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Jean-François Augoyard, an explorer of the sensory world

Jean-Paul Thibaud

Text translated from French by Sophie Provost

Jean-François Augoyard is senior researcher at CNRS (France). After studying philosophy (research on Giordano Bruno), aesthetics and musicology (Conservatoire National of Lyon and Gregorian Institute), he started teaching in the French national education system. He then carried out his doctorate in urban studies and practiced urban planning in Paris. In 1975, he started a new path as a researcher in urban sociology and environmental anthropology, while he continued teaching in several universities (Vincennes, Paris VI, Grenoble 2), and at the Graduate School of Architecture of Grenoble since 1976. In collaboration with Jean-Jacques Delétré, he created the *Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore* (CRESSON — <https://aau.archi.fr/cresson>) in 1979. Along with Jean-Pierre Peneau, he also created the *Ambiances architecturales et urbaines* Joint Research Unit (UMR — CNRS/Ministry of Culture) in 1998. He is co-director of a French doctoral programme on architectural and urban ambiances. Moreover, Jean-François Augoyard edited the “Ambiance, ambiances” collection for the A la Croisée Editions (9 books).

His main studies revolve around the perception of space and social conducts in the city, around the interdisciplinary methodology of the sensory environment (sound, light, smells), around the theory of architectural and urban ambiances and around the aesthetic experience in an urban milieu¹. In France or abroad, he is an expert

¹ For more information on Jean-François Augoyard’s scientific production, please visit: <https://aau.archi.fr/equipe/augoyard-jean-francois/>. I only mention a part of his substantial production, which spans over forty years. I would like to thank Françoise Acquier, reference librarian at CRESSON, for her outstanding work that now allows to directly access the team members’ production, including that of Jean-François Augoyard.

and member of several scientific or academic committees on the urban environment, landscape, public space and on the relations between art and city.

Inventive researcher and pioneer in several fields of urban research, Jean-François Augoyard holds a special place in French social science. As Pascal Amphoux and Philippe Le Guern mention it (2017): "Jean-François Augoyard belongs to a generation of pioneers who brought new objects and conceived new paradigms to re-think the social matter, and who also structured the research field by pushing the academic boundaries". Trained in philosophy by thinkers as varied as Henri Maldiney and Gilles Deleuze, he has been since early on committed to combine theoretical work and field survey, opening to new realms of thought and meticulous investigation on the ordinary urban experience. Avoiding the trends of the 1970s — whether it was structuralism, marxism or the semiotics of space — he developed an original position, which will be the foundation of the CRESSON scientific program , as well as current questions on architectural and urban ambiances.

The *Step-by-step* opening

Jean-François Augoyard made himself known with a first book, in 1979: *Pas-à-pas, essai sur le cheminement en milieu urbain*². Stemming from his doctoral thesis, defended in 1976 at the Université des Sciences Sociales of Grenoble, this book was part of a collective research dynamic that was particularly thriving at the time in Grenoble, at the crossroads between urban sociology and theories of social imagination³. With this seminal work, Jean-François Augoyard has paved his way by

² This book was reissued in French in 2010 by the A la Croisée Editions, with a foreword by Yves Winkin. It was also translated into English and published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2007 (*Step by step — Everyday walks in a French Urban Housing Project*), with a foreword written by Françoise Choay and an afterword by David Ames Curtis. An Italian translation was published in 1989 by Edizioni del Lavoro. It was called *Passo passo*. Lastly, several chapters were translated into German by Justin Winckler, in an upcoming book.

³ Among the researchers who have actively contributed to the rise of the Grenoble research in social science in the 1970s-1980s, we can mention François Ascher, Yves Chalas, Gilbert Durand, Alain Médam, Alain Pessin, Pierre Sansot, and Henry Torgue. For more information

studying in an original way the dwelling practices in Villeneuve, Grenoble. This is not the place for an extensive presentation of this reference book⁴, and I will only mention here the most important points.

Firstly, we should note that we are dealing with a research work that revolves around the urban everyday life and the ordinary dwelling experience. If this undertaking has affinities with other leading thinkers — we can think for example about Pierre Sansot's poetics of space, about Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life, Erving Goffman's staging of everyday life, Georges Pérec's infra-ordinary or Michel de Certeau's invention of the everyday — it remains different by proposing an approach that was until then unprecedented, rooted in phenomenology and rhetoric, and by putting to the test a demanding and large-scale empirical work. The concept of ordinary is thus tackled as close as possible to the lived dwelling experience and contexts.

To that end, secondly, Jean-François Augoyard introduces the theme of urban walks⁵ within the observation of dwelling conducts. He initiates a set of works that will be developed at a later stage. Along with the traditional research subjects in social studies — work, leisure, consumption — walking now finds a place in social science. It has not stopped being studied ever since. It is thanks to an acute attention to **figures of walking** and to the moving bodies that this work has a large-scale theoretical scope.

Thirdly, this thorough situated observation work gives grounds for the discovery of a true rhetoric of dwelling, which will be at the heart of the *Step-by-step* project.

on the history of this urban laboratory, see Buyck, Martin, Prévot & Romano (2018). For an illustration of this collective urban research, see the research report by Augoyard, Médam, Pessin & Torgue (1975).

⁴ This book was commented upon its publication — see for example André Jacob's report, published in 1980 — and keeps being commented upon — see for example the enlightening article written by Yves Winkin (2010). It will hold a very special place in Michel de Certeau's work, in particular in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (translation published in 1984).

⁵ See Augoyard (1985) in particular.

Against an all-too deterministic sociology, this research opens to a way of thinking modalities that would eventually affect in a sustainable way the body of work carried out at CRESSON. By being located at the level of the expression of the inhabitants, and by describing in detail the different figures of walking, the now classic concept of “ways of dwelling” emerges and unfolds. In other words, the point here is to thematise the question of *how* and to ask ourselves “how things occur”⁶.

This new research orientation is also possible by the implementation of an original investigatory mechanism, which gives their rightful place to the description, narrative and memory of the future. The creation of the “narrative conduct” (*conduite de récit*)⁷ — a method that articulates language expression and wandering practices — also has an essential role in the empirical testing of the pathway rhetoric. It also initiates a set of methodological innovations that, from then on, will continuously appear in Jean-François Augoyard and the CRESSON team’s investigations (we will go back to this question regarding studies dedicated to the sound environment).

Lastly, although it was not thematised as such, the theme of ambiances can be seen as underlying the *Step-by-step* project. The attention given to the sensorial motricity in action, to the pathic dimension of experience, to atmospheric effects and to the climate pervasiveness raises many questions, which will be at the centre of some future works on ambiances. The references to Henri Maldiney, Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Ludwig Binswanger’s studies are no coincidence, as each one contributes in his own way to foresee this new realm of thought.

The ordinary of sound

⁶ On this modal approach, you can refer to Jean-François Augoyard’s interview by Jean-Christophe Sevin and Dimitri Volley (2009). See also Augoyard (1982). To continue on this research position, see the article by Grégoire Chelkoff (2010) on a model conception of architectural ambiances.

⁷ See Augoyard (2001)

As we understood, *Step-by-step* represents a seminal work that adopts a new scientific position, outlines a long-term research programme and foreshadows CRESSON's future research works. However, it is only the first entry into Jean-François Augoyard's scientific journey. Indeed, a fundamental side of the problem statements developed afterwards deals with the sonic environment. CRESSON — *Centre de Recherche sur l'Espace Sonore* (in its first designation) — clearly states the special interest given to this sensory modality. Without going into detail on 40 years of research on that topic⁸, sound here becomes both a field of empirical investigation and a specific way to question architecture, urbanity, sociability and environment. This field of research will represent the opportunity to develop a true interdisciplinary approach, at the crossroads between social science, design science and applied physical science.

In 1978, an exploratory study was carried out⁹, questioning the dwelling practices through sound phenomena and reproducing a modal approach from this new field of study. This research report is unfortunately little known¹⁰ but essential, and it operates in a way the passage from *Step-by-step* to the future works on sound. Many arguments and lines of research emerged at this point, proposing the opening of a third path between music and noise, questioning the idea of sound territoriality. It proposed an alternative approach to the concept of soundscape, introducing an ethological perspective, thematising the sound imagination and focusing on the phonic activity¹¹. Those represent many open lines of research that would inform 40 years of research at CRESSON on the sound world.

The foundations of a background research work on the ordinary situated sound experience were set. They came to fruition later with other research works and different themes: exploratory research on the concept of sound effect, opening up

⁸ For an overview of the CRESSON's work on soundscape, see Chelkoff (2015) and Thibaud (2016).

⁹ See Augoyard (1978)

¹⁰ The document is now accessible online, on the halts platform, see: <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00685590/>

¹¹ Several articles unfold and further the results from this initial research later on. See in particular Augoyard, (1980a), (1980b), (1982), (1991), (1995).

to a broadened interdisciplinary approach¹², research on sound environment and interpersonal communication, questioning the immanence of sociality¹³, research on the production of the sound environment, asserting the importance of listening attitudes and ways of sounding¹⁴, research on information sources regarding neighbourhood noise, questioning the idea that "the noise is the other"¹⁵, research on the sensorial factors of the sense of insecurity, testing both the sound and light aspects¹⁶. Always strengthened by field data and interdisciplinary empirical investigations, these studies, forerunners to *Sound studies*, definitely anchor the theoretical and epistemological position implemented at CRESSON. Moreover, we can add that new investigation methods would later emerge thanks to these works, whether it is for example on the reactivated listening interviews¹⁷ or the anecdote repository.

A long-term collaboration, led by Jean-François Augoyard and carried out by the CRESSON team, will focus on the concept of sound effect¹⁸. No fewer than around sixty sound effects were recorded and described in an interdisciplinary way, offering a sound grammar of constituents regarding our everyday listening. Halfway between the sound object and the soundscape¹⁹, the concept of sound effect

¹² See Augoyard & Balaÿ (1982)

¹³ See Augoyard, Amphoux & Balaÿ (1985). A synthesis article highlighting the concept of "sound parasite" is also available in: Augoyard (2003).

¹⁴ See Augoyard, Amphoux & Chelkoff (1985).

¹⁵ See Leroux & Augoyard (1986).

¹⁶ See Augoyard & Leroux (1991).

¹⁷ For more information on the interview on reactivating listening, see Augoyard (2001). The anecdote repository was experimented during the aforementioned study on sound environment and interpersonal communication.

¹⁸ For a summarised presentation of this concept, see Augoyard (1989). An article is also available in English (Augoyard, 1998). The outcome of the collective work on the concept of sound effect became the repository of sound effects (Augoyard & Torgue, 1995), translated and published in Italian (Augoyard & Torgue, 2003) and in English (Augoyard & Torgue, 2005). The concept of sound effect was also applied to film analysis, see Augoyard (2015) for more information.

¹⁹ See Augoyard (1999)

represents the cornerstone of the whole body of work regarding sound, as well as the bond of a shared culture within the team.

The growing power of research on sound environment in France would bring Jean-François Augoyard to carry this theme at a national level. He thus organised a large-scale, bi-annual seminar questioning the articulation between sound and societal, gathering the best specialists on the subject²⁰. A few years later, a pluridisciplinary symposium was organised at CRESSON, on the sound quality of inhabited spaces, bringing together acousticians, architects and sociologists²¹. A synthesis article was published afterwards²², taking stocks on the origin, development and evolution of the French research around the theme of urban sound environment.

The aesthetics of ambiances

In parallel with the work on sound, which continues to be developed at CRESSON, the early 1990s see Jean-François Augoyard introducing, in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Peneau from CERMA at the Graduate Architecture School of Nantes, the theme of architectural and urban ambiances²³.

Two main orientations, intrinsically connected, are implemented in Jean-François Augoyard's studies in terms of ambiances.

On one side, it is a question of developing a theory of architectural and urban ambiances over time. Since the 1990s, a true scientific and epistemological framing work has been undertaken, opening this new field of research. An article of great

²⁰ Since 1984, the *Environnement sonore et société* seminar has been initiating a background prospective work on this emerging theme. See Augoyard (1987).

²¹ See Augoyard, Delétré & al. (1992)

²² See Augoyard (2000)

²³ This new theme is at the origin of the reunion of CRESSON and CERMA as on UMR called "*Ambiances Architecturales et Urbaines*", as well as a degree of the same name, which was to train a whole generation of young researchers in the 1990s.

importance was published in 1994, initiating and aiming to establish scientifically this emerging field of investigation²⁴. Many other publications followed, continuously developing, bolstering and specifying the theoretical project over time²⁵. There is no way to try and summarise the scope, the complexity and the subtlety of this proposition. Therefore, we will simply mention a few aspects particularly prominent: distinction between *ambiance* in the singular (as an overall quality that is experienced) and *ambiances* in the plural (as defined in the various fields of applied physics); affirmation of the phenomenon as the central theme of the analyses; recognition of physical signals resulting in contextual physics²⁶, emphasis on the fundamentally situated, inter-sensorial and social nature of the sensory experience; proposition of a true interdisciplinary approach based on transversal methods and tools cross-referencing social science, design science and applied physical science; importance given to the built environment and to the stakes of architectural and urban design; articulation between the receptive and the generative dimensions of *ambiances*. These arguments contribute to meticulously build this new field of study, making Jean-François Augoyard one of the main instigators of French research in this subject area. In 2008 in Grenoble, the organisation of the *Faire une ambiance* symposium confirms that he is at the centre of the development and structuring of this field²⁷.

On the other side, the theory of *ambiances* developed by Jean-François Augoyard is deeply intertwined with an aesthetic questioning in nature²⁸. It seems as if the theory of *ambiances* and the aesthetics of *ambiances* go together and are inseparable. The article translated and published here is evidence, highlighting an original conception of sensory perception and the possibility of an aesthetics of *ambiances*. It also aims to revisit the field of aesthetics itself by turning *ambiances* and atmospheres its key lever. A sensible and articulated reading of the great

²⁴ See Augoyard (1994b)

²⁵ In particular, Augoyard (1998), (2004), (2007), (2008), (2011), (2016)

²⁶ On the topic of the contextual physics of *ambiances*, see Augoyard (2005).

²⁷ The opening conference, followed by its publication in the proceedings of the symposium (Augoyard, 2011), represents an important step in Jean-François Augoyard's work.

²⁸ The aesthetic question has been developed since the beginning of the 1990s. See for example Augoyard (1991), until his most recent works (Augoyard, 2016).

aesthetic thoughts enables an original version on this matter. Furthermore, questioning ambiances is paired with a socio-aesthetic approach that will be supported by large-scale empirical studies regarding artistic actions in the urban environment and the ordinary aesthetic experience of architecture²⁹. Therefore, the point is to both propose an aesthetic problem statement within ambiances — as the fundamental and constitutive question for the field — and test this proposition against field investigations. Such an aesthetics of ambiances thus finds ways to be supported in an empirical way, becomes a part of the current everyday life and work as a true analyser of the contemporary sensory transformations. As we have shown, Jean-François Augoyard opened the field of ambiances to architectural and urban research while paving his own way from an aesthetic problem statement in nature.

What could be better for the reader than to read this translated and revisited version of one of Jean-François Augoyard's essential articles? There is no doubt that it is a fascinating text written by a tireless navigator of the sensory world...

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²⁹ Various publications of these field investigations and results are available. See Augoyard (1994a), Augoyard & Leroux (1999); Augoyard & alii. (1999-2000); Augoyard & alii. (2003). Among the main researchers taking part in this work, we can mention Martine Leroux and Catherine Aventin. Beside these various research reports, we can also mention a synthesis article on the subject (Augoyard, 2000).

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