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► **To cite this version:**

Georges-Henry Laffont. Affects as Foam of the Balance of Power at a Time of Urban Aesthetisation? About an Exploratory Research on Nantes and Saint-Etienne (France). Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances, Alloaesthesia: Senses, Inventions, Worlds, Réseau International Ambiances, Dec 2020, e-conference, France. pp. 304-309, 10.48537/hal-03220321 . hal-03220321

HAL Id: hal-03220321

<https://hal.science/hal-03220321>

Submitted on 11 May 2021

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Affects as Foam of the Balance of Power at a Time of Urban Aesthetisation?

About an Exploratory Research on Nantes and Saint-Etienne (France)

Georges-Henry LAFFONT¹

Abstract. In the society of affects, inhabited spaces are designed and the urban experience is conditioned. Based on preliminary observations realized during several editions of the Voyage à Nantes and the Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Etienne, this paper addresses theoretical, methodological and analytical questions in order to contribute to the research on the urban environment. This research postulates that this material, symbolic and discursive transformation of our sensibility perpetuates the structural relationships of force linked to cultural and social capitals while promoting, through the instrumentalization of affects, a standardization and normalization of individual and collective feelings and actions.

Keywords. Urban Atmosphere, Affects, Saint-Etienne, Nantes, Production of Space, Normalization, Conflicts

Introduction

This contribution is an exploratory research² on the processes and practices of normalization and resistance in the face of the “aestheticization of the world” (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2013) and is part of the spectrum of research on atmosphere³, taken here as a socio-aesthetic relationship - sensitive, emotional, temporal (Amphoux et al., 2007) maintained with our living environments

On one hand, urban becomes decor, sensorial urbanism, sensual architecture, daily events (Laffont, 2019; Guiheux, 2017; Lucas and Mair, 2008). On the other hand, in a society of affects (Lordon, 2015), people are encouraged to know, value and express their emotions. Thus, not only living spaces are designed, but the living experience (Lussault, 2015) is itself conditioned. By paying as much attention to the atmosphere as to the affects, everything seems to be done to offer and guarantee calm, luxury and pleasure.

Two assumptions are made in the light of these findings. Firstly, this ambient aestheticization (Mons, 2013) by an instrumentalization of affects, would smooth out the

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2. Since 2017, non-contractual research aims to inform the role of affects in the contemporary production and experience of the urban. On the occasion of the Journey to Nantes (2017-2018-2019) and the International Design Biennial in Saint-Etienne (2017-2019), an immersive field survey was conducted. It consisted in directly observing both individual and collective practices “in situation” and thus to try to analyze the behaviors, attitudes, arts of dealing with space during these events, as well as the material or immaterial staging of the spaces where these events took place. In 2021, this method will be supplemented by others, which are presented in the latest developments of this contribution.

3. Atmosphere will be discussed here as a synonym, in the English language, of ambiance used in the French language

sensitive roughness that would spoil this collective celebration and pacify social relations by creating a climate of apparent appeasement between social groups. Then, it would infantilize people through the deployment of material, symbolic and discursive codifications leading to a playful, mercantile and convivial urbanity. On the basis of these two hypotheses, which are in the process of being consolidated, this article proposes theoretical, methodological and analytical questions for debate, which could feed into research on setting the urban atmosphere.

First of all, it synthetically presents this new urban era through the first observations made in Nantes and Saint-Etienne, two industrial cities that have alternately “mutated” into creative cities after 1990 and are now collaborative cities. Then, it discusses the transformation of our sensibility that is being experienced there thanks to two cultural events, the *Voyage à Nantes* and the *Biennale Internationale Design Saint-Etienne*. Finally, it specifically addresses the research protocol that will be set up in these two cities to support the hypotheses formulated and consolidate these initial observations and reflections.

Towards General Urban Standardization and Air Conditioning?

For more than thirty years, the urban environment, an experiential environment, has been characterized by buildings with forms that rival each other in boldness, wastelands reinvested in festive spaces, and events of all kinds that mark a new rhythm of life. The material and symbolic transformation of the urban space and the staging of events at set dates, in set places and in playful and convivial ways of reappropriating public spaces would be the preferred tools of public and private actors to renew their financial rents (Adam and Laffont, 2018).

Nantes and Saint-Etienne, two cities chosen both for their cultural, social, etc. differences but also in view of their common trajectories, namely as industrial cities, having made culture and architectural or public space excellence their assets to be part of the metropolization phenomenon. Moreover, both of them relied on events, as illustrations of this transformation of the urban environment.

Since 2012⁴, in Nantes, an 8 km long green line painted on the ground invites every summer tourists and inhabitants to live a city adventure punctuated by the discovery of works of art and unusual places to demonstrate the cultural, architectural, urban and social excellence of the city.

Nantes guarantees a festive atmosphere and conviviality for everyone. During the various field observations, it was common to observe that these adventurers scrupulously followed this breadcrumb trail from the SNCF railway station, stepped on their feet, went to the wrong place or entered shops without noticing when a clever shopkeeper diverted the green line. In Saint-Etienne, a biennial event has been held since 1998 to mark the cultural life of this former industrial and mining stronghold⁵. After a few editions where the event was confined to a single venue, the Cité du design⁶, Biennial “is coming to town” and design is colonising all the public space (parades, festivals held in the city, etc.).

The observations made during the last two biennials, illustrate the ambivalence of the event and the urban atmosphere. On one hand, both are supposed to offer everyone,

4. See at: <https://www.levoyageanantes.fr>

5. See at: <https://www.biennale-design.com/saint-etienne/>

6. See at: <https://www.citedudesign.com/fr/home/>

whatever their social condition and cultural capital, the “design experience.” On the other hand, they target an elitist public with amenities that enable it to distinguish itself from other social categories.

Beyond the temporality specific to these two events, what we observe in these two cities is that, with the help of animations, events and other architectural, urban and landscape productions, it is not only the whole urban space that is aestheticized, but above all the sensitive experience of the urban that is transformed. Thus, in this setting of the contemporary urban environment, the tones, atmospheres, intensities, etc. felt become the alpha and omega of the production of space.

A Reloaded Urban Experience?

In the neo-liberal era, the use of events, the object architecture and the narration of urban projects contribute to the uniform and ambient aestheticization of our living environments. If the observation and analysis of social practices, memories, imaginary inhabitants, customs and sociabilities show the existence and persistence of atmospheres specific to Saint-Etienne and Nantes, initial elements show that this aestheticization contributed to an impoverishment of the sensitive experience and a reduction in the field of perceptions. The atmospheres observed in these cities, even if this remains to be substantiated, would translate and illustrate a massive process of standardization and codification of the urban in its material, symbolic, social and experiential dimensions, a process in which affects become an operative dimension.

Affect has become so prominent in the social debate that it has become an emotional watershed (Clough et al., 2007). In fact, affects now dominate the vast majority of research in the human and social sciences, neurosciences, cultural or urban studies, etc. This “emotional turn” would qualify an era characterized by a strong propensity to express one’s emotions, feelings (Illouz, 2006), or even an injunction. Consequently, for any research on the production and experience of contemporary urban life, one understands the infatuation for affects and its double challenge. On one hand, it is a question of grasping and understanding the nature of the relationships that an individual, a group, a society, maintains with its environment. On the other hand, it is important to be able to account for the values and ideologies that animate and structure these relationships, that oppose and confront each other in the arena that each urban situation constitutes.

In this way, it is possible to postulate and analyse the urban experience of a city in particular or of the urban in general, as a series of performances that engage corporeality, the being in its entirety (sensation, reflection, enunciation, action). Bodily experienced, limited in time, changing, affects are the products of a subjective perception and appreciation, with a view to an action, a situation that involves the individual (Laffont and Martouzet, 2018). As part of a society, the individual seeks to find meaning in what he or she experiences by adjusting between the values of the society and his or her own. What both an individual and a group feel is informed, defined and shared by society, which produces, legitimizes or prohibits ways of feeling, sensing and expressing that feeling (Bernard, 2015).

By a game on, with and through affects, the ambient aestheticization of the urban environment puts to the test the mastery of what an individual feels in a situation, the means and admissibility of expressing it, the ability to act accordingly. Being “out of place” or being “in the right place” results in significant differences in feelings and actions. A city with a singular and familiar atmosphere confers a certain ontological

security to the person who frequents it daily or discovers it and can quickly feel at ease there. On the other hand, this same city, as a discursive, material and symbolic translation of a process of standardization and codification, but also as an illustration, as it were, of a transformation of our sensitivity, can lead us to feel a relative insecurity, an unease for those who do not master the ad hoc code of behaviours.

Throughout a few exchanges, what we have learnt is that, in Saint Etienne, living the Biennial affects individuals by testing their legitimacy to feel and act or simply to be there. On a different note, in Nantes, the people interviewed, although they feel legitimate to take part in the *Voyage à Nantes* or to be there, do not seem to be experiencing an extraordinary event, which affects them individually in a singular and profound way. They will confess to “go with the flow,” or “be entertained.”

A twofold hypothesis can therefore be founded: on one hand, this codification of environments and practices would perpetuate the structural power relations linked to cultural and social capital. On the other hand, through the instrumentalization of affect, this same codification would aim to guarantee everyone a relationship without pain, without worry or surprise, without expectations and therefore without disappointment. In this way, the aestheticization of the urban environment and its setting would function as a social imaginary (Taylor, 2004). On one side it would aim at the fusion of the members of society in order to curb the tendency to friction, on the other side it would maintain the illusion that this same society is not a field and therefore cannot be subject to and governed by power relations.

Methodological Assumptions and Research Perspectives

During the last editions of the *Voyage à Nantes* or those of the *Biennale Design*, a whole range of behaviours have been expressed, from mastery to lack of mastery of the situation, of what it provokes and what it leads to do. In certain attitudes, postures, and speeches, it has been possible to detect that in situations of discomfort, individuals make adjustments to correct it. Adjustments that, in many ways, are emotional work (Hoshchild, 2003): changes in the physical or somatic manifestations of feeling (body or arm position; change of place, etc.), modification of expressiveness (use of superlatives with positive connotations, cries of joy, etc.) in order to communicate to others an impression of mastery, etc. Of course, at this stage of the research, these are only initial observations and their analysis, understanding and confirmation call for an investigation protocol. The protocol should also allow for a more detailed analysis of the behavior, what motivates them for the individual, how external determinations affect the behaviour, how, again, the individual manages or fails to act, etc.

In the new developments of this research in 2021, the challenge is to be able to appreciate this process from feeling to action and to reconstruct the chain (explanatory, causal, etc.) and to understand how and by what means the spatial devices and the setting of the contemporary city's atmosphere perform. To do this, several methods of investigation and analysis will be used, combining quantitative objective and qualitative reflexive analysis, methods that have been tested in previous research. First of all, observation in situations, in order to identify several clues on the composition, layout and action of spatial devices on and with individuals. Then, the commented path, which, by allowing us to gauge the influence of the situation, will prove to be a way of expressing feelings. Then, the mental map which, leading to a description of the situation and its spatial configuration will offer access to personal preferences and interests. Finally, a reactivation interview will allow the unveiling of the justifications for the behaviour, linking the situation to a previous personal event. A complementary

work of textual and lexicographical statistical analysis could complete this protocol (signify-significant); fine analysis of the discourse; identification of recurrent elements for each field and for the whole corpus of respondents).

Insofar as the focus here is on what affects, how it affects, what it does in a situation, this experimental protocol should make it possible to grasp how, through cognitive work, the disturbed individual will seek to regain calm, balance and harmony, by conforming to or resisting the stimuli of the situation.

Atmosphere is what makes the experience possible, but it is also what frames it, guides it and allows the sensitive to exist. To be affected means, in a situation, to feel, express and overcome a sensitive experience in order to give meaning - to rationalize - to what is lived, according to the possibilities established by society. Today, on one hand, discourse on the urban environment calls for the expression of affectivity, pleasure and desire, while on the other hand, their urban planning, architectural, landscape and experiential translations suggest a predetermination and typification of behaviour.

The observations made in Nantes and Saint-Etienne have made it possible, in a progressive and iterative approach, to build an interpretative framework. This leads to the thesis that the contemporary urban atmosphere produced materially, discursively and symbolically, just like the atmosphere as a way of feeling a situation, becomes an instrument at the service of keno-urbanization (Dear, 2002).

By combining the observation of situations where individuals and groups experience contemporary urban life and the analysis of the discourse that these individuals and groups bring to bear on their own experiences, research developed for the 2021 editions of the *Voyage à Nantes* and the next *Biennale* will have two objectives. Firstly, to identify the capacity of the atmosphere to animate, condition, air-condition, atmosphere and tone an urban environment and its experience. Secondly, to put forward that this sensorial government operates by an instrumentalization of affects in order to unify, normalize and neutralize feelings and actions in a kind of entertaining, soothing and alienating.

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