" (Latour, 2015, 23), the "psychosomatic health" described by Pérez Gómez falls within the capacities of the designers of places to respond, in the sense of *responses-abilities* given by Donna Haraway (2016). Forms of re-phenomenalization, such as the highlighting of discrete, delayed, or absent phenomena, can only constitute crucial political and ethical choices. Integrated into the design and management of places, the phenomenal limits of the ambiances could then contribute to the readability of the world, leading to the establishment of mental conditions enabling, in turn, collective mobilizations.

Conclusion: Architecture as a Reconciliation Between Ourselves and the World

In the last volume of his *Spheres Trilogy*, Peter Sloterdijk shows that the need for readability of the world was partly built under threat, especially when air quality began to be at stake. The contemporary passage, in the field of knowledge, of phenomena relating to planetary atmospheric balances, comes now to question their places in that of lived experience.

If an ambiance is an interpretation, in a given socio-cultural context, of bodily sensations linked to a specific cultural and physicochemical context, the 'readability' or

'invisibility' related to the passage from latent to manifest, in return, questions this whole. The entry into the Anthropocene challenges our ability to perceive subtle and sometimes decidedly postponed changes in our sensory environments, at scales of time and space that far exceed our ordinary apprehensions. The issue of sensory readability of Gaia's intertwining is, in-fact, a reconsideration of the spatial and temporal scales of perception of the world, especially in everyday life.

The design of places then goes beyond the most direct phenomenal, to resonate more deeply with the world, through a conception of the non-objective, in a thought of æsthethics that refers to its primary meaning as the ability to simultaneously 'perceive' and 'be affected.' So, under the aegis of Gaia, the conception of places can revert to Juhani Pallasmaa's definition: "Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation is carried out by the senses" (2010, 81).

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