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**French-speaking geography of retail and consumption:  
themes, issues and approaches**

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## Commercial ambiances and atmospheres. Explorations of the sensory dimension of retail in urban space

*Ambiances et atmosphères commerciales. Explorations de la dimension sensible  
du commerce de détail dans l'espace urbain*

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# Commercial ambiances and atmospheres. Explorations of the sensory dimension of retail in urban space

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## Introduction

- 1 Retail can be investigated by invoking the concepts of ambiance and atmosphere<sup>1</sup> from multiple perspectives. They can be used to understand how the sensory quality of a commercial environment can influence the behaviour of consumers. Research following this perspective has developed after the publication of the reference article by Kotler (1973). It suggested considering atmospheres as a marketing tool. The research established following that article has made it possible to determine the impact of various atmospheric factors (climate, light, sound) on consumer behaviour, such as the number of hours spent in a shop, as well as the purchases made.<sup>2</sup> This approach to retailing through the notion of atmosphere is mainly quantitative and has been widely developed in research into marketing and environmental psychology. The concept of atmosphere has also influenced the development of sensory marketing research in France (Grandclément, 2004; Bakini Driss, Lallouna, Hafsia and Zghal, 2008). Despite the significant number of publications, these works have developed without any theoretical background in relation to the concept of atmosphere and without reference

to conceptual work on this notion, carried out in philosophy and social sciences, which has emerged internationally since the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

- 2 This article develops another research perspective. It focuses on the sensory quality of the urban environment under the influence of retail trade. This perspective raises the question of the influence of commercial activities on public spaces and urban life from a specific angle. Unlike the aforementioned perspective, we do not propose here a well-established research theme. On the contrary, this paper is prospective. It proposes the creation of a hitherto unrealised convergence of French retail geography and research in the field of architectural and urban ambiances and atmospheres. This convergence enables the more explicit integration of the sensory dimension in retail geography, and complements existing research work on the influence of retail trade on the city.
- 3 We must note that the consideration of the concept of ambiance in French-speaking human geography is not non-existent. On the one hand, it is taking shape through the publication of work on ambiances, albeit of a more conceptual nature, in geography journals (Augoyard, 1995; Kazig and Masson, 2015). On the other hand, French-speaking geographers have participated in the development of the concept of ambiance (Labussière, 2013). So far—apart from a few exceptions (Laroche, 2018)—it has not found its true place within retail geography. This absence is surprising given the obvious influence of retail trade on the sensory quality of urban spaces. One only needs to imagine the ambiance of a pedestrian street in a city, which varies for the most part depending on commercial presence. Both the architectural presence of shops and the composition of their window displays contribute greatly to the sensory presence and experience of this urban space. The influence of retail trade on the sensory quality is not limited to pedestrian areas. Indeed, it involves a large part of urban space with various configurations, such as urban centres, neighbourhood centres or shopping centres on the outskirts of conurbations. Interest in the sensory dimension of urban space (Adams and Guy, 2007), and more broadly in social life (Howes, 2017), has developed recently in the humanities and social sciences. The emergence and consolidation of the sensory studies as a new field of research beyond the disciplinary limits shows this consideration (Bull *et al.*, 2006). The concepts of ambiance and atmosphere are located at the centre of attention for sensory studies, which are based on the idea that “the senses mediate the relationship between self and society, mind and body, idea and object” (Bull *et al.*, p. 5) and thus invite the humanities and social sciences to use the senses and the sensitive capacity of humans as the starting point of their thought process. The use of the notions of ambiance and atmosphere to analyse the urban environment under the influence of retail trade thus allows French-speaking retail geography to open up to new research perspectives.
- 4 The present article is structured in five parts. The first part briefly presents the concepts of ambiance and atmosphere. Then, we will develop three perspectives to use the two notions in question to understand the effects of retail presence in urban space. The first perspective deals with the material dimension of retail facilities in urban space and reveals how the use of the concept of ambiance enables the characterisation of their welcoming quality, uses and impacts on the practice of living together in the public space. The second perspective focuses on retail spaces as a place of recreation and aestheticisation of ordinary life. By mobilising the concepts of ambiance and atmosphere, it aims to understand how and in which conditions users experience this space with a specific aesthetic attention. The third perspective addresses the role of

atmospheres in contributing to the emergence of a sense of community and in analysing its emergence in retail spaces. Lastly, the conclusion will allow us to revisit the contributions of the two concepts to the geography of trade, as well as, conversely, the contributions of the geography of retail trade to research on ambiances and atmospheres.

## The concepts of ambiance and atmosphere

- 5 The field of research on ambiances and atmospheres has developed independently in France and in Germany since the 1990s. In France, the research on ambiances first found a place in architectural and urban research, with a strong interdisciplinary and empirical orientation (Kazig and Schiller, 2021). For a long time, its application remained limited to these fields, before recently exercising a broader influence on other disciplines without being related to architectural themes and to the built environment (Gaudin & Le Calvé, 2018; Bégout, 2020). In Germany, the research on atmospheres had its roots in philosophy, before finding its way into other humanities and social sciences (Hasse, 2002; Löw, 2001; Rauh, 2012). Following the internationalisation of research and translations, we now witness reciprocal reception between the two research traditions (Thibaud, 2003; Schmitz, 2018). Despite their independent development, both concepts share some important ideas. We will focus first on the concept of ambiance. Secondly, we will add some important specificities regarding the concept of atmosphere from the German-speaking sphere.
- 6 The notion of ambiance refers to space-time experienced in sensory terms. At the same time, it calls in the human sensorial modalities as a whole and is located at the crossroads between sensory forms, social forms and built ones. This concept deals with a multi-sensory and interdisciplinary field of research that pays particular attention to the situated, embodied and shareable aspect of the dwelling experience (Thibaud, 2013, p. 2). This definition invites us to explore both the way ordinary sensory environments are formed and transformed in public and private spaces, and the way the users are immersed, modify their behaviour under the influence of ambiances and take part in the tempering of the affective tonality of a place. The empirical research on ambiances focuses on describing and analysing the generation of an ambiance both by characterising the sensory qualities of the places (heat, visual presence, sound effect, etc.) and by grasping the way these sensory qualities are experienced by the users (Thibaud, 2014). We can illustrate this point by mentioning a commercial street with various sensory nuances—such as its sound qualities, the dynamics of people going in and out of a building, or the moiré effect in the shop windows—changing along the street. The ambiance of this street emerges from the everyday interactions between space and users, between the material, the social and the subjective. The aim is to grasp how the experience of living bodies evolves depending on the surrounding sensory quality. The term ‘experience’ stresses the fact that research in terms of ambiance focuses not so much on perceptions as on how the subjects feel about a specific situation within their immediate environment.
- 7 With its idea that the living body evolves according to the surrounding sensory quality, empirical research on ambiances takes place mostly through in-situ approaches. It established itself thanks to methodological innovations that often rally several methods to capture the evolution of the in-situ experience of a place in relation to its

sensory qualities. The anchoring of the notion of ambiance in phenomenology and pragmatism has contributed to the view that the experience of ambiances depends on the activities of the subjects. French research has been particularly interested in understanding how walking contributes to the emergence and the experience of urban ambiances (Thomas, 2004). On the one hand, individuals contribute to the quality of the sensory environment, for example with the sounds produced by the action of walking. On the other hand, this activity transforms subjects' readiness to experience an ambiance. As we have mentioned, multi-sensoriality is another specificity of the concept of ambiance. Each of our senses can be analysed on its own and works according to a specific spatiotemporal logic to create a contact with the world in a particular way. Various studies have shown how different senses contribute to the emergence of an ambiance (Balez, 2001; Torgue, 2011; Germon, 2017).

- 8 With its philosophical tradition, the research on atmospheres is far less attached to the field of architecture than the research on ambiances. Following Schmitz's conception (1969) of the concept of atmosphere as part of his "new phenomenology," the emotional dimension of an atmosphere is more pervasive than in the theory of ambiances. He understands atmospheres as spatially widespread emotions (Schmitz, 2014). The implicit consequence of this conception is that the social sphere takes on an important role as a generator of atmospheres. As such, research focuses rather on atmospheres in organisations (Julmi, 2017), in education (Wolf, 2019) or more generally in situations of communication, and recently as the expression of a form of life (Kazig, 2020).
- 9 Another important difference for our purposes concerns the role of dispositions in conceiving the sensory subject. This concept is used in the theory of atmospheres put forward by Böhme (2001). Not only does it enable us to think of the effects of the experience of atmospheres as a way of placing oneself in relation to the world, it also opens up the possibility of thinking explicitly that individual or collectively shared dispositions influence the experience of atmospheres. This position follows on from the reception of the concept of atmosphere in urban sociology and sociology of space, which requires the socialisation and categories of differences, such as gender, class or ethnicity, to be taken into consideration in the theorising and research on atmospheres (Löw, 2001, p. 204).
- 10 Following this brief presentation of the notions of ambiance and atmosphere, we propose three invitations for the geography of retail trade to explore the sensory dimension of retail trade in urban space.

## **First perspective for exploring the sensory dimension of retail trade: diffuse materiality of shops**

- 11 Diffuse materiality (Kazig & Masson, 2015) is characterised by material conditions that contribute to the unfolding of user experiences. This approach aims both to question the welcoming capacities of urban public spaces and private commercial spaces, and to take note of the pedestrians' sensitivities (sight, hearing, smell, thermal sense, touch, movement) associated with the uses of the space and of living together. This attention to materiality was particularly significant in the work by practitioners or researchers in architecture and spatial planning (Zardini, 2005; Zumthor, 2006; Rahm, 2018). Among the positions defining design criteria and enabling the drafting of future developments,

Chelkoff's stance (2011) allows us both to talk about space at different scales (ranging from the body, neighbourhood, to the territory) and to consider the many characteristics of the space studied. According to him, three levels of analysis must be considered concurrently: the form, which is the articulation between built installations and the environment at the physical level; the formant, which relies on the experience of phenomena perceived in action; and the formality, which characterises the way in which the urban environment is practised, used and hijacked. These three levels of analysis invite us to determine users' experience of the spaces crossed, by questioning their physical evolutions, their qualities of ambiances and the potential adaptation of behaviour. These steps of description and project allow the cross-referencing of work from geography on the evolution of relations between retail and the city (Metton, 1980; Gasnier, 2010), by tackling the subject first from a historical point of view, then with a prospective approach.

- 12 This attention to the ambiances produced and experienced by users occasionally appears in studies carried out on the evolutionary relations between the city and retail trade from the users' point of view, whose roles can range from strollers (Benjamin, 1997) to drivers (Bégout, 2013) and consumer actors (Rocheport, 2007). As Soumagne (2013) stresses, these studies in retail geography were carried out "as soon as retail was understood as a contributor to urbanisation in the spatial sense, a transformer of urban morphology, a creator of new fabrics and new landscapes"<sup>4</sup> (Beaujeu-Garnier & Delobez, 1977). The consideration of commercial ambiances deals more specifically with the transformation of certain built installations, such as façades, entrances, signs. For example, we can mention the transformation of shop windows, which in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were arranged as intermediary spaces to share the continuous animation of department stores with boulevards in order to draw the attention of the clientele. Later on, the shop windows disappeared with the introduction of hypermarkets, to build a "minimal aesthetics of mass distribution" (Péron, 2004). They are currently reappearing as a shimmering wall in large commercial centres, such as Europark in Salzburg, Austria, or Aéroville, near Roissy airport in Paris. Beyond the form of the built installations, sensory effects occur which are connected to the material configuration of these places. They modify the pedestrian experience. From the 19<sup>th</sup>-century typologies of arcades to the current concept stores, trade has thus formed innovative, dramatised, industrial, air-conditioned, phantasmagorical, verdant and sublimated spaces. This transformation tends to show a form of palimpsest regarding ambiances, *i.e.*, an embodiment of the past in the present time that appears through a continuous process of "sedimentation of traces" (Gamal, 2012, p. 3). The temporal dynamics of the present thus include in city centres—with their tradition as the location for the retail trade—connections to the sensory qualities of the past. The idea of the palimpsest invites us to explore whether there are spatial, sensory and social traces that remain between the different formats of trade. As Topalov (2010) underlined an etymological and formal continuity along the main aisle once dedicated to the obsolete game of pall-mall, which became a straight-lined space to allow people to wander in malls, are there not sensory and social continuities that remain between each format of shops? These probably exist underneath the different traces of diffuse materiality, a morphing of forms of shops, ambiances that remain in the composition of the places, a perception or even attachment of pedestrians to certain configurations.



- 13 The second problem that appears within the perspective focusing on the diffuse materiality of shops deals with the strategies regarding the establishment of retail trade in the city, by analysing the materiality of the commercial environment, down to its most minute dimensions—the implementation of materials, the porosity of the façades, the floor coverings. This problem, which is only occasionally present in commercial development strategies, enables the formulation of prescriptions for designing quality shops in order to encourage the morphological integration of the shops within the urban fabric (Sporck, 1964; Sporck, Malevez & Sporck-Pelletier, 1975). More recent works formulate criticisms regarding the integration of the shops, for example by mentioning the lack of reach, the lack of integration of the shops into the city. They thus represent “unenclosed enclaves, even if they are strongly secured and monitored” (Soumagne, Desse, Gasnier, Guillemot & Grellier, 2010, p. 454). Through the descriptive tradition of research on ambiances, it is possible to reveal the specificities of the commercial ambiances produced to limit the standardisation effects of the shops. Implicitly present or sometimes central, it also raises another position and ties in with work on the sensory influence of places (Laroche, 2018). In fact, it is not just a question of assessing the location of retail facilities, but also of examining the influence or the outreach of these diffuse materialities in order to encourage the transformation of the generic ambiances formed by urban shops in favour of a more contextualised formation. The lack of staging in the windows, or, by contrast, the overflow of commercial ambiances (music, smells, lighting, etc.) into the neighbouring streets have an influence on the pervasiveness of private installations over their surroundings. Conversely, the lack of opportunities for users to sit down, cross or find shelter close to the shops reflects the lack of opportunities for pedestrians. Therefore, we can see a contradiction regarding the objectives of such private spaces, which offer generalised yet non-appropriate accessibility by users.
- 14 In a paper by Thomas (2007), the paradox situation defines “places developed for walking, with remarkable pedestrian qualities, which do not attract anyone as they are perceived as empty, cold and sanitised. In this type of environment, the function of walking is guaranteed, but the pedestrians’ expectations in terms of approval, pleasure, conviviality are not met” (Thomas 2007, p. 117). With the spread of commercial signs, the analysis of shops from the point of view of their ambiances at the scale of the construction, the neighbourhood or the city calls for the specification of their urban quality and for an understanding of their dynamics of change. Attention to the diffuse materiality of shops can thus participate in the renewal of modes of urban construction with the aim of reducing the zoning rationale and encouraging links between the shop and its territory. Methodologically, this perspective can be based on mobile methods such as “parcours commentés” (Thibaud, 2001), which allow both the experience of the spaces by pedestrians and the architectural and social characteristics of the respective spaces to be recorded.

## **Second perspective for exploring the sensory dimension of retail trade: aestheticising the city under the influence of trade**

- 15 Using the concepts of ambiance and atmosphere can also enrich work on recreational commercial spaces that have been part of the French-speaking geography of trade for



more than a decade, in particular thanks to research carried out by Lemarchand (2008). With this approach, commercial installations represent not only distribution and sales areas, but also places of recreation or distraction. The interest in recreational commercial spaces arose with the consideration of the cultural turn in English-speaking geography (Lemarchand, 2008), which allowed for the development of the geography of retail as a geography of consumption.

- 16 This new geography of retail tackled recreational retail spaces mainly from a scenographic perspective. Focusing as much on shop windows (Lemarchand, 2014), shops (Delamarre, 2016) or shopping agglomerations such as malls (Lemarchand, 2008, pp. 169ff), recreational retail is mainly analysed through its staging. From this perspective, the role of consumers is reduced to that of subjects for whom the staging serves as a means of identification (Lemarchand, 2008). The consumers interacting with the recreational retail spaces and the way they appropriate and perceive them remain, however, little explored. We can cite as an example an article on Sunday shopping which describes very well the possible attractiveness of a visit to a market (Lemarchand & Mallet, 2016). However, this approach is not based on an empirical study of the experience.
- 17 The explicit consideration of experience in recreational commercial spaces is relevant if it is seen as a phenomenon of the aestheticisation of ordinary life, which represents a major development in our contemporary societies. It results in increased importance being given to aesthetic attention beyond the sphere of art (Kazig, 2020; Lolive and Blanc, 2009). Aestheticising ordinary life translates into both the production of objects and spaces—such as the staging of commercial spaces—and the adoption of aesthetic attention within ordinary life. Aesthetic attention is classically adopted in museums or theatres when a visitor or viewer looks at an artwork or a performance. It can also appear in ordinary situations, such as activities related to work, shopping, mobility or tourism. It can appear in ordinary contexts and rely on various ordinary objects and situations, which can contribute to a positive experience for users. In that sense, an urban space or a commercial space—regardless of whether it was designed with an aesthetic aim—can become a place where aesthetic attention can emerge.
- 18 The notions of ambiance and atmosphere are useful for understanding the emergence of aesthetic attention among consumers in urban spaces. As we explained earlier, an atmosphere manifests as a way of placing subjects in a specific disposition. Works by Thomas (2004) and Kazig (2007) showed that the disposition stimulated by atmospheres or ambiances can be expressed at the level of a person's mode of attention. The ambiance or the atmosphere is thus an important element for the emergence of aesthetic attention to commercial spaces.
- 19 Several factors can influence the emergence of aesthetic attention regarding retail spaces. Walking is the dominant condition for the practice of recreational commercial spaces, both indoors (Sabatier, 2011) and outdoors. To this end, we must start explicitly from a walking user of commercial spaces. Empirical studies on the experience of ambiances or atmospheres from the pedestrian perspectives have shown that the ambiances can be transformed over short distances (Thibaud, 2015), that pedestrians have different modes of attention depending on the ambiance (Thomas, 2004), and that aesthetic attention can only emerge in a very limited part of a journey in a city centre (Kazig, 2007). The results of these studies invite us to question the emergence of an aesthetic attention in relation to the route taken in a retail agglomeration, to

understand when and how a recreational commercial space can truly arise as an aesthetic object. The journey taken within the commercial space is a factor that deals with the embodiment of urban ambiances or atmospheres, and it influences the possibilities and the forms of the aesthetic experience of commercial spaces. Moreover, age, gender, the existence of a disability or a consumer's lifestyle can also be factors capable of influencing the emergence of an aesthetic experience. Commercial spaces' rhythmicity—in the sense that they change with a certain regularity—is another dimension that should be considered (Wunderlich, 2008, p. 133). It transforms the conditions of the walk and thus impacts the attention and experience of the urban space. Studies on crowding (Popp, 2012) have proved that developing aesthetic attention regarding one's environment can become impossible when a space is occupied by a crowd of people. On the other hand, a study on shopping atmospheres showed that moments when the density of pedestrians is too low can create an impression of "loneliness," reduce the desire to stroll through retail spaces (Kazig, 2013, p. 224) and downgrade its potential to become an object of aesthetic attention.

- 20 However, the emergence of aesthetic attention in a retail space depends not only on the ambiances or atmospheres in which the consumer is located. It is also the quality of the appearance of the urban environment that calls for more or less aesthetic attention. In effect, the object of the aesthetic attention is not only the windows (Lemarchand, 2014) or commercial architecture. The atmospheres of retail spaces—as an affective tonality of space—can themselves become the "object" of aesthetic attention.<sup>5</sup>
- 21 The integration of atmospheric research allows retail geography to gain a better understanding of recreational commercial spaces from the perspective of the consumer. It makes it possible to grasp under which conditions and in relation to which sections commercial spaces actually become objects of aesthetic attention and function as recreational commercial spaces. Furthermore, the focus on the situated experience of consumers allows us to apprehend the meanings that these moments actually have (just a passing experience, an important identity-forming moment, and so on). In order to empirically record the emergence and personal significance of moments of aesthetic attention in the context of commercial spaces, multi-method research designs can be used (Kazig, 2020), in which moments of aesthetic attention are first reconstructed in qualitative interviews and later contextualised through a second phase of in-situ interviews.
- 22 Vacant retail outlets are an interesting phenomenon for exploring the boundaries of retail agglomerations as recreational spaces. Empty windows and vacant locations limit the potential of urban centres to function as places of aesthetic attention and sensual pleasure. On the contrary, the sensual encounter with them can even be experienced as dreariness (Kazig *et al.*, 2023). Vacancy is a problem in particular in the city centres of medium-sized cities (for France, see Berroir *et al.*, 2019), and thus affects their potential to serve as an area for distraction or recreation. Exploratory studies have shown, however, that vacancy can appear in a variety of forms in public spaces (Laroche, 2018; Kazig *et al.*, 2023). Using atmospheric research, it becomes possible for retail geography to analyse the effects of different forms and configurations of vacancies on the aesthetic potential of retail agglomerations.

## Third perspective for exploring the sensory dimension of retail: the community dimension of commercial spaces

- 23 The culturalisation of retail geography and its opening up to a geography of consumption has enabled the questioning of consumption and of commercial and consumer spaces in the establishment of community identification, feelings of belonging, but also of exclusion (Lemarchand, 2008, p. 67). The much-noticed article by sociologist and urban researcher Zukin (2008) argued along similar lines. Lemarchand discusses this matter by considering the display and the sharing of symbols and signs as the basis of community identification. Referring to Maffesoli (1988), she qualifies this community identification as a form of (neo-)tribe. The reference to Maffesoli opens the way towards a complementary interpretation of the construction of community identity by relying on the concept of atmosphere. The notion of neo-tribes postulates not only a strong importance of proximity and space for the development of community identification, which translates into Maffesoli's famous thesis (2011, p. 12) that "place makes a link." The concept also accords a major role to affects and shared emotions in the emergence of this spatialised community dynamic. This idea of shared emotions in a place corresponds to the notion of atmosphere, understood as emotions spread spatially. It invites us to integrate the dimension of atmospheres into the emergence of spatialised community dynamics more systematically.
- 24 The consideration of the place as a link and the reference to atmospheres are also present in a study by Lehmann-Frisch (2002) which deals with the practice and representations of a commercial street in the centre of a gentrified neighbourhood in San Francisco. The author sees this street as the "essential base for everyday sociability" at the scale of a neighbourhood (Lehmann-Frisch, 2002, p. 48). This study shows the importance of the "small village atmosphere" in the decision by new inhabitants to move into a neighbourhood (Lehmann-Frisch, 2002, p. 53). On the one hand, the interviews highlight that the commercial street plays a central role in creating the impression of a small village. On the other hand, it shows that the new inhabitants experience a sense of belonging to a community created through the sociability of this commercial street. However, this case study does not include theoretically explicit elements that reveal how the sociability of this street can contribute to the emergence of the sense of belonging to the community.
- 25 The use of the concept of atmosphere helps to clarify the emergence of this sense of belonging. Unlike the situation with the notion of architectural ambiance, we are talking about a "sociocultural" atmosphere here. It highlights the idea that it is not only the built environment that has an atmospheric dimension, but it is also crucial to take into consideration the human presence and activities and the staging of a place. It is only recently that more work has been focusing on this phenomenon (Kazig, 2013b; Le Calvé & Gaudin, 2019; Bégout, 2020, p. 315). We relate here in particular to the aesthetics of appearance by the German philosopher Martin Seel, in which atmospheric appearance is discussed alongside other forms (Seel, 2000, p. 152). With the concept of atmospheric appearance, he refers to the fact that life forms can express themselves in a certain atmosphere and can also become an object of aesthetic experience. In this sense, for example, an eco-friendly coffee shop appears through a certain atmosphere. The specificity of this form of atmosphere lies in the fact that it can be brought into

relation to one's own form of life, and on the level of the lived body it can correspond more or less with it or be more or less in contradiction with it. For this reason, Seel (2000, p. 154) talks about aesthetic correspondence. The experience of a correspondence can be felt as a sensation of familiarity, of a community or even of intimacy, which is conveyed by the sociocultural atmosphere of a place (Kazig, 2013a). The concept of sociocultural atmosphere allows an understanding of the emergence of a sense of belonging to a community, due to the experiences of sociability of the commercial street in the neighbourhood in Lehmann-Frisch's study, as previously mentioned. This commercial street is characterised by the strong presence of families with young children. In the interviews, the inhabitants highlight the experience of a family atmosphere in their neighbourhood (Lehmann-Frisch, 2002, pp. 65-66). This characteristic of the shopping street could be at the origin of an experience of correspondence for the new residents and could contribute to the emergence of this impression of belonging to a community, despite the rather superficial relationships that, according to the study, exist at the neighbourhood level.

- 26 Recourse to the concepts of sociocultural atmosphere and correspondence opens up the possibility for retail geography to arrive at an understanding of the community dimension of commercial and consumer spaces that places the corporeal and sensual dimension at the centre of attention. Moreover, it raises a number of questions, the first of which deals with the relation between commercial presence and human presence. We can assume that the sociocultural atmosphere of a retail space relies both on the radiance or "ecstasy" (Böhme, 2001, p. 131) of the shops in a commercial agglomeration and on the presence of a certain type of person that together contribute to the emergence of a sociocultural atmosphere. To better understand the emergence of the community dimension of commercial spaces, it is interesting to examine the role of shops and of a certain category of persons and their relationship in the emergence of sociocultural atmospheres. This question is also connected to that of the density and homogeneity of an atmosphere (Hauskeller, 1995, p. 42). For example, a commercial street can be determined by a diversity of types of shops and by the presence of different sociocultural categories of people. They contribute to the emergence of a retail atmosphere without it being dominated by the expression of one lifestyle. It is an invitation to question the moment when the sociocultural atmosphere appears in a retail space. Finally, the dynamics of the loss of correspondence that can unfold in connection with a sociocultural atmosphere also need to be considered. As previously indicated with reference to Zukin (2008), the spread of alternative consumption practices in a neighbourhood can also lead to dynamics of exclusion of the original residents of a neighbourhood. In gentrification research, this negative side of gentrification has recently been increasingly focused on under the term 'displacement' (Elliot-Cooper *et al.*, 2020). With the help of the concepts of sociocultural atmospheres and correspondence, the sensory side of this dynamic can be captured, and the extent to which the change in the retail landscape can not only lead to a sense of belonging to a neighbourhood, but can also contribute to a subtle sense of exclusion and to displacement.
- 27 Also in this third perspective, multi-method research designs are useful for empirical research (Kazig, 2020) in which moments of correspondence or their loss are first reconstructed in qualitative interviews and later contextualised through a second phase of in-situ interviews. Comparative studies appear to be of particular interest here

in order to enable the recording of the effects of different changes in the retail landscape and the role of the social structure in the neighbourhoods.

## Conclusion

- 28 The intersection between retail geography and research on ambiances and atmospheres represents a renewal of questions for both fields of research.
- 29 Regarding the geography of retailing and consumption, as indicated in the title of this paper, this renewal allows us to accord greater attention to the sensory dimension and to the felt experience in the analysis of the presence of retail in the urban space. Several works in the field of French-speaking retail geography have already shown an interest in ambiances, without explicit commitment to the concept or systematic development of research orientations (Lehmann-Frisch, 2002; Mérenne-Schoumaker, 2018). The present contribution goes further by explicitly proposing perspectives that enable the integration of the conception of ambiance and atmosphere in the retail geography, to analyse the influence of retail trade in the urban space. The three lines that we have proposed here open the door both for retail geography applied to urban planning and for retail geography in its academic sense.
- 30 The analysis of diffuse materiality of commercial installations via the concept of ambiance includes a strong urban dimension. It can contribute to improving the effects of retail developments for the users of urban spaces. This orientation, which also requires architectural skills, calls for the development of interdisciplinary research between retail geography and architecture, to gain a better understanding of the effects of the integration of commercial spaces in the urban environment.
- 31 At the academic level, the concepts of ambiance and atmospheres allow for the continuation of the cultural turn in retail geography. It was introduced in French-speaking retail geography by the work of Lemarchand (2008), and it has contributed to the understanding of retail geography as the geography of consumption. With its staging approach, it belongs to the textual and discursive tradition of cultural geography. In recent years, English-speaking cultural geography has started focusing on “non-representational” approaches (Lorimer, 2008) or “more-than-representational” ones (Lorimer, 2005), which deal rather with ordinary practices, their material, sensory and affective dimensions in the creation of spaces and identities. The concepts of ambiances and atmospheres fully belong to this major movement in cultural geography.
- 32 The integration of these concepts into retail geography contributes to an updating of the cultural side of the geography of retail and to bridging it to current trends. In the part regarding the aestheticisation of the city under the influence of trade, we showed that scenographic and atmospheric approaches are not contradictory. Indeed, they can be complementary, in fact, as the consumers live in both a symbolic world and a world of lived bodies—both being closely linked.
- 33 Finally, the intersection with the geography of retailing also opens up new perspectives for research on ambiances. In particular, the questions regarding the influence of ambiances and atmospheres on the community links developed in the third perspective invite research to focus further on social issues that are not immediately connected to the built environment, and more on the social dynamics of contemporary societies.

This intersection contributes to conceiving of research on ambiances not only as a perspective of architectural research, but also as an approach in cultural and social sciences.

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## NOTES

1. In this paper, we refer mainly to French- and German-speaking research. While German-speaking works use the term “Atmosphäre”—in English, “atmosphere”—the French-speaking ones have developed by using the term “ambiance”, translated into English as “ambiance” (Adey *et al.*, 2013; Augoyard, 2020). Given that the two research traditions are based on different

theoretical foundations, we will use the term ‘ambiance’ when we are referring to the French-speaking theories and the term ‘atmosphere’ when we are referring to the German-speaking theories. This dual attachment stems from the authors’ different academic backgrounds, influenced by the French-speaking discourse on the one hand and by the German-speaking one on the other.

2. See Turley and Milliman (2000), offering a summary of the work carried out until the end of the previous century, Francioni, Savelli and Cioppi (2018) as an example of more recent research.

3. Exceptions are the works by Kazig (2013) and Julmi (2016).

4. All original French quotations have been translated into English by Sophie Provost.

5. Atmospheres can both be a condition for the emergence of aesthetic attention and become the “object” of such aesthetic attention. We can illustrate this dual role with the example of a party. You can find a place or a situation within a party that allows you to develop an aesthetic awareness of the atmosphere reigning at the party.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the sensory quality of the urban environment under the influence of retail trade. It proposes a rapprochement between the geography of retail trade and research in the field of ambiances and atmospheres, and outlines three resulting research perspectives for the geography of retail trade. The first concerns the material dimension of retail facilities and the contribution of the notion of ambiance to characterising the impact of the material dimension on the qualities of the reception and the uses of public space. The following perspective looks at commercial spaces as objects of ordinary aesthetics. By drawing on the notions of atmosphere and ambiance, it aims to understand how and under what conditions users experience space through aesthetic attention. The third perspective addresses the role of atmospheres in analysing the emergence of a sense of community in commercial spaces.

Cet article s’intéresse à la qualité sensible de l’environnement urbain sous l’influence du commerce en détail. Il propose un rapprochement de la géographie du commerce et de la recherche dans le domaine des ambiances et des atmosphères et esquisse trois perspectives de recherche qui en découlent pour la géographie du commerce. La première porte sur la dimension matérielle des équipements commerciaux et l’apport de la notion d’ambiance pour caractériser l’impact de la dimension matérielle sur les qualités d’accueil et les usages de l’espace public. La perspective suivante s’intéresse aux espaces commerciaux comme objet d’esthétique ordinaire. En mobilisant les notions d’ambiance et d’atmosphère, elle vise à comprendre comment et sous quelles conditions les usagers expérimentent l’espace à travers une attention esthétique. La troisième perspective aborde le rôle des atmosphères pour analyser l’émergence d’une sensation de communauté dans des espaces commerciaux.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** ambiance, atmosphère, matérialité diffuse, esthétique ordinaire, communauté, espace urbain

**Keywords:** ambiance, atmosphere, diffuse materiality, everyday aesthetics, community, urban space

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