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Evangelia Paxinou

► **To cite this version:**

Evangelia Paxinou. Infinite Atmospheres. Ambiance as a Praxeological Tool for Public Space Design. Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances, Alloaesthesia: Senses, Inventions, Worlds, Réseau International Ambiances, Dec 2020, e-conference, France. pp. 320-325, 10.48537/hal-03220332 . hal-03220332

HAL Id: hal-03220332

<https://hal.science/hal-03220332>

Submitted on 25 May 2021

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Infinite Atmospheres

Ambiance as a Praxeological Tool for Public Space Design

Evangelia PAXINOU¹

Abstract. How does the notion of “infinite places” allow us to question the production of a contemporary architectural space? For creators, what are the new challenges for the design of the atmospheres of these new forms of public space? This article aims to bring together the urban practices identified by the *Encore Heureux* collective with a praxeological thought of the design of atmospheres. Infinite places through ambience are analyzed in their potentials to create infinite conflicts, infinite negotiations and infinite sympathies between the back plan and the emerging events.

Keywords. *Infinite Places, Infinite Atmosphere, Public Spaces, Architecture, Design*

Ambiance Design and Infinite Places

Today, the architectural work is more and more concentrated on the unilateral production of the architectural object and the satisfaction of its client’s needs, and less on its sensible qualities and the improvement of the human’s living conditions. Especially in public places, “architecture for architecture’s sake” creates “predetermined molds” (Zask, 2018, 87-88), based on extreme or stereotypical situations, in which the residents must adapt, suppressing their dynamics and needs, often cut off from their environment. The spaces become either uniform, “sterile,” without outbreaks, or completely differentiated from the environment, inaccessible, and restrictive.

In contrast to these approaches, we are interested in these modern places of collective creation “Infinite-Places” which was the main theme of the French pavilion of the Venice Architecture Biennale, in 2018, under the direction of the architecture office *Encore Heureux*. It is a team of architects who are looking for economically and ecologically feasible construction methods, which are not necessarily based on the destruction of the pre-existing framework and the consumption of significant resources and costs in order to create impressive works. Each context has and offers infinite resources, so the correctness of a project is based on systematic analysis and synthesis of what exists, and on how we can re-explore and enrich it².

The idea proposed by the group is that spaces should be considered as “endlessly incomplete” (Pérez, 2018, 100). According to the *The Yes We Camps Team* (2018, 224-225), architecture must allow people “to occupy the site” while it opens up to “the

1. Univ. Grenoble Alpes, ENSAG, AAU Cresson - CNRS, 38000 Grenoble, France, evangelia.paxinou@gmail.com
 2. *Encore Heureux* (Nicolas Delon, Julien Choppin et Sébastien Eymard) in <https://www.inexhibit.com/case-studies/infinite-places-the-french-pavilion-venice-architecture-biennale-2018/> (consulted, June 2020).

reception of other functions and social groups.” In this way, it is never “fixed” but “continues to transform adapting to the emotions and uses that arise. Through these forms, circulations, colors and views offered up to us, this architecture addressed itself primarily to the senses and the perception of our bodies within an inhabited system.” The question now is how do these (infinite) places “become an environment and promote a spiritual climate,” we can say an *ambiance*, “that extends beyond the actual building”? (Encore Heureux, 2018, 19).

Infinite Atmospheres?

The creation of Infinite Places is a system, a process, and by no means a final object. Matthieu Poitevin characteristically states that “the finished is death, life lies in the infinite” (2008, 282). For the “infinite” to work however, all those involved in the creation of the place (users, creators, managers, etc.) must complement each other and participate in shaping their own living conditions. As Pascal Dubois reports on *Les Grands Voisins*, Infinite Places are abandoned spaces that are transformed “and take on a new soul depending upon the person who moves in there, their activity, their sensitivity” (Dubois, 2018, 220). The role of the architect as the “conductor of an orchestra” (Pajot, 2018, 178) which consist of the contracting authorities, the team of experts and the users, is to ensure the conditions of emerging infinite/unfinished activities and consequently sensitivities, within a given - finished space (Encore Heureux, 2018). Therefore, the architecture of Infinite Places is a link for the creation, revelation and projection of the infinite atmospheres of spaces that inspire unpredictable situations and unplanned events. The creation of an *ambiance* in architecture is based on the management of the dialectical relationship of back-planning/events (Thibaud, 2015) that ranges between three interrelated situations: the *conflict* of motley elements, the *negotiation* of sensible spatialities and the emotional identification of sensible experiences (*sympathy*) (Paxinou, 2017). The aim of this article is to prove that the above principles of creating atmosphere in public spaces facilitate the dialogue between the dynamic and moral performance of “infinite places.” And vice versa, can we pretend to design infinite atmospheres when we wonder about these infinite places?

Infinite Conflicts

The conflicts have a political and æsthetic character in order to ensure the public character of the place. The public character opens to the activation of events through the conflict of diverse elements and sensible contrasts that are activated through the possibilities of actions provided by the material design. The public space that activates conflicts and encourages the participation of different social groups is considered as a “living” public space that opens to improvisation.

Infinite Places are places where take place infinite social, ecological, technical, political conflicts that arise from the proximity and diversity of participants, socio-economic regimes and dominant techniques. The challenge is to deal with the conflicts between their private and public character, their residential/professional status and the entertainment, the order and the disorder, the urban and the rural, without losing their competitive and provocative character.

Everything is Wrong

According to Patrick Bouchain (2018, 140-142), the abandoned, difficult places where “everything is wrong” are mostly open to the infinite. They are mono-functional, infected, damaged, too big or too small, illegal, unhealthy or uncomfortable, trying to turn into places of collective creation, without a specific program. Their permanent danger is the possibility of failure, and their unparalleled value is their transformation

into success. But “their real risk would be to do nothing at all.” During their re-invention, the place itself bothers again and again, including the methods we use to transform it, and as P. Bouchain puts it, “this is what makes it live again.” In other words, spaces where everything is wrong have strong potentials for infinite conflicts and therefore for the creation of remarkable atmospheres.

Freedom of Expression

The goal of Infinite Places is to ensure the freedom of expression of all participants who occupy a space and try to develop it without relying on pre-existing models. In order to achieve this, however, the creators face many tensions and concerns.

In these places are formed “micro-societies” by communities with common experiences and feelings often opposite to each other, which influence and “create, with their rules and esthetics *zones of temporary autonomy*, taking much from pirate ideologies” (Gwiazdzinski, 2018, 46-47). According to M. Poitevin (2018, 282), architect of La Friche La Belle de Mai, freedom of expression means creating spaces that allows the unexpected and inspire confidence at the same time. It is a matter of conflict between “trust and risk taking.” Such places are the abandoned, ugly, polluted, industrial spaces, because they challenge the participants (and not only the architect) to transform them into beautiful, useful and functional, through a process that never ends.

Contradictory Feelings

Even the emotions are mixed. A combination of sadness at the thought of history that comes to an end, and excitement at the intensity of the new life that begins, as new users wander and interact with the space, its history and others. In Le Tripostal, the old Avignon mail sorting center, which was an abandoned space full of rubbish, is being turned into a reception center for the homeless. As a result of this controversial development, there have been many conflicting sentiments, such as the local community’s suspicion during the winter, and the solidarity during the summer, where they have been actively involved in organizing various workshops (bicycle repair, film production) (Encore Heureux, 2018, 185). These contradictory feelings become the expression of the dynamic relationships between the back plan of the atmosphere and the events that mark it. They become temporal markers of the constitution of an ambiance.

Infinite Negotiations?

Design ‘negotiates’ the assurance of sensible (individual) and social distance and proximity. It often tends to weaken conflicts between identities and favors individual experiences and actions, creating events that rely solely on entertainment, and have no political meaning (do not bother). The result is the immobilization and the distancing of the person who is not actively involved. An example is the phenomenon of the overstimulation by external stimuli in the modern city, where the emotional intensification of a person can exclude him from the society. Negotiation between the organization/control of architectural design (back-plan) and the freedom of individual expression/action (events) ensures the public character of the space (Böhme, 2014). Excessive differentiation of events and back-plan leads to the creation of predictable spaces that try to impose themselves and determine action. This is achieved either by creating many “impressive” events, for the immediate satisfaction of the users’ senses (i.e. Disney Land, shopping malls), or by creating “sterile spaces” which, due to the lack of events, homogenize the perception of the built space (sounds, lights, smells, activities) (Paxinou, 2017). In both extreme cases the public character of the space is weakened. Infinite Places are examples of modern spaces that do not succumb to the

price of impression and homogeneity, and in which infinite negotiations take place in order to avoid social inequalities and tensions.

Without a Program

According to Sophie Ricard at Hotel Pasteur, the place is “conquered” by the different uses chosen by those who participate, the remnants of the past and the values of the new purpose. The goal is to create a place suitable for everyone, without a specific program of use. The program is flexible and arises from the needs of the civil society, the participants and the Authorities. A two-way relationship develops between creators, citizens and politicians. Together they explore alternative ways of living (outside the classical context), occupying exclusive-abandoned spaces which were not built for these purposes (Ricard, 2018, 157). Conflicts are ‘negotiated’ in-situ. Architecture simply provides the conditions for creating infinite negotiations and atmospheres.

The Role of Art

The art has an important role in the above negotiations between the participants. The artistic creations assure the democracy, the respect, the exchange, the evolving of the space and its sustainability. According to Encore Heureux, in Les Grands Voisins, the combination of social and artistic activities with simple and popular facilities such as camping, thermal baths or games has ensured the vitality of the area, by offering social inclusion, local transactions, joint meetings and self-sufficiency in actions. Agathe Chiron (designer) states that in Tripostal, the team negotiated its new controversial use as a homeless shelter, by organizing during the summer months, various cultural events such as exhibitions, galas, auctions, which allowed the space to become functional, not only for the vulnerable, but also for the residences. It is the art and the creativity that enabled all to sit “around the same table in their finery: the prefect, the homeless, the directors of the hotel manager, architects, the educators,” in a “place of kindness and coexistence.” (Chiron, 2018, 203). Atmospheres can therefore deal with these infinite negotiations.

Infinite Sympathies?

The ideal form of negotiation necessities all the participants to work together and not on their own. For that to happen, they need to feel sympathy for each other. Lars Spuybroek (2012, 311-314) argues that living with each other means feeling each other. It is the feeling of sympathy that enables the coordination of the actions of the participants of a group, in order to cooperate and help each other (ex. the swans who create the whole but do not control its form).

Based on the above relations, the concept of sympathy extends to the way in which the design of Infinite Places affects people’s lives. Infinite refers to the flexibility of spaces and uses, with the result that everyone feels free to create or explore and be enriched through collective diversity. Places emerge at any time from the coordination of these infinite transformations with their environment (infinite atmospheres).

Architecture of Presence

They are never fixed spaces - they continue to transform and adapt to the emotions and uses that occur. For the Yes We Camp Team (2018, 224) at Grands Voisins, what matters most is the process, the journey, not just the outcome. “It is an architecture of presence born of the everyday, practiced in a collective manner and interfaces with other professions.” The project is not fully defined before its implementation. It is being built progressively, in sympathy with the real situations prevailing in the area, allowing the participants to live and appropriate the space (infinite sympathies between creators and users). It’s all about the infinite “transformations in sympathy

with the environment” which enables architects “to respond to the cultural, political and public issues inherent in the project” (Pajot, 2018, 178).

Living Material

In *Tripostal*, the most intense moments are when the “dreamers” of the project, as mentioned by Sébastien Thiéry (political analyst), began to meet and appropriate the space, in order to start the action (architects, clubs, residents and region). They started visiting the area, talking to the homeless and the residents, dreaming and conceiving ideas at the same time, in an undoubtedly more productive method, than the one where the architect is obliged to predetermine ideas and concepts. The architect becomes the “messenger from a utopia,” trying to project what does not yet exist in the realm of logic. According to Tiéry, the hut made of mud and straw and the people who will live in it, become the tool for composing the “living material” of the space, that is, the atmosphere created by the expression of the participant’s desires (sympathy between participants and space) (Tiéry, 2018, 199-200).

Aesthetics of the Do-It-Yourself (bricolage)

Finally, the transformations in sympathy with the environment are activated by the “aesthetics of the do-it-yourself” (*bricolage*), which coordinate the existing back-plan with the “idea” and the activation of events. According to P. Perez (2018, 105), based on Levi-Strauss, the aesthetics of the craft are the opposite of the engineer. “While engineers conceive their designs in abstracto, validating them with simulation and sophisticated evaluation (drawing, calculation, use of scale models, etc.),” and then having them materially constructed by workmen, the bricoleur with the materials to hand, searches through the “already there” and among his or her stock of available tools and conceives by doing.” The object is gradually defined and the gap between idea and result is constantly reviewed (Pérez, 2018, 105-106).

Based on the above, we can argue that “*bricolage*” expresses the dialectical relationship between thought and instinct and is based on the development of feelings of sympathy. It is activated by the emotions felt by the creator while he experiences the space and the mental and physical processing of the object he wishes to construct. For the creator to feel the changes, he must move along with the changing object. Consequently, if the forms activate sensory-motor experiences (affordances) then the emotion can configure a form through sympathy. The atmospheres are its witnesses.

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