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Fear of the Unknown in Urban Atmospheres

Abstract. In today's world of insecurity, we are feeling less and less secure in our urban environments. In recent years, there has been much focus on reducing crime rates and crime prevention. However, there are times when we feel unsafe in a place where there is no real threat. This will directly affect our cities and their atmospheres as one avoids places of insecurity. In this paper, by reviewing the existing literature on actual safety and perceived safety, the perception of atmosphere, fear and fear of the unknown, we aim to suggest that it is fear of the unknown and the lack of sensory information as the mediums of atmospheres that can lead to the emotion of fear in an otherwise safe seeming place.

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Introduction

Environments, are first and foremost, perceived through their atmospheres (Böhme, 1993). Atmospheres are what give us a feeling of safety and attachment in an environment, or at the same time, can make us feel alienated and fearful. One of the most important factors in the quality of urban environments, is the feeling of safety. However, we often feel afraid and unsafe in environments that do not lack actual safety. There seems to be a clear distinction between actual safety and perceived safety. In this paper, our main focus is on the perception of safety. There is something about certain atmospheres that makes us feel unsafe and provoke the emotion of fear. Atmospheres are emotional powers that impregnate us. They are perceived through different mediums, such as, air, sound, light, odor, etc. (Thibaud, 2015; Böhme, 2016). We then, come across the question of: how are atmospheres with the resonance of fear created?

In this paper, by focusing on the proposal that fear of the unknown or the absence of sufficient information can be fearful (Carleton, 2016a), we try to identify the cause of fear in urban environments in the absence of any real threat. We suggest that, it is in fact, the lack of sensory information as the mediums of the perception of atmosphere, which ultimately create a fearful atmosphere.

Safety in Urban Environments

Over the years there have been many studies on the links between safety and environmental factors. For example, Jacobs' "eyes on the street" theory (1961), Newman's "Defensible Spaces" theory (1972) or the integration of Jacobs' and Newman's ideas

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into “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design” (CPTED) (Iqbal and Ceccato, 2016). All mentioned theories suggest that crime rates could be affected by urban elements and environmental design (Shach-Pinsly, 2019) and that these elements could be modified in order to reduce the opportunities for the occurrence of crime. However, one can have a feeling of insecurity in a situation where there is no risk of any real crime or danger. This perception of unsafety, could have many incentives, one of which being environmental factors (Warr, 1990).

Perceived safety, as an experienced feeling, differs from actual safety, risks, and dangers in the environment. The feeling of insecurity in different environments, apart from elements which could cause a fearful atmosphere, is mostly related to the fear of crime, not the actual crime (Jansson et al., 2013). In other words if you feel afraid or unsecure in an environment, it is not necessarily a sign of imminent danger (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995). Although, perceived safety, as a subjective feeling, is not directly related to incidents of crime and criminality (Moser, 2012), it does however, seem to influence behavior, and also the preference of a certain environment (Blöbaum and Hunecke, 2005; Li, Zhang, and Li, 2015). Many studies have shown a persistent negative correlation between perceived safety and preference in urban environments (Blöbaum and Hunecke, 2005; Herzog and Smith, 1988). Similar to actual safety, perceived safety is also affected by urban variables and their arrangements. For instance, two adjacent locations with different urban variables and arrangements, could differ in the sense of security and safety that they project (Shach-Pinsly, 2019). However, the conditions in which a safe environment is created, are not necessarily aligned with the conditions that create a perception of safety (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995).

As mentioned previously, environments are perceived through their atmospheres (Böhme, 1993) and atmospheres are perceived via sensory stimuli, in a holistic manner (Pallasmaa, 2012, 23). However, most studies that have been conducted on the elements that could enhance the perception of safety, have only focused on, and analyzed one or two aspects of the environment such as, light, sound, vegetation, entrapment, concealment, etc., and their effects on perceived safety (Sayin et al., 2015; Atkins, Husain, and Storey, 1991; Li, Zhang, and Li, 2015). For this reason, we feel, a review on atmosphere and its perception is needed.

Concept of Atmospheres and its Perception

We live in a “world of sensory atmospheres” (Thibaud, 2015), and all places, whether we are aware of it or not, acquire a certain atmosphere or ambiance (Anderson, 2009). Upon entering an environment, what is first and foremost perceived is its atmosphere (Böhme, 1993). Atmospheres are emotional powers, radiated by the environment, that captivate the subject. They are the primary objects of perception (Böhme, 2016). The perception of atmosphere is a complex phenomenon that engages all the senses and has an emotional effect on us (Albertsen, 2019). We enter an environment and instantly have a feeling about it (Zumthor, 2006, 13). This feeling can be a positive or a negative one. There are places that, through the perception of their atmosphere, make us feel calm, safe, and emotionally attached. And, there are also places that frighten us, without being able to identify the cause. It is only after its perception, that we might try and detect the origins of our emotion (Böhme, 2016, 235). Pallasmaa believes that the environments in the first category activate our senses, whereas the second group alienate us and don’t give sufficient sensory information (Pallasmaa, 2019).

Atmospheres have the ability to be designed, generated and experienced (Thibaud, 2015; Böhme, 2016). Thibaud (2013) proposes five operating modes through which atmospheres can be installed in the field of urban design: establishing the sensory as a field of action, composing with affective tonalities, giving consistency to urban situations, maintaining spaces over time and playing with imperceptible transformations. In this proposal for a new way of designing urban environments, he suggests that atmospheres are perceived through *mediums*, such as, air, sound, light, odor, etc. These mediums create a certain *resonance*, an emotional value, such as lively, gloomy, fearful, chilling, etc. These tonalities are what *impregnate* us and make us feel the way we feel in an atmosphere (Thibaud, 2015).

One of the most important factors in reducing fear and heightening the perception of safety in urban environments is social presence (Warr, 1990; Sayin et al., 2015). However, much of the research carried out on perceived safety in urban environments, have considered a low or lack of social presence in their research, as social presence could automatically eliminate fear from urban environments. So, in a situation that lacks social presence (by social presence, we mean an acceptable presence of people) what can cause fear? What are the generators of fearful atmospheres? For this reason, we suggest looking into the emotion of fear or perceived lack of safety, to try and identify its generators.

Fear

Fear is considered as one of the basic emotions of humans, making it innate, easy, categorical and immediate (Sander, 2013). It is a negative emotion which, not only effects behavior, but also influences different aspects of cognition such as, attention, memory, judgment, decision making, etc. (Adolphs, 2013; Moreland-Capuia, 2019a). The human body, collects information via the senses (Dias, Correia, and Cascais, 2017) and we are ultimately connected to the environment through our sensory channels (Rouby, Fournel, and Bensafi, 2016). Fear is provoked through sensory stimuli (Moreland-Capuia, 2019b) and intervenes between the eliciting stimuli and behavior responses (Adolphs, 2013).

The perceived lack of safety or fear is a complex interaction between personal or socio-psychological attributes, social or socio-demographic attributes and physical or environmental attributes (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2006; Sreetheran and Van Den Bosch, 2014). However, there are fears that are common amongst all humans, regardless of socio-demographic and socio-psychological factors (Bauman, 2013, 20). Brantingham and Brantingham (1995) suggest five categories as fear generators: direct fear of another person, fear of being alone, fear at night in the dark, fear of unknown areas and fear of encounters with scary people (Brantingham and Brantingham, 1995). In this paper, we focus on fundamental fears which we believe are provoked by urban environments.

Fear of the Unknown

There are many types of fear, however, some are acknowledged as being fundamental. One of the criteria for fundamental fears, is that they are present at some level, in most healthy individuals and do not require prior knowledge or learning (Carleton, 2016a). Carleton has proposed that fear of the unknown meets all the criteria for being a fundamental fear and could in fact be recognized as one (Carleton, 2016a). The unknown or “the perceived absence of information at any level of consciousness or point of processing” is frightening. It seems like, one of the first references to the fear of the unknown (FOTU) has been made by Lovecraft in 1927. In his book, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, he writes “*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind*

is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (Lovecraft, 2013, 1). Fear is one of the emotions that is shared by animals and humans. However, what distinguishes humans from animals is the fact that fear in humans can be provoked, without being exposed to threatening stimuli and just thinking about it (Adolphs, 2013). In the absence of information, the mind wonders, and this wonder alone can lead to fear. As Bauman writes, "Darkness is not the cause of danger, but it is the natural habitat of uncertainty- and so of fear" (Bauman, 2013, 2).

From a neurological standpoint as mentioned before, fear is provoked through sensory stimuli. The cognitive processing of these stimuli at the earliest stage classifies the received stimuli as knowns and unknowns, and recognizes the unknown stimuli as threatening (Carleton, 2016a). Also, intolerance of uncertainty (IU), is a human trait that indicates the level of threat caused by uncertainty or the unknown (Tanovic, Gee, and Joormann, 2018) caused by the "perceived absence of salient, key, or sufficient information"(Carleton, 2016b).

Furthermore, in terms of environmental behaviour research, the results show that unfamiliar and unknown places lead to the triggering of fear, caused by overstimulation and the number of unrecognizable stimuli (Day, Stump, and Carreon, 2003). Also in virtual reality and video games, research indicates that one of the factors that causes fear is in fact the unknown (Lynch and Martins, 2015).

However, the unknown, apart from causing fear, may also provoke curiosity and mystery (Clasen, 2018). Mystery is defined as the promise of gaining more information by delving deeper into the mysterious setting (Herzog and Smith, 1988). In other words, partially unknown, if balanced correctly with the perceived information, can cause a positive feeling of mystery (Clasen, 2018). If the environmental stimuli is rightly balanced, the created mystery will have a positive effect on preference (Herzog and Smith, 1988), but if not, the unknown will cross the threshold of fear.

Conclusion

Fear as a primary emotion and atmospheres, as emotional powers, both are communicated to us through our sensory stimuli. Also, fear of the unknown, or the absence of sufficient information and certainty, seems to be a fundamental fear in humans. Environments which are not well lit, or are too quiet, or leave some areas visually unattainable, etc., could provoke fear. As designers, architects and city planners, our main aim is to focus on "installing urban atmospheres" (Thibaud 2015) in the process of design. We have to manage and balance the information that an atmosphere communicates with the user. If an environment is dark, the lack of information may be balanced out, by heightening the other senses. In the end, we believe, everything is about the balance of information in the generating of atmospheres.

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