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# Infinite Atmospheres for Vulnerabilities of spaces - Ambiances and architectural design.

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## **Abstract:**

In the frame of the B-AIR co-funded program by the European Education and Culture Executive Agency, architects, designers, artists, anthropologists, radio artists have been exploring the theme of social, environmental, and spatial «vulnerabilities» through the ordinary listening in the public spaces. Ambiances theory for architectural design address the theme through the discussion between the infinite atmospheres and the last concerns on the happiness business. The paper shows that creating atmosphere in public spaces can facilitate the design of places with sensible qualities and the improvement of the humans' living conditions, beyond the «narcissistic» production of sterile and stereotypical architectural objects with no social background.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the last 2 years, architects, designers, in collaboration with medias and arts companies (radio, television, theatre, street performers, musicians) but also health institutions have been working on the role of sound in the constitution and the development of individuals for the B-AIR program (B-AIR, 2022): Art Infinity Radio program - creating sound art for babies, toddlers and vulnerable groups.

To tackle this issue, the group of architects of the B-AIR consortium have decided not to differentiate the populations to which it is addressed. One can say that we are all permanently or temporarily in a situation of vulnerability. More specifically, what do we listen to from the Sound World around us? What is the role of Sound in the construction of our personality and how can sound reveal, help, and resolve situations of vulnerability that we encounter. What kind of dialogue can we set between art and science to discuss this issue and find practical solutions? Several workshops between theoreticians, architectural practitioners, and artists (students in architecture, young professionals, sound designers) have therefore taken place with the main goal to reformulation of the above questions through different design proposals. These questions become even more complicated to answer when they

engage the responsibility of designers, architects, or urban developers to improve the qualities of public space for all.

The work was therefore concentrated around 3 theoretical reflections which are discussed in this paper: the definition of situations of vulnerability in public spaces by the experience of ordinary listening, the discussion of design ethics and the role of the dipole positive - negative psychology and vulnerable - invulnerable in architectural space, and finally the role of atmospheres to a more ethical design of public spaces for all.

### **VULNERABILITIES AND SOUNDS, THE LISTENING EXPERIENCE**

Any architectural project and any intervention in the public space must be the subject of particular attention, to preserve the public character of the place while respecting its particularities and the conflicts between several forms of vulnerabilities, especially through the sounds: the spatial vulnerabilities and the social vulnerabilities due to sounds. Sounds (heard and produced) are considered as an invisible architectural matter that affect atmospheres in public spaces. Some ordinary examples are the sounds of oppressive built spaces that can make the users feel vulnerable. For example, when someone is walking in a deserted pedestrian square in the afternoon and he listens to the sounds of his own footsteps with the urban rumour in the back-plan, he can feel insecure and fear of unpredictable threats (spatial vulnerability due to sounds). The same deserted square can be transformed to a sonic chaos when a public market takes place. All the sounds “of the world” can be heard - human sounds (shouts, voices, laughs, and footsteps) regularly masked by the noisy passage of intense cars streams. In such intense situations, a lonely or old person can equally feel vulnerable because of the social exclusion caused by the lack of speech intelligibility or the extensive social exposure (social vulnerability due to sounds).

These general forms of vulnerability, through ordinary and everyday listening situations, have therefore fuelled a work of theoretical reflection on the design of public spaces and their sounds. Indeed, sound conveys forms of vulnerability and affects our feelings in general (Marchal, 2021). Designing a public space with the sounds assumes anticipating or planning a certain number of practices in space considering of course the bodies and emotions of future participants.

The designer's responsibility is therefore to avoid the trap of a precognitive categorization of sounds and situations. In other words, how do we predict that a space will be comfortable and cheerful for everyone? How can we avoid situations of vulnerability knowing that sounds affect our emotions, which are by essence subjective and therefore unpredicted? Many recent works in positive psychology have been sneakily influencing the productions of designers for more than 20 years, promoting an individualistic and capitalist approach where vulnerabilities activate negative emotions and therefor, they must be erased (for example within the framework of a company). The only way to do so is for individuals to straggle for their

own happiness. In other words, the creation of positive and happy situations is considered as a strategy to erase the different forms of vulnerability in architecture. The questions that arise are: How ethical is it to design only for the happy people? Is the erasing of negative emotions a way to deal with the vulnerabilities in public spaces?

### THE DICTATORSHIP OF HAPPINESS

First applied to corporate culture, the thought of positive psychology influences all sectors of industry and in particular the one of space design. As an example, one can quote the WELL certification that tries, in an objective way, to quantify the well-being of everyone in a space. We therefore quickly see that there are more and more architectural projects where the concept of "happiness" is commercialized in the name of productivity and consumption. The idea is to build places where people feel happy and thus self-confident, invulnerable, and productive.

Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz discuss this issue in their essay - Manufacturing happy citizens. How the Science of Happiness Controls our Lives (Cabanas and Illouz, 2019). In a world where everyone tries to find desperately happiness emerge new sciences like "positive psychology" with experts that try to "teach" you how to be happy. As this sounds vague, happiness is often limited into the experience of positives emotions (joy, optimism, enthusiasm, compassion, strength) by the overcome of the negative and "unproductive" ones (disappointment, fear, anger, and shame). Even if it is well known that negative emotions like anger, jealousy, or fear, are often the incentives for productive behaviours and positive emotions, like passion, courage, compassion, the negative emotions are usually well hidden and not expressed socially, because they are culpable of causing unhappiness.

«Positive psychology instils in people a certain sense of hope, strength and comfort and the promise that, despite their precarious and disadvantaged position, they can succeed in life».

(Cabanas and Illouz, 2019)

The problem as they say, is what happens if someone fails to feel happy? Whose fault is it? If everyone is self-centred on its one happiness, he's incapable of being socially involved and he ignores the emotions of the others, without realizing that the others affect him and his happiness equally. In that frame Edgar Cabanas and Eva Illouz detect that «*the so-called science of happiness extends the scope of consumption to our inner world, turning emotions into common commodities*» and happiness into an «*industry that rules our lives*» by shifting the responsibilities from the society to the individual.

Basing on this aspect, we assume that the "chase of happiness" leads also to a more introverted and absolute architecture, like the architectural blockbusters that cost

millions and are designed usually by global stars of the architectural elite who associate only with consultants and financiers. It is an architecture of “personal choice” regardless the personal or social life circumstances of those who participate in it (e.g. homeless people or extradited women). It is more concentrated on the unilateral production of the architectural object and the flattering of the narcissism of its creators and its clients, and less on its sensible qualities and the improvement of the human’s living conditions. Residents must adapt, suppressing their dynamics and needs, often cut off from their environment. “Happycratie” (neologism for the French edition of Cabanas and Illouz essay) comes to reassure that those who do not adapt, they are not flexible enough and they do not realize adverse circumstances as opportunities to live a better life. Therefore, as a natural consequence of the economical and health world crises the ethical dimension of the design of environments becomes very important to discuss. This discussion leads to research for a more “social architecture”.

The architects start to “realize the failure of these prototypes and the terms by which they evaluate and perceive the world, those who participate in it and those who shape it [...] Architecture starts to take its shape from multiple dialogues between members of a wider ecosystem, materials, infrastructures, flows (of people and goods), economic systems, anthropological approaches, scientists, experts, trained and untrained».

(Ivi Diamantopoulou, 2022)

In other words, designing spaces by considering their sounds qualities can be an ethical way to inspire the emotional freedom of the future participants. For architects and designers, it means abandoning the obligations for happiness and switching from the big scale of urban projects to the scale of the human body in action, that perceives and can be affected (Remy, Paxinou, 2020, p.348). Atmospheres design allows such care. It permits to reveal ways of existence and coexistence in a place (sensible experience) and can inspire the ethical design of the architectural and urban environment, which relies in addition to the technical, aesthetic, and functional dimensions, on the affects as personal and collective expression.

## **FOR AN ETHICS OF ATMOSPHERES IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN**

The atmosphere is a tone. It is partly designed by the architects, but it is indeed the future participants who activate it through their co-presence and their co-practices. As Dorte Mandrup, who has just delivered a sports hall in a difficult suburb of Copenhagen, says that defining an atmosphere in architecture means giving a framework or a mould in which the whole community has the leisure to create its atmosphere.

“Dorte Mandrup does not believe that architecture can transform society. She doesn't believe new equipment is driving semi-delinquents to sign up for sports. On the other hand, she believes that a new, beautiful, and well-designed building can improve their daily lives. For this, it must offer itself unconditionally. That it looks like those outdoor spaces where they used to hang out, free and open to everyone, protected simply by an envelope”.

(Mandrup, 2022)

For Pajot, the architect, as a “conductor of an orchestra” (Encore Heureux, 2018, p.178) which consists of the authorities, the experts, the users, is there to ensure the conditions of emerging infinite events and consequently sensitivities within a given - finished back- plan (creation of atmospheres), by working on the conflicts of motley elements, the negotiations of sensible spatialities and the sympathy of sensible experiences (Paxinou, 2020, p.321). Regarding all the above, creating atmospheres in architectural places of collective creation with spatial and social vulnerabilities (“Infinite Places”), aims to explore economically and ecologically feasible construction methods of a more social architecture. In that sense, the architecture of these vulnerable places deals with the creation, the revelation and the projection of infinite atmospheres that inspire unpredictable situations and unplanned events.

More specifically in these places appear infinite vulnerabilities due to social, ecological, technical, political conflicts that arise from the proximity and diversity of participants, socio-economic regimes, and dominant techniques. A way to deal with these vulnerabilities without erasing their competitive and provocative character, is to work again and again with all the sensible contradictions (sonic, visual, olfactive) that arise out of the ordinary, ensuring at the same time the freedom of expression of all participants. According to Matthieu Poitevin (Encore Heureux, 2018, p.282], architect of the “friche de la Belle de Mai”, freedom of expression means creating spaces that allow the unknown and inspire confidence at the same time. Even the emotions are mixed and contradictory. Negative emotions created by the infinite vulnerabilities are appropriated by creating empathetic emotions and controversial reactions. In the case of “La Ferme du Bonheur”, De Pres (Encore Heureux, 2018, p.314-317), the anachronistic sounds of sheep, horses and drawn carriages, the theatre spectacles and music events, are completely in contrast to the noise and the extreme urbanization of the La Defense motorways and high-rise buildings. These contradictory sounds express the infinite atmospheres created by the interactions of the hostile back plan of the city and the events of human scale that mark it. But the excessive contrasts of events with their back-plan may lead to spatial and social vulnerabilities like exclusion, disorientation, overexposure (ex. Disney Land, shopping malls). So, it's about infinite negotiations between the organization of architectural design and the freedom of individual expressions. In that sense places are never fixed

- they continue to transform and adapt to the emotions and uses that occur. The architectural project is not fully defined before its implementation. It is being built progressively, in sympathy with the real situations prevailing in the area, allowing the participants to live and appropriate the space. The architect works with the infinite atmospheres created by the expression of all the participants' desires.

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