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# The Urban Spontaneous Beach, an Idle Ambiance in the Urban Space

Maroua EN-NEJJARI<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract.* Often located on the water's edge, "spontaneous urban beaches" are urban spaces where urbanites adopt beach behaviors without the space having been designed for that purpose. Such public spaces redefine the ordinary urban life and allows new sensitive experiences and new forms of body presence in the public urban space. They highlight the emergence of a new urbanity made of idleness, immobility and exposure. The aim of our research is to identify the spatio-temporal, climatic, sensitive, cultural, social and political conditions for the appearance of a beach situation that modifies the ambiance and the experience of the contemporary urban environment.

**Keywords.** *Urban Beach, Ambiance, Idleness, Public Space, Beach Situation*

## Introduction

We call "spontaneous urban beaches" public urban spaces, often at the water's edge, similar to the natural beach in the way city dwellers appropriate it. Those spaces seem to allow city dwellers to relax and expose their bodies to the sun, to the water, to the wind and to others, in the urban area like they would have done on a beach.

In contrast to "staged urban beaches" where a temporary spatial transformation allows the emergence of beach behaviors (Pradel and Simon, 2012), the improvised dimension of the spontaneous urban beach highlights a new relationship to public space and its appropriation by the urbanites who reinvent the conditions of their well-being.

In a context where solicitations and mobilities are multiplying in the city, spontaneous urban beaches seem similar to shoreline beaches in the ambiance that is installed there, and in the attitudes that they generate among the "beachgoers"<sup>2</sup>.

We hypothesize that specific spatial and ambient conditions can foster the emergence of a "beach situation"<sup>3</sup> in different urban areas that were not developed for this purpose.

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2. *Beachgoers*: English translation proposed for the term "plageur," first used by Jean Didier Urbain (1994) to designate beach users, rather than the term "plagist" (Pradel & Simon, 2012) that also means the person in charge of managing a beach.

3. Through literature (Coëffé, 2010; Lageiste, 2008; Urbain, 1994), we can define a "beach situation," as a sunny space-time where beachgoers adopt "beach behaviors," namely cohabiting, relaxed, in a common orientation, exposing their bodies to sun, air, water and to other people, often using accessories specific to the seaside world.

Based on an on-going Ph.D. research, the aim of this paper is to identify, through a brief review of literature and a discussion of the results of our field survey<sup>4</sup> in Nantes and Toulouse (France), the spatio-temporal, socio-cultural and political conditions of the emergence of spontaneous beach situations in the urban environment. What are the conditions of space and ambiance that allow the existence of the spontaneous urban beach? How do they contribute to redefine the sensory experience of the public space? How does this phenomenon affect the way of managing the public space for leisure?

## **A Need for Idleness and Nature in the Contemporary Public Space**

As mentioned above, beach behaviors seem to be bursting into urban public spaces. For several years now, we have been observing that relaxation and body exposure have gradually become part of the urban landscape, at least on the French scale. Lawns and riverbanks are emerging as new places for idleness, modifying city dwellers modes of presence in the public space (Jolé, 2006). The desire for the outdoors seems to grow in the urban space and the desire to relate to sun and nature, at least in its western cultural dimension, becomes a haunting preoccupation that accentuates the bodily presence of the city dwellers (Di Méo and Foussette, 2015). The latter do not hesitate, on a sunny day, to reappropriate lawns, steps or public benches, to relax and bask in the sun (Whyte, 1980).

Through their potential for distancing traditional urban codes, spontaneous urban beaches seem to respond to a desire for exposure and relaxation of body and mind, which the city dwellers find in their relationship to the ground, water, air, sun and other people.

Our field survey among the beachgoers highlights the idea of the spontaneous urban beach as a place of pause and immobility in a constantly moving city. The need for an elsewhere and a break from everyday life seems to animate urbanites as the good weather arrives, transferring stopping and leisure places from indoor to outdoor waterfront public urban spaces.

## **The Urban Beach as Reconfiguration of Social Relations**

Like the shoreline beach mentioned by several respondents through our field survey, the spontaneous urban beach, as we defined it, appears to city dwellers as a place of sociability, where meeting people is simpler and proximity is less disturbing than in everyday public spaces. As in any public space of co-presence, wherever the beach situation takes place, distances between individuals or groups play an important role in the configuration of beach practices and the way of managing proximity.

We have observed that beachgoers intuitively organize the distances on the urban beach to ensure their comfort and assert their territory. In this type of place, where people may be crowded together, the beachgoers set up territorial logics, instinctively or not, to protect their space and share it peacefully with other people. Using markers,

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4. The field survey, during the summer 2018 and 2019, combines two complementary approaches on the waterfront public spaces selected for our study: a first immersion phase including observation sessions and interviews with beachgoers, and a second phase of investigation outside the spontaneous beach situation, consisting of four focus groups with beachgoers outside the situation on the one hand, and semi-directive interviews with officials of the cities of Nantes and Toulouse on the other hand. The in-situ field survey concerns six public spaces in Nantes and five public spaces in Toulouse, including parks and riverbanks, selected based on the presence of beach behaviors in it.

each unit asserts itself and its territory in a situation of co-presence. Personal objects, such as towels, sunscreen bottles or sunglasses, act as “central markers” and “border markers” (Goffman, 1973) on the beach, claiming possession of a part of the space.

The issue of anonymity also seems to influence the slackening of beachgoers. Being in a place that is part of everyday life and whose users are likely to recognize the beachgoers, seems to deactivate their beach experience. On the contrary, a space conducive to relaxation appears to be physically and symbolically far from the daily users’ areas and judgment.

## **A New Relationship to Body and Exposure in the City**

New forms of immobile appropriation of public space can be observed in specific public spaces such as parks, public lawns and riverbanks. Indeed, those places witness the appropriation of public space by the idle, relaxed, immobile body, and sometimes more or less naked and exposed to the gaze of the other. They become parentheses in everyday urban life, instant holidays from urban control and solicitations (Worpole, 2000). Beyond the slackening of postures, a whole new relationship to the body, usually related to the beach sphere, seems to take place in our cities, made of relaxation, immobility and exposure to the sun and to the sight of everyone. These places highlight a new relationship to the body in cities that are “balnearizing” by making semi-nudity, usually visible at the beach, gradually part of urban life (Barthes-Deloizy, 2003).

The spontaneous urban beach, as we have defined it, seems to be a situation that changes the urban expression of the body, as much in terms of its posture and comfort as in terms of its exposure and visibility. Indeed, on our urban survey sites, city dwellers are relaxed, often lying down, sunbathing and sometimes wearing a swimsuit just like on the natural beach. Different spatial, sensitive, social and cultural signals seem to allow the city dweller to feel legitimate to expose his body to the sun and to others, without a surrounding legal framework, in particular for the practice of semi-nudity. However, the spontaneous urban beach situation is pervious to social control and restraint usually related to the urban environment.

Legitimacy to adopt beach behaviors in the city appears to be found first in the attitudes of others. An implicit consensus, established by beachgoers with the same recreational project, seems to legitimize their collective body loosening and unveiling. This tendency to affirm the body in the city highlights the hypothesis of the spontaneous urban beach as a place of “anthropological redefinition of intimacy” (Jolé, 2013). It invites us to rethink the ways in which the body is welcomed in the city.

## **Space as Ambiance Creator**

Urban space offers the body multiple possibilities and “behavioral opportunities” (Di Méo, 2007). It shapes the urbanites behavior and it influences their well-being. Through our fieldwork, several spatial elements appear to activate the spontaneous beach experience in the urban space. The distribution of practices in these places seems to follow a specific spatial configuration that guides uses, dividing the space into different zones more or less suitable to relaxation. Users seem to choose their installation area carefully, according to the experience they are looking for, especially for the beachgoers who adopt the most representative beach behaviors such as body exposure (illustration 1).



**Illustration 1.** Beachgoers organization on an urban spontaneous beach. Port Viguerie, Toulouse, France. Credit: M. En-nejjari

First of all, the relationship of the urban beach with the surrounding urban environment seems to play a role in stimulating beach behavior in the city. The different materializations of the limit between the spontaneous urban beach and the surrounding urban environment modifies the way of behaving. In this sense, the surveyed beachgoers evoked several boundary elements, such as dense vegetation, fences, ramparts, difference in levels between the space and the outdoors, that can affect their practices, through the physical or symbolic distance they allow with the daily city life.

Furthermore, proximity to nature seems to play a role, according to our respondents, in the feeling of well-being and freedom that allows city dwellers to relax in the middle of the city. The presence of water appears to encourage slackening and to modify the urbanites sensitivity on the spontaneous urban beach. Despite the forbidden access to it, water seems to ensure a physical as well as symbolic distance from the urban space in front of it. Looking towards a common distant horizon seems to preserve intimacy and to allow beachgoers to feel far from urban nuisances and from the other users of the space.

In addition to that, the proximity of water also makes spontaneous urban beaches places of refreshment for city dwellers. The heat wave episodes of the last few years push them to look for spaces that are connected to urban nature, offering them cooling interstices and a break with the dense city noise and solicitations.

### **The Spontaneous Urban Beach, a Break From Ordinary Urban Temporalities**

By its distancing potential from everyday life, the spontaneous urban beach appears as an area that is outside of ordinary time. These spaces seem to be articulated around specific temporalities, distinguishing them from the rest of urban public spaces, at the scale of the day, week and season.

The different phases observed in the life of an urban beach and the transformation of the ambiance of these spaces through the seasons question the spontaneous urban

beach as a spring phenomenon rather than a summer one. It raises the question of its possible status as a substitute for the shoreline beach when access to it is impossible. Interviews with beachgoers also highlighted an aesthetic relationship between the shoreline beach and the urban one, several beachgoers consider sun exposure on the latter as a phase of preparation of the body for the summer and the shoreline beach. This raises the possibility of a link between those two spaces as two phases of the same beach experience, one replacing the other according to the season.

These different temporalities of use can also be found at the scale of the week and the day. The ambiance of the urban beach changes through the day and through the week and seems to be intimately linked to the weather and the density of occupation, which hinders the adoption of beach behaviors when it is very high.

### **Urban Planning in Response to a Need for Nature, Leisure and Change of Scenery**

Our investigative work, in various public entities<sup>5</sup> in charge of public space in Nantes and Toulouse, highlighted a growing interest for leisure and relaxation in urban space managing. According to them, idleness and leisure become main elements of the attractiveness of the contemporary city and are integrated into its development in order to modify the urban experience and ambiance to one that is more conducive to the well-being and relaxation of city dwellers, notably in connection with the cultural idea of nature. Public authorities therefore tend to design spaces suitable for slackening, as a guarantee of the “acceptance” of life in the dense city.

Our survey highlights a tendency to take the beach sphere as a model of an exemplary multidisciplinary leisure space, allowing city-dwellers to relax, to expose their bodies, to socialize and to reconnect with nature, in the development of certain public spaces. This trend occurs in the context of the reconquest of rivers to turn them into spaces for idleness.

In this sense, attempts to integrate ambiances linked to a simulated nature in the city, such as scenic urban beaches, are multiplying. However, a need for transgression is observed by the public authorities of the city of Nantes regarding the appropriation of public space, and it is particularly shared by the youngest beachgoers. Today’s city dwellers need informal spaces where they can express themselves freely and choose their way of appropriating, or at least have the impression of doing so. This need to free themselves from norms seems to underlie the practice of the spontaneous urban beach.

According to the city’s public officials, a relationship exists between the spatial and ambient qualities of public space, deliberately planned by designers, and the appearance of beach behaviors that are tolerated when they take place in areas designed for leisure. This new form of spontaneous appropriation of public space seems to fit into a vision of the city oriented on uses and ambiance of leisure, idleness and relaxation.

### **Conclusion and Opening**

The emergence of beach atmospheres in specific urban places and conditions, whose disappearance can deactivate the change of scenery, has highlighted the question of

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5. *Semi-directive interviews conducted with city officials in the Public Space and the Green Spaces Departments in Nantes Métropole, and various city officials in the Urban Planning and Development Department in Toulouse Métropole.*

the spontaneous urban beach as a situation rather than as a static space-time. In this sense, we could say that under specific spatial, ambient, temporal, climatic, sensitive, social and political conditions, a situation of spontaneous urban beach can take place in a perennial public space of the city. It can also disappear from it if the conditions of the emergence of the beach ambiance are not verified.

These situations bear witness to a need for city dwellers to renew their modes of presence and attention in urban public space. They seem to be sensitive to places that they can freely appropriate and in which they redefine their experience of urban space, an experience of leisure, relaxation, immobility and exposure. Idleness seems to integrate the contemporary urban experience and ensure a necessary break with urban daily life, within the contemporary city itself.

Spontaneous urban beaches highlight a desire and a quest for nature and for a change of scenery that city dwellers are looking for in this type of ambiances that allows them to reinvent the conditions of their well-being in the city, in connection with the elements.

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