Atmospheres of Rejection. How Dark Design Rejects homeless in the city

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Abstract. *You are looking for a place to sleep. You have no job, no money, and no place to stay. The night is closing in, and the city is changing its face from day to night. What will you do? Where will you go? This is the situation for millions of homeless people 'sleeping rough' in cities every night all over the world. This paper explores in more depth how the rejection of homeless people in urban spaces is an interplay between public space design and human bodies. The framework of 'dark design' is utilized to illustrate how social exclusion by design (e.g. spikes, leaning benches, inserts of metal frame etc.) is materializing, and how this is felt. The paper explores how the material exclusion of homeless people through dark design is enrolled into an '**atmosphere of rejection**'.*

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Atmospheres of Rejection

The social acceptance of individuals within societies small or large is recognized to be one of the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human (Goffman, 1964; Young & Petty, 2019). Feeling accepted in social circles of various kinds is essential to the 'social animal'. In this paper I wish to address how rejection can be framed in the light of atmosphere. In more specific terms, the paper will use the case of so-called 'dark design' (Jensen, 2019) which is when urban spaces are being re-designed so that for example homeless people cannot sleep on benches because they are angled in a steeper way by designers, or when spikes and other sharp objects are being set into corners and small spaces where homeless would aim for temporary shelter. Dark design has affinities with so-called "hostile architecture" (Rosenberger, 2017). This paper leans on the broader notion of dark design since it is wider in its framing (e.g. also including for instance socially exclusionary dimensions of traffic light coding for elderly, a case that would fall out of frame had 'architecture' been the lens).

There is, however, more to rejection than simple material and physical impossibility of particular practices. As these practices (e.g. sleeping under a bridge or lying flat on a bench) becomes impossible due to the material design of things, they slowly establish a particular atmosphere of rejection primarily felt by the homeless people (Jensen & Lanng, 2017, 89). The hypothesis is that the way in which homeless people experience the increased number of socially exclusionary interventions and designs slowly and gradually pushes them away from urban spaces, but also form society per se. Even though there (might) not be a coordinated and 'sinister plot' to exclude homeless people via dark design (I will return to the notion of design intentionality)

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the experience from the point of view of the homeless is clear. In a city full of dark design, you feel rejected even by the bench that other people just pass by unknowingly about its role in an atmosphere of rejection.

The structure of this paper is the following. After the introduction, section two shortly explain the notion of dark design. Hereafter section three explore how the phenomenon of dark design might connect to the notion of atmosphere. Section four is devoted to the pivotal theme of the body. The paper end in section five with some concluding remarks and pointers for future research within the areas of atmospheres of rejection.

Dark Design

Dark Design is the deliberate shaping and design of urban spaces and artefacts with the intention of excluding particular activities and social groups (Jensen, 2019). In this context we are not including the exclusion of for example skate boarders by mounting the so-called 'skate-stoppers' on edges in the urban fabric. We want to reserve the discussion about dark design to the exclusion of vulnerable social groups in the city such as for example homeless people suffering from lack of mobility justice (Sheller, 2018). This paper explores how this may be better framed by engaging with the notion of atmosphere. However, let us start by listening to an account of how it feels to be rejected by the spaces and artefacts of the city. Here is a statement from a person who became homeless as an effect of a personal crisis:

> From ubiquitous protrusions on window ledges to bus-shelter seats that pivot forward, from water sprinklers and loud muzak to hard tubular rests, from metal park benches with solid dividers to forests of pointed cement bollards under bridges, urban spaces are aggressively rejecting soft, human bodies. We see these measures all the time within our urban environments, whether in London or Tokyo, but we fail to process their true intent. I hardly noticed them before I became homeless in 2009. An economic crisis, a death in the family, a sudden breakup and an even more sudden breakdown were all it took to go from a six-figure income to sleeping rough in the space of a year. It was only then that I started scanning my surroundings with the distinct purpose of finding shelter, and the city's barbed cruelty became clear (Andreau, 2015, quoted in Jensen, 2019, 122-123)

What is striking in this first-person account is the language of 'urban spaces rejecting soft bodies' and further the 'city's barbed cruelty'. The vulnerability of the human body and the fragility of human flesh is coming across quite forcefully here. This is indeed what it is about: the fact that the body might be cut, hurt, and damaged by some of these interventions. Benches are often examples of dark design since they already are resting places in the city that afford staying and occupation (Armborst et al., 2017; Rosenberger, 2017). A 'classic' intervention is to separate the horizontal surface with what might look like an armrest. However, very often we see 'armrests' that are very poorly designed had this been their true purpose. Mostly, they are about 5-10 centimetre high and not really meant for any comfortable armrest, but rather for preventing the horizontal placement of a human body.

The effect of various dark design interventions and installations across the city means that homeless people will face these as they drift through the city seeking for shelter. This, then results in a new geography of power that renders the city scripted with a 'mosaic' of places one cannot go, and places still able to offer shelter:

> Some of the interventions and designs directly orchestrate flows and movements by rendering benches, doorways and grass lawns uninhabitable. […] Urban no-go areas and design blockings force movement to 'free zones', areas not yet imprinted with dark design. So, while bum-proof benches and metal spikes nested into concrete are stationary and sedentary interventions and devices, they afford and enforce movement to other places, establishing an urban mosaic of 'go/no-go' areas. Places of forbidden access exist alongside places of access, creating an urban jigsaw puzzle constituted through corridors of movement/access and immobility/exclusion. Furthermore, these meticulous interventions work directly on unwanted subjects' bodies by denying them a public space of being, excluding them from this sphere of social life. Over time, such acts of citizen denial surely contribute to a general erosion of self-confidence amongst people who already are at the bottom of societies (Jensen, 2019, 123-124)

The manifestation of dark design is, however, not only a matter of artefacts and objects. In Denmark, as in the US, design is not alone in creating atmospheres of rejection. As Rosenberger points out: "design and law come together to unjustly and unethically push the unhoused out of shared public spaces" (2017, 35). The complex relationship between laws prohibiting people to gather and make shelter is together with the concrete artefacts of dark design working to create an atmosphere of rejection.

Atmospheres

Atmospheres are both a very tangible and ephemeral. They are materially manifest and sensorial perceived. They are effects of materials, spaces, and artefacts as well as they are sensed throughout all the sensorial and effectual registers. Atmospheres are characterised as the "prototypical 'between' phenomenon" (Böhme, 1998, 114). Precisely this 'in-between' status is the key to the ephemerality of atmosphere, but also to why the notion has proven to be central in the recent research on mobilities and urban design (Jensen & Lanng, 2017). In the words of Böhme: "To be sure, the designer also gives objects form. But what matters is its radiance, its impressions, the suggestions of motion" (1998, 115). The in-between dimension and the radiance (or "ekstase," Böhme, 2013, 14) that certain materials and spaces manifest is key. Shade or sunlight, slopes or flat surfaces are all complex material configurations that connects bodies and minds that senses, and make sense.

The history of architecture is rich on examples of how atmospheres can be crafted, manufactured, and staged (Borch, 2014). The *Third Riech* and its spectacular crowd gatherings (Borch, 2014, 61) are *legio* but also other more mundane acts of staging would testify to the political potential of atmosphere: "the staging of politics, of sporting events, of cities, of commodities, of personalities, of ourselves" (Böhme, 2013, 6). However, there are also atmospheres that are less loud and explicit. The small and meticulously installed elements of dark design are most often not meant to communicate explicit political agendas, but simply to remove the unwanted. The 'stealth ambitions' of dark design does not make it less political and normative, but it takes away some of the spectacle and requires close attention and observation. As David Bissell argues: "affective atmospheres are central to everyday conduct whilst on the move since different atmospheres facilitate and restrict particular practices" (2010, 272). This resonates with Ben Anderson, to whom atmospheres emerge in the relational "assembling of the human bodies, discursive bodies, non-human bodies, and all other bodies that make up everyday situations" (2009, 80). Thibaud notices this when he points at the subtle interweaving of synæsthesia and kinæsthesia and the affectual resonance (2011, 1). Urban atmospheres and ambiences reach out and connect

bodies, spaces, and artefacts in ways that render themselves often best described by "non-representational" ways of description (Bissell, 2010; Vannini, 2015).

We are facing material interventions that pushes bodies away in a very tangible manner often afforded by basic conditions such as gravity. However, we are also seeing how the push from the artefacts and materials in their subtle way becomes parables of self-perception of the homeless. The constant rejection 'radiating' from the artefacts and spaces is part of a larger discourse of rejection that ultimately expresses a deep and profound case of identity rejection in a context of demand of ethical recognition (Duff, 2017, 528; Justesen, 2020, 263). One does not belong, and hence one is not even a citizen of this city! In this sense even 'quiet' artefacts are political and play their part in an atmospheric politics. Or in the words of Borch: "the design of architectural atmospheres amounts to a subtle form of power, in which people's behaviour, desires, and experiences are managed without them being consciously aware of it" (Borch, 2014, 15). It should now be clear that the body and the way in which it registers, senses, and relates with the material and physical environment is a pivotal theme.

It All Comes Together in the Body – Assembling Atmospheres of Rejection

Humans are placed in material situations with an openness between the world and bodies that has the character of "osmosis" (Jensen, 2016). In the words of Richard Shusterman:

> To focus on feeling one's body is to foreground it against its environmental background, which must be somehow felt in order to constitute that experienced background. One cannot feel oneself sitting or standing without feeling that part of the environment upon which one sits or stands. Nor can one feel oneself breathing without feeling the surrounding ait we inhale. Such lessons of somatic self-consciousness eventually point toward the vision of an essentially situated, relational, and symbolic self rather than the traditional concept of an autonomous self-grounded in an individual, monadic, indestructible and unchanging soul (2008, 8)

The concrete, physical situation of say walking through a public space looking for shelter is then always situated into the material environment. When trying to find shelter utilizing the material props of the city, artefacts and materialities such as benches, doorways, tunnels, and underpasses are assessed in relation to their affordances (Ihde, 2016). The nature of atmosphere as in-between, "reaching out" and bridging can be combined with the ideas of "osmosis" (Jensen 2916) and the insights from gerontology on what is termed the "extended body": "The extended body' refers to the ways in which one's body always extends into its environment, just as its environment extends into it" (Reynolds, 2018, 33).

The multi-sensorial and affectual experiences of e.g. homeless people when it comes to dark design is thus pivoting around the notion of the body and its relational coupling to spaces, artefacts and wider legal and social discourses. The atmospheres of rejection perform via this complex and relational interplay.

Concluding Remarks

The role of the body is vital for understanding the atmospheres of rejection. There is no doubt that rejection is felt and experienced by the homeless people on the street. However, one question that keeps coming up when one speaks with architects and city

planners is the question of intentionality. As already mentioned, we might not only be looking at bad intentions (even though that surely is the case in many instances). Sometimes we may even face what I would term the 'unintended consequences of design'. However, with the specific artefacts of exclusion that have been discussed in this paper we need to face the fact that these artefacts are inserted into the urban fabric on purpose. Hence, we may speak of 'embedded rationalities' where:

> The materials have not chosen to locate themselves in these particular sites, but are meticulously and strategically inserted into the urban fabric to create socially exclusionary effects in particular situations. Put differently, we may think of these exclusionary rationalities as processual, situational and relational phenomena, which require assemblages of different (but particular) bodies, artefacts and objects in time and space (Jensen, 2019, 125)

A future research agenda for dark design must be concerned with exploring the relational assemblages of institutions, humans, organizations, artefacts, and spaces. The notion of atmosphere is a key dimension of this exploration as it bridges spaces, artefacts, and human bodies in a search for atmospheres of rejection.

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