The Ambience of Tension. Socio-Spatial Negotiation as Urban Cultural Heritage

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Abstract. *Inherent in urbanity is tension, where the "weak tactics of the strong," which lead the formal shaping of our cities are negotiated by the "strong tactics of the weak" (de Certeau, 1984), a reactive performance by its citizenry. An example is the citizen-led repurposing of urban form, where new meaning and function is assigned to a site, and in doing so, a distinct atmosphere produced. This paper explores how the socio-spatial response to this tension contributes a distinct element of a city atmosphere, while challenging the dichotomization of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. By drawing on ethnographic observation of the use of the steps in front of Flinders Street Station in Melbourne, this paper aims to conceptualize urban atmosphere as the result of this reactive process.*

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Introduction

An inherent part of urban life is tension – tension between the tangible and intangible, and the formal and informal city. Resultingly, a prominent part of urban atmosphere is the socio-spatial negotiation of this tension – a significant "spatial practice" (Lefebvre, 1991) that is often performed in banal, everyday ways in cities. An example of this negotiation, which will be the focus of this paper, can be seen in the citizen-led reclaiming and repurposing of built urban form. Particularly, built form and structures with a different (possibly conflicting) primary function, such as people using stairs, stoops or ledges as somewhere to sit, rest and gather. This spatial practice, which can be seen regularly occurring across cities and the public realm – from hospitality workers using milkcrates as somewhere to sit while on a smoke break, to nightclub goers using the footpath in front of a venue to socialise or the street curb to sit and wait for a cab – contributes to the public culture of a city and ambience of the 'urban'. As Sumartojo and Pink (2018) suggest, "urban environments are experientially constituted by many very mundane elements that shape what it feels like to be in a city, and in the specific localities from which they are comprised." These mundane spatial practices constitute a significant part of a city's (or site's) atmosphere and heritage. This embodied spatial practice often emerges as a negotiation of tension between the physical, or sanctioned city apparatus (such as urban planning, zoning of activities, spatial regulation, etc.) and the more informal, socialised elements of existing in a city. This paper will explore how this negotiation contributes to a unique, urban atmosphere, and how (re)focusing on the affective experience and reaction to this tension can assist in nuancing existing heritage frameworks.

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Socio-Spatial Tension in Cities

Lefebvre (1991) proposed that space is socially produced within tension, and concrete forms or the 'texture' of the city is given meaning through its use and reuse: "The subject experiences space as an obstacle, as a resistant 'objectality' at times as implacably hard as a concrete wall, being not only extremely difficult to modify in any way but also hedged about by Draconian rules prohibiting any attempt at such modification" (1991, 57). The defining of space through barriers of access and sanctioned activity creates tension and, and often an othering process. However, the way that inhabitants subvert and negotiate these tensions, frequently in an embodied manner, is similarly constitutive of urban life and space. To reference Lefebvre conception of the power of bodies in space; "each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (1991, 170).

The power of bodies in creating, disrupting and recreating boundaries can be seen in an example from Stevens (2007) research into 'loose space', where skateboarders use cement form and rails as somewhere to skate (despite what is otherwise a bounded form with a perceived orderly function). Highlighting the ways that "through their actions, people can loosen the physical conditions of space as well as the social and representational conditions" (ibid., 63). Similarly, Massey (1999) points out how young people respond to a lack of suitable, sanctioned spaces within which they can exist (as they are often not able to access certain venues due to age restrictions), by loitering in public. Which in turn, creates another bounded, representational space, not least a form of public culture (i.e. 'urban youth culture').

In this way, the response to the boundaries and defining of urban space become just as significant as the physical and social parameters that create these boundaries and tensions in the first space. This process of reconstituting spatial parameters and negotiating spatial tensions, leads to the recreation of social relations and as such, the 'production of space' and our urban experience (Lefebvre, 1991). What's more, in adopting an agonistic theory stance, as the conflict that it negotiated within this production is likely inevitable (Hillier, 2003; Mouffe, 1999), then so too is this form of cultural production.

This negotiation can be seen in how physical form (a tangible, often formal element of a city) is repurposed by citizens (an intangible, often informal process). Or as de Certeau (1984) proposes, the 'weak tactics of the strong', which lead to the formal shaping of our cities (i.e. urban planning/design, development, commercialisation) often become negotiated and subverted by the 'strong tactics of the weak' (an intentional, or unintentional reactive process led by citizens, such as the skateboarders referenced in Stevens (2007) research).

Embodied Negotiation of Tension

Though often a relatively passive, or banal act, sitting on steps or ledges – which are designed for movement – is arguably a way in which tension is represented in the city. There is tension between how the physical form regulates our movements, and dictates a certain type of socio-spatial behavior (or a 'resistant objectality' (Lefebvre, 1991, 57)), and the desire to exist in the city in a different way. This "thrown togetherness of bodies, mass and matter, and of many uses and needs in a shared physical space," contends Amin (2008, 8), is inherent in urban public culture, and arguably by extension, atmosphere, as our bodies are "regulated by the rhythms of invention, order and control generated by multiplicity" (ibid., 8). The embodied negotiation of such tension creates a distinct, urban ambience – both for the individual repurposing the built

form, and for any spectators. This embodied negotiation creates for an affective experience of atmosphere, and of the 'urban'. Or of being "citified," as Grosz (1999) suggests – "the city is made and made over into a simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, 'citified', urbanised as a distinctly metropolitan body" (242).

Embodiment as a way of defining space, and creating and experiencing ambience, can also be thought of in terms of the embodiment of socio-spatial rights. In embodying tension, we embody our capacity to assemble and perform politics (Butler, 2005) and embody our rights to the city. Harvey (2008) contends that "the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city" (23). In 'changing the city' through our bodies, in 'assembling' and negotiating space – even (or especially) through relatively banal interventions in the urban landscape such as sitting on steps – we, arguably, contribute to a city ambience.

Flinders Street Station Steps

Figure 1. Flinders Street Station Steps, Authors image, August 2019

Fieldwork and observational analysis conducted in Melbourne, Australia at Flinders Street Station steps revealed how 'strong tactics of the weak', contribute to a city's identity and ambience. Flinders Street Station is a busy central station in Melbourne city. A grand, building, with a large dome and clocks, Flinders Street Station can easily be considered an 'iconic' site in the Melbourne imaginary, and plays an important role in the city's tourism and branded identity. Often known for its architectural significance, the actual steps to the buildings main-entrance however, also hold a cultural and civic significance.

The steps to the station, and footpath immediately in front of the steps, are often very busy – be it from people entering/existing the station, waiting to cross or coming off the busy intersection directly opposite, or waiting, often to meet someone else

(and not always necessarily someone coming off a train commute). Which has given birth to the common phrase "meet me under the clocks." In the late evening, the steps are also often still busy, due in part to the nearby bars/pubs and fast food venues. The station steps often have people sitting on them, despite being a busy thoroughfare, and designated seating available nearby (including the Federation Square, the city's main public square, being just across the road). People use the steps as somewhere to sit, wait and/or loiter, sometimes tucked to the side of the steps and other times sitting right in the middle of foot traffic, almost as though to intentionally take up space (see figure 1). The function of the form, as a set of stairs, becomes repurposed as a site to also gather and engage in public culture, and the idea of 'meet me under the clocks' becomes a part of the urban imagination and produces a distinct atmosphere.

Interestingly, the atmosphere created in the embodied response to tension, can contribute to a new layer of tension. Arguably, atmosphere can take a 'disciplinary role' (Buser, 2017), and impact on what is deemed the appropriate use of a space. Hence, when a site is repurposed, and with it the ambience altered, it impacts on how the site is used after the fact. For example, when observing Flinders Street Station steps, often one could see people sitting in the middle of the stairs, usually in groups, and disturbing quite explicitly the flow of foot traffic. As such it was observed that some pedestrians existing/entering the station would respond to the 'convivial' or dominating atmosphere on the steps with a displeased or annoyed expression. Other times you could observe pedestrians feeling uncomfortable as they tried to circumnavigate the seated people, wincing somewhat, and trying to get around the group(s) without getting in their way, as if that was their responsibility as a pedestrian. As the steps function was reassigned by those who took up space to sit, there appeared to be an ambience of 'dominance', or territorialisation, which pedestrians would react differently to.

In the case of Flinders Street Station steps, the form (including its spatial characteristics and broader geographic context) is assigned new meaning through this distinct socio-spatial use (of repurposing the steps to sit and loiter), and as such facilitates a reactive public culture and atmosphere. The form gives meaning to this cultural performativity, and cultural performativity (and engagement in spatial justice more broadly) gives meaning to this form, and hence the delineation between the two becomes very complicated, if at all possible. The way that it is repurposed, and the tension that exists within it, contributes towards the distinct atmosphere that makes it an 'iconic Melbourne site.

Towards an Affective Understanding of Heritage

Switching focus to the heritage paradigm, since the adoption of the 2003 UNESCO convention for the *Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the distinction between tangible and intangible cultural heritage has become commonplace in heritage discourse and policy (Smith, 2014). Tangible cultural heritage often refers to "material, non-renewable and fragile" forms (Smith, 2014, 135), and intangible cultural heritage, as defined by the UNESCO convention, refers to "practice, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills" (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2). This dichotomisation has received increasing scholarly criticism, based on the idea that tangible and intangible elements of heritage cannot be appropriately distinguished (Kaufman, 2013; Smith, 2014).

The significant public culture and atmosphere that exists at Flinders Street Station steps for example, does not fit neatly into this binary framework of heritage. It in fact exists, exclusively, at the nexus of the tangible (the steps) and the intangible (the act

of repurposing them). Moreover, it is the tension *between* these two that creates the distinct atmosphere, and culture, of the steps. If tension emerges however, at the nexus of the tangible and intangible city, how can the significant, even 'iconic', atmosphere of Flinders Street Station step be preserved within a heritage framework?

Perhaps the existing heritage paradigm needs to be expanded to include an *affective* consideration of heritage and site. Let us consider the urban atmosphere that is produced as a result of the negotiation of socio-spatial tension. As Anderson (2014) suggest "we can understand both affective atmospheres and structures of feeling as processes of *mediation* that mix the formed and formless, emergent and finished, *structural and ephemeral*" (161, emphasis added). As discussed, much of a city's implicit, but significant, urban atmosphere and public culture occurs as a reactive process to socio-spatial tension, emerging as a *by-product of the nexus between the tangible and intangible city*. An *affective* and embodied understanding, and valuation, of living heritage may as such offer a bridge between the tangible/structural and intangible/ephemeral conceptions of heritage (helping to collapse this binary), and in doing so allow for greater consideration (and preservation) of atmosphere within the heritage paradigm.

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