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Participate in the Atmosphere

Distribution of Involvements and Attachments as Urban Construction

Olivier OCQUIDANT¹

Abstract. This article reports on an ongoing ethnographic survey of the post-industrial city of Saint-Étienne (France). Through a sensitive approach and a methodological use of walking, attachments and relationships to places are questioned. Urbanity and atmosphere appear to be the result of three types of daily actions of city dwellers: the production of ordinary civilities, the evaluation of amenities and the memory recognition. This approach aims to consider the city through its resources of attachment and to take care of them.

Keywords. Urbanity, Involvement, Attachment, Atmosphere, Interaction

Atmosphere is not only something present in the place, in its material form or architecture. It is essentially made by the activities of the living and by their traces (Ingold, 1993). Understanding the atmosphere of a city through an ethnography of its public spaces requires investigating what is done there. We are dealing first with interactions between people, most of them “unfocused” (Goffman, 2013), diffuse, by the way. These interactions make up a type of “public order” (Cefaï, 2013), particular forms of cooperation, coordination, opposition, tension and indifference depending on the places, times and social worlds involved. Moreover, city dwellers constantly evaluate the accessibility of spaces by looking for signs of trust, regularity and predictability (Joseph, 1998). They identify obstacles, alarms, changes in atmosphere (Gibson, 2014; Goffman, 1973; Thibaud, 2015). The flatness and regularity of the ground, the width of the sidewalks, the absence of obstacles and the predictability of the spatial form, allow movements to be made without calculations or corrections.

Our thesis research develops an ethnography of public spaces through the prism of the sensitive, in a post-industrial city (Saint-Étienne). The survey tools are observations, photography and filming, interviews and “commented walks” (Thibaud, 2015). This medium-sized popular city has an urbanity that differs from the dominant metropolitan model. As a city in decline, it has a relatively low interactional density and urban animation. Its downtown area is small. It resembles a “mosaic of neighbourhoods” corresponding to a type of “suburban city” (Merriman, 1994). It also has a high level of mobility as a city of migration and work. Overall, we can see various reasons why urbanity could be weakened: the recurrence of “mixed contacts” (Goffman, 1975) that complicate ordinary civilities, post-industrial spaces that are not very welcoming, and attachments weakened by high mobility. These characteristics are fairly typical

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of a working-class city. In this field, our survey revealed three types of ordinary actions that build urbanity: the reduction of stigmatization, the multiplication of attachments, and the mobilization of memory through places.

The walkers surveyed say little about their relationship with other people in the public space. The qualities attributed to the places and ambiances themselves bear witness to possible tensions in the civil bond (Pharo, 1985). The work of the ordinary civil bond, as “civil inattention” (Goffman, 2013) and as the management of “vehicular units” (Goffman, 1973), was highlighted by our ethnographic observation. We observed the importance of the phenomenon of stigmatization, which is an interactional and co-produced process (Goffman, 1975). Usually, passers-by carry out a “cognitive recognition” aimed at dodging other passers-by, without paying attention to their specific identities. A “social recognition,” on the contrary, consists in identifying a person according to a particular category (depending on the context, a woman, a black person, a handicapped person, a beggar, a young Arab in a tracksuit, a rich person, etc.). According to our observations, the stigmatized quite often carry out a visual check at a distance (between 30 and 15 metres) by which they gauge the type of recognition produced by the person arriving opposite (Goffman, 2013). If this person also looks from a distance, it is a sign of identification that is not simply cognitive (which is done at close range), but social.

In these scenes of ordinary public life, a work of social identification and situational definition is carried out, between civility, distinctive claim, and indifference. Forms of offense also occur, for example through disrespectful vehicular behaviour (forcing the other to change lanes), or ‘uncivil attention’ (staring at passers-by). Suspicion and the demand for reparation are common for the stigmatized persons, while caution and avoidance (of eye contact and vehicular unity) are common for the “normal persons” (Goffman, 1975). ‘Stigma reduction’ (or destigmatization) is a way of calming the atmosphere by attempting to transform social recognition into more cognitive recognition. The difficulty is to achieve felicity’s condition of an easy engagement in the public space without ratifying the roles of suspicion and avoidance. The stakes are high because recurring tensions can lead to a segregation of spaces of sociability and produce a “vulnerabilization of the civil bond” (Garcia Sanchez, 2007).

By investigating the experiences of public spaces through “commented walks” (Thibaud, 2015), we identified different types of situations ranging from tension to ease (through snagging, neutrality, and moments of felicity). In these walks, several types of actions are carried out: aesthetic and sensitive judgements about places (Thibaud, 2015), “valuations” of their convenience and safety (Bidet et al., 2011; Joseph, 1998), and production of their “existential content” by evoking memories (Ledrut, 1973). These different actions constantly engage with each other in urban travel. Making people “be in the city” is carried out in a plural, labile and exploratory way. The plurality of objects and registers of valuations (Bidet et al., 2011) seems to give public experience a multiplication of its motives, producing sufficient “reserve” (Simmel, 2013), “social innocuity” (Gayet-Viaud, 2006) and “ordinariness” (Schutz, 2013; Garfinkel, 2007). The question is then to know which “affordances” (Gibson, 2014) and attachments are capable of maintaining this type of commitment.

The elements valued or surveyed by the walkers (aesthetics of the place, atmosphere, hospitality, temporal links) do not only refer to the urban materiality. They constitute affordances that allow the construction of attachments (Hennion, 2009), that foster sociability, commitments and relationships between people in the city. For example,

the scenic configuration of a place (horizon, width, spacing) configures the interactional and social “work” (Schutz, 2008) in a more or less frontal, near, lateral, or distant manner. Also, the presence of movement, background noise or visual backgrounds are supports for our attention and expectations of the urban experience (Hillier, 2007). Their absence can bring social interaction to the forefront and cause disturbances. Certain “details” of urban space (trees, fountains, facades, light, viewpoints) are anchors in a phenomenological dimension of “being-there” that frame attention and interaction (Seamon, 1979). For example, the recurrence of “snags” in the way that “racially” different men look at each other, clearly diminishes in the context of metropolitan animation or festive unrest (e.g. the football Euro). In these contexts, commitments and participation are multiplied, accelerated and densified. This type of sensitive mobilization (Cefai, 2007) is not outside the scope of social work. They constitute resources that promote the work of co-presence and urbanity. These resources lateralise, produce spacing, and densify social experience, and configure at last relations. They take a particular importance in a “suburban city,” which inhabitants deal with complex belonging, many of whom are foreign or even “disaffiliated” (Castel, 1995).

Surveyed marchers often looked for traces of their past. Through the search for precise clues, erased or changed by the passage of time (buildings, graffiti, shops, friends’ apartments), they have mentioned past experiences in places. Remembrance can enhance the experience of places and open up depth and horizons (Heurtin, Trom, 1997). On the contrary, if its evocation is unfortunate, the past can lead people to avoid certain places and prefer others. Through these remembrance activities, urban spaces acquire an existential or “vital” quality (Ledrut, 1973). They are grounds for ordinary exploration and investigation that produce urbanity. These memories, more or less invested and maintained, can give rise to pleasure, disappointment, and even “disgust.” The conservation of historical depth is therefore not only a heritage issue. It is an essential support for memory, “authenticity” and the experiential intensity of living (Roncayolo, 1996; Heurtin, Trom, 1997).

Investigating the urbanity and atmosphere of a city aims to improve knowledge of the ordinary attachments of city dwellers. Urbanity is produced by many daily actions, the defect of which tends to “exhaust public space” (Joseph, 2004). Understanding the ordinary ways of “making the city” make possible to identify the functioning of an effective urbanity, its problems, and possibly to intervene on problematic aspects. Our survey could thus, in a pragmatic way, offer some avenues for thinking about urban transformation. As noted above, the continuity and regularity of the “affordances” (Gibson, 2014), as well as the presence of life and movement, reinforce the ease of pedestrian movement. Historic and memorial elements, including traces and “details,” provide a dimension of authenticity to the experience. And urban “spacing” (Goetz, 2001) provides backgrounds of experience that facilitate co-presence. It is therefore important to develop and take care of these urban objects that support daily exercises of attachment and “taste” (Hennion, 2003). Because urbanity is made through them.

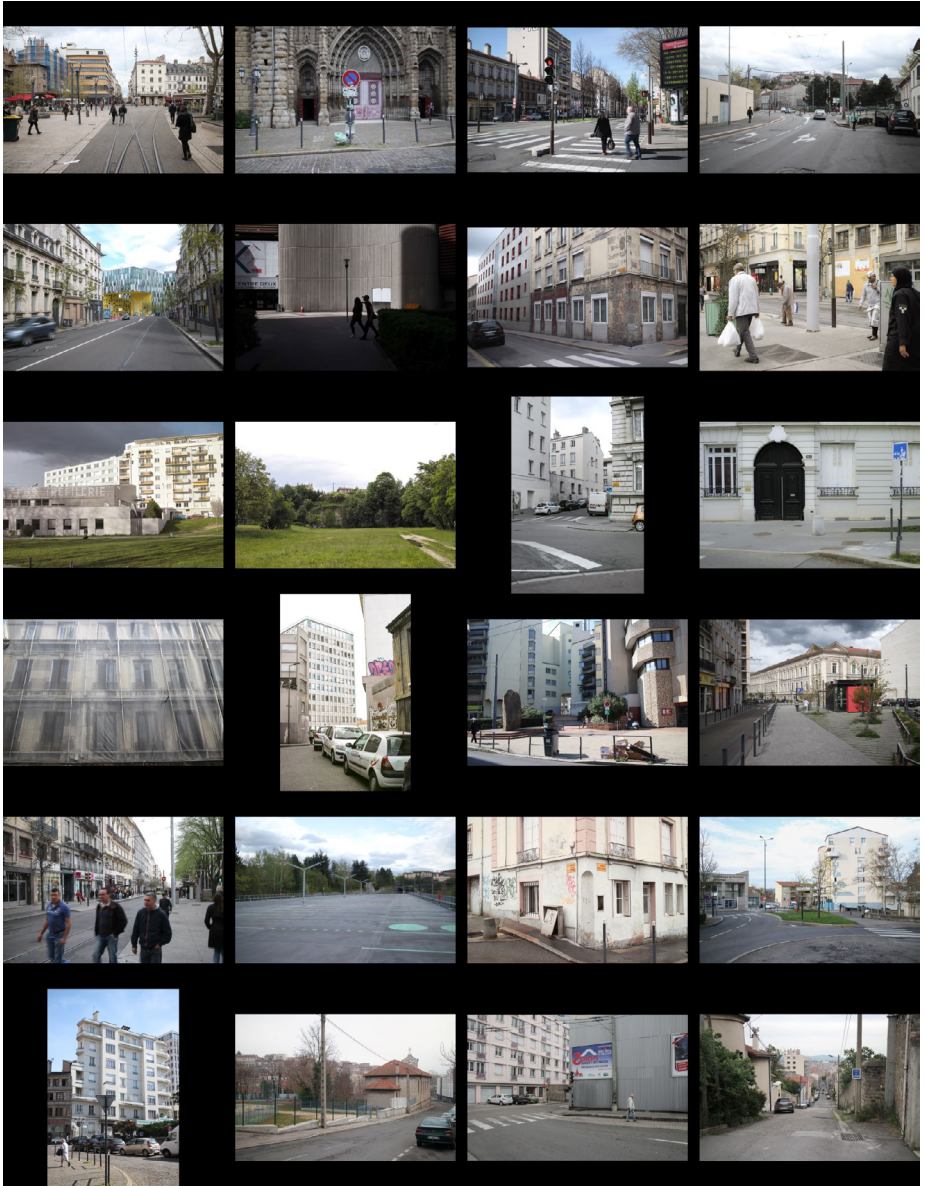


Figure 1. Extract from photographic drifts by the author.

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