The Ambiance of Rome Self-Managed Spaces as Dispositif de Sensibilisation. How Space Sensory Experience Can Lead to Approaching Political Cause?

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How Space Sensory Experience Can Lead to Approaching a Political Cause?

Abstract. As occupied and 'self-managed political-sociocultural spaces' in Rome are material urban spaces, we consider the æsthetic experience of their 'ambiance' as a central factor of engagement, helping to build attachment to the place and to develop the desire to 'make community'. Therefore, we analyse ambiances as spatialized dispositifs de sensibilisation, with a special interest in the degree of influence of the synesthetic process of ambiance – e.g. architecture, nature, smells, symbols, lighting, humidity, temperature, arrangement, attendance, etc. – on the choice to commit. We are also interested in existing feedback loops, understood as resulting from the fact that the perception of an 'ambiance' can lead activists to want to change it over time if it induces topophobia.

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Introduction

The research focuses on what we call "self-managed (political-)sociocultural spaces (SSCS)" of Rome. It is a denomination established in order to put together different militant experiences that, despite their different denominations, are characterized by some common points: they are political, social and cultural experiences operating on a material urban space, self-managed by an assembly.

These 'spaces' – activists prefer the use of the term 'space' rather than 'place' (Mudu, 2004) – may have a more or less explicitly militant character, be illegally occupied or granted for social purposes by local administrations; they may (1) arise as 'spatialization' of a previous political collective (2) or appear from local battles for the preservation of urban spaces or (3) for the (re)conquest of spaces of sociality in deprived areas. Some are "occupied and self-managed social centres (CSOA)," a movement born more than 40 years ago, within the radical left (Mudu, 2004) and highly stigmatized by the political right and the media (Pecorelli, 2015); others, mainly the more recent ones, are inspired – more or less openly – by that movement but without using its name (Mudu, 2012).

The common point among these different types of SSCS is that in all cases, activism is put in practice through a material space. In this type of configuration, material space, and its *ambiance*, become a determining factor, in the sense that it is the experience of the space itself that determine who you are able to attract or not, and not only the activities offered by the places. We could argue that this applies to many different cases (e.g. a restaurant manager tries to create an ambiance according to its target consumers).

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As far as political causes are concerned, however, we are less often confronted with this issue, at least in its purely spatial anchoring. In fact, in order to attract support for one's cause, literature usually highlights how one organization opts for various '*devices*' – advertising campaigns, posters, public events, etc. – that aim to stimulate a certain emotional reaction in people, able to 'sensitize' them to their cause; what Traïni (2009) calls "*dispositifs de sensibilisation.*"

 In the case of SSCS, we consider that in addition to the use of the already mentioned 'classical' devices of political activism, the material space itself works as a complex and spatialized *dispositif de sensibilisation*.

Exemplifying the Role of the Ambiances

Before exemplifying how the *ambiances* play the role of *dispositifs de sensibilisation* in the case of four Roman SSCS, we briefly present the case studies:

> *CSOA Forte Prenestino* (**FP**): the most emblematic social centre in Rome. Occupied in 1985, it is located in a 19th century fortress. Outside the big events that can attract thousands of people, every day **FP** offers sports, theatre and music courses as well as a pub, a wine bar, a tea room, a restaurant and cultural or musical events.

> *Villaggio Globale* (**VG**): occupied in 1990, it is located inside the former slaughterhouse of Rome. Initially oriented towards intercultural activities, after internal divisions, **VG** has gone through a techno-music-oriented phase. The unwished consequences of this phase conducted the activists to another change, with activities oriented to artists and craftsmen.

> *Casetta Rossa* (**CR**): is a small house located in a park, which was occupied in 2000 by some of the older activists of another CSOA, in order to create a space that corresponded more to their age. It hosts many political, social and cultural activities, as well as a restaurant open every day.

> *Casale Alba Due* (**C2**): is a farmhouse located in a park, which was occupied in 2013 in order to fight against the extension of the nearby prison on the park. It offers various courses and different events (film forums, concerts, meetings and cultural presentations).

As a preamble to their analysis, it should be remembered that even if *ambiances* are by definition "synesthetic" (Thibaud, 2015), we will *break* them *down* into different components, in order to facilitate their understanding. This analysis was carried out from interviews conducted with several activists (named by their initials in the text) in 2019 and early 2020.

Visual Language

By visual language of spaces, we mean mainly tags, graffiti as well as the different posters and flags (mainly political) that often cover the walls and facades of these spaces. SCSS's walls emerged, in our interviews, as a conflictual element.

For some, as L., a former FP activist currently in **CR**, the 'talkative' character of SCSS walls is one of the things that impressed her more positively when she first visited one of these spaces. The presence of these 'messages' transformed the experience of attending a concert, from an act of pure entertainment to an act of perceiving, even

if 'passively', 'a content, something to transmit to the person who was using that space'.

While these messages conveyed by the walls are perceived in a positive way by some people – and can contribute, as for L., to commitment – according to some of the activists they can also repel others, especially in the case of strong, radical messages.

The case of **C2** is particularly interesting in this respect: since its occupation, **C2** was supposed to be '*a non-social centre*', i.e. less oriented youth and underground culture, in order to be attractive for a wider public, especially from the neighbourhood. That was put in place through a different event programming but also through some spatial strategies: the walls seem to be much '*cleaner*' here than in other spaces. Effectively, according to M., an activist recently arrived at **C2**, "if your goal is to catch as many people as possible (...) and then promulgate your ideals, let's say that some writing may not allow you to do so because then you can only catch certain types of people'. If instead, as in the case of **C2**, you want 'to get a little more people together […] you have to understand the dynamics of the neighbourhood, of who is frequenting the place." Despite the fact that he defines himself as an anarchist, M. thinks that some radical messages (e.g. against the police) can be really divisive: the solution is not to give up one's ideals, but to promulgate them in a more 'discreet' way, since "some people need to approach reality a little more quietly."

Cleanliness

Another issue that appeared to be central is that of the cleanliness of the space, and more specifically of an apparently trivial but actually fundamental architectural space: the toilets. This space appeared effectively several times in the interviews as a key component of militants' and users' spatial experiences of our case studies.

P., a long-time **C2** militant and committed for years to various struggles, emphasizes that the toilets of **FP** (essentially an uncomfortable squat toilet and a series of equally uncomfortable chemical toilets) are never clean, which makes her think – with a vein of sarcasm – that it is a 'gutter punk connoted' space: in short, not very welcoming for people like her who are not keen on that kind of æsthetic and practices.

For **VG**, a space that has undergone many changes, the question of toilets also appears as central. As we said, **VG** has experienced three distinct phases. According to A., who has been an activist there for more than 10 years and lived all its phases, during the techno period, the **VG** had reached social and material conditions that were repellent for many people. In fact, during the techno phase, "there were no toilets anymore. That is, there were toilets but they were unliveable, in the sense that a child, a parent, a sane person would not have entered! And that makes you realize the level you reached. If you want to be open to everyone as before, you have to go back at least to a level where people have the courage to enter [this place]." We can see how the toilets – the symbolization of the general *ambiance* of the **VG** at that period – became the input that made the activists realize that they needed a radical restructuring of their material space and their practices in order to continuing the idea of having a positive social impact.

The resolutely underground *ambiance* of **VG** during the techno phase (A. cites both the writing on the walls and the WC) could effectively work to attract young people looking for fun or to make graffiti, but who were rarely interested in actually commit to the cause.

Odours

Another issue is the one of odours, not only of toilets but also, for example, of smoking (both cannabis and cigarettes). Most of the spaces in question claim to be anti-prohi-bitionist and most of the interviewed activists did not seem upset by the fact that in many spaces a strong smell of cannabis can often be perceived. However, **C2**'s activist P., argues that another reason why she does not feel so much at ease in **FP**, especially at night, is the fact that she perceives a 'toxic air', which reminds her of the era of the heroin crisis she experienced in her youth.

In general, however, within many of these spaces you can smoke both pot and ciga-rettes without problems, with a few exceptions. At **C2** you can never smoke inside. On this, P. recognizes the exception they are among the other spaces; she also points out the fact that this attitude might give the idea that they are more 'prude' than the other spaces, implying the (negative) consequence of being less attractive for young people. D., a young **C2**'s activist, also recognizes this risk, but he has no doubt that this is the right way to proceed, since "you can [easily] find other spaces where you can do drugs or have a rave, but it is much more difficult to find spaces where instead create a dialogue between middle school and retired people."

Light and Temperature

When asked how her first assembly at **FP** was, L. replies that she found the ambiance rather 'threatening', stressing her so much that before she spoke for the first time, she said to herself, "oh God, I'm going to die." This *ambiance* is not only imputable to the other militants (despite as we will see, it counted as well) but also for what she calls a "somewhat frozen atmosphere […] [in] this not really enlightened place" which made the assembly look as "a very complicated organism to interact with or [just] to take the floor." Although this start had frightened her, she still managed to integrate **FP**'s activist community, although this aspect of a cold, dark ambiance returns several times in L.'s account of her 8-year-long experience at **FP**.

The question of temperature also returns several times in the interviews, since, often, these spaces were not built in order to host socio-cultural activities. This can create real difficulties in carrying out political activity when the long meetings are made even harder to stand by winter temperatures.

Attendance

Attendance to space – i.e. which people are there at the moment of the experience – is actually both a consequence of the ambiance and a component of it, since we are facing "a movement of mutual constitution of the built environment and social practices" (Thibaud, 2015, 195). As we have seen in the previous subsection, the presence of people in the space at the moment one experiences it – for example at one's first visit or assembly – also contribute to the experience of the space we live, to its ambiance. In addition to the 'frozen atmosphere' and the 'dimly lit space', what made L.'s first experience at **FP** 'threatening', is the fact that she was surrounded by long-time militants, with "some historical dynamics, quite outlined among them." This reminds us that this procedure of decomposition of the ambiances is artificial – even if necessary to emphasize the single aspects that emerged from the research – since it is the set of these components that gives the dominant '*emotional tone*' of the place (Thibaud, 2015, 200).

The question of the 'diversity' of the people attending these spaces appears strongly in the interviews: the already mentioned intergenerationality of **C2** is in fact one of

the aspects that impressed most of the people I interviewed. For **CR** the discourse is similar: the participation of people from the neighbourhood, including many elderly people, is one of the aspects that most amazed and attracted S. and L. For the latter, this is particularly true especially if compared to **FP** that she calls – ironically – "a threat to biodiversity." In fact, she thinks that compared to **CR**, people attending **FP** are much more 'æsthetically homogenized': "the clothes […], the hair […], the piercings, the tattoos" seemed to be the same for everybody. She perceived it now as a 'somehow repulsive' factor that can have an impact on the "type of audience it attracts." The fact that **CR** is particularly 'biodiverse' is therefore for her something attractive – contributing to her new commitment – and which sends "a different message to the outside also in terms of usability" of the space.

Conclusion

The components into which we have broken down the ambiances of these spaces are just some of the many that we could have chosen. However, this operation of decomposition – necessary for the intelligibility of my argument – is a narrative expedient rather than a coherent description of the phenomenon, given that ambiance, by definition, "gathers all the senses simultaneously" (Thibaud, 2015, 57).

The analysis brings us to the fact that the concerned SCSS – regardless of their name – are obliged to confront the fact that they "are often demonized by mass-media representations" (Pecorelli, 2015, 283). It appeared that activists are conscious of this stereotype, that they alternatively seem to claim or to reject. In fact, activists' discourses around the question of the ambiance seem to describe two opposite and only at first sight contradictory poles:

- ▪ On one hand, the stereotyped social centre (young, underground, libertarian if not clearly 'gutter punk');
- ▪ On the other hand, the idea of a politicized space that can be attended by many different of people, especially by those who we would not expect to find inside the first pole.

The two poles that we have mentioned are obviously extreme representations, or 'ideal types' that therefore do not correspond to an objective reality. As we have seen, the same space can actually tend towards both, depending on three different factors of variation:

- ▪ On the person who experience them (e.g. its age, but also the environment in which one is used to evolve or its political positions). We can point out that even if ambiance is a 'sharable experience', this "does not necessarily mean that it is inevitably perceived in the same way by everyone" (Thibaud, 2015, 280);On the temporality (night/day; week/weekend, etc.). In fact, "sensitive phenomena (…) vary according to the type of attendance at the place and the actions in progress. In this sense they reintroduce the temporal character of situations" (Thibaud, 2015, 195);On the epoch (different phases of the spaces that can make it tend towards one or the other of the ideal types, as for VG).

The last two parameters show us that the same person can associate the same space to different ideal types, depending on when one experiences it.

As we have seen, activists can make choices in order to make their space tend towards one or the other ideal type. In this sense, we can therefore understand ambiances as spatialized *dispositifs de sensibilisation*. This leads us, however, to ask ourselves

whether this way of acting could not be thought as a kind of '*sensorial marketing (retail atmospherics)*' contributing – paradoxically – to keep away from SCSS "certain social categories considered undesirable" (Thibaud, 2015, 299-301). Is this attention, could ambiances be a way to repel more marginal people in order to attract people considered more socially acceptable (e.g. for the media)? Or is it just, as some activists say, a matter of creating the right compromise to make these spaces accessible to everyone?

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