

## Ambiance and history of architecture: the built environment in our sensory experience and imagination

Bilingual journal coordinated by an editorial committee <http://ambiances.revues.org>

### Proposition

How are we to account for the spatial, material and social arrangements which make a particular sensory configuration – an ambiance – at a given point in history? In raising this vast question, this special issue of the *Ambiances* journal aims to fill some of the gaps in history as it is currently practised: gaps relating to the environmental awareness of societies in the past with regard to buildings, gaps which show that the historical evolution of architecture and cities is linked to concrete experience of the built environment, appraisal of its potential for being inhabited, and its transformation for the demands and joys of use. So, with this call for papers, we are positing that the ambiance of these places and spaces is one of the little understood forces in architectural and urban history. In their work Lucien Febvre, Alain Corbin, Sabine Barles, Jacques Léonard and Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud – among others – have plotted the growth of olfactory, auditory and visual pollution. Many recent scientific publications have also highlighted the permanence of these phenomena in history. Treating ambiance as a historical object, as a medium for new knowledge about past buildings – much as ongoing research into the weather, desire, the human body or private life – opens the way for three new types of investigation.

### Exploring sensory sources over time

How may we gain access to past ambiances? Though fragile and ephemeral, traces of the sensory do nevertheless persist in many media. In iconography, literature, cinema, broadcasting, architectural treatises and techniques, such sources are testimony to the know-how and imaginings of residents, architects and passers-by, material often overlooked by the history of architecture. So what are these sources and how can we examine and compare them? Examining involves first of all investigating the past existence of humans, who established for themselves and their families settlements which interacted closely with the perception they sought and scope for smelling, seeing, listening to and touching the objects and temperature of their surroundings. Sources exist indirectly by way of buildings and places which have survived. They form permanent points of reference in space from which we can track changes or static situations. Such sources of sensory data have yet to be explored.

### Interpreting and reconstituting past sensory experience

But there is more to taking an interest in the historical particularities of an ambiance than just sources of sound, smell and light appearing at a specific point in time. It is also well worth finding out where and how these sensory experiences were received as singular, emotional events, perceived as pleasing or disagreeable depending on the era. How then should we go about investigating these sources, analysing them and above all interpreting in the light of our own sensibilities and tastes? Is it even possible to project ourselves into a past ambiance without distorting or betraying it? The settings may have survived, but it is often difficult to grasp their sensory features, designed and built as they were in other times and for other people. These traces may sometimes strike us as useless, incomprehensible decors, or alternatively as fragile, threatened remains. Thanks to technological advances and cross-referencing of sources, the simulation of ambiances may offer a new reading of history and urban conditions. In which case, how far should research go in reconstituting ambiance in order to interpret and restore the sensory experiences of the past?

## Revealing imaginary ambiances

What more is to be said of all these imaginary ambiances, dreamlike visions, ideas of projected buildings and places, the material realization of which has transformed, perhaps obliterated, the original intention? The fruit of fantasy or dream, the object of genuine social, political or artistic projects, these imagined ambiances can tell us as much about the way projects were conceived as about the fate of certain utopian ideas. The various alterations – such as conversion, rehabilitation and energy efficiency – may serve as the driving force to change or, on the other hand, try to recreate real or imagined ambiances. They offer an opportunity to question the motives presiding over these changes and the methods deployed to fashion a new architectural and urban identity.

Some converted places, sometimes damaged in the process or possibly sublimated and revealed, contain several layers of ambiance which lend them an identity that is rich but hard to decipher. This task of reading and interpreting their complexity, undertaken by successive generations, has directed their subsequent development, involving multiple, sometimes contradictory stakes, particularly in terms of heritage. This in turn raises questions about the purpose of some conservation policies which set out to preserve, in the name of some historical truth, material components or arrangements at odds with the ambiance as it was first conceived.

## Papers we would like to see

This call for papers concerns a broad range of researchers and practitioners, at the meeting point between history and ambiance, in the following fields:

- Architecture, town planning and design;
- Building rehabilitation, heritage studies;
- History of the senses, art, cinema and broadcasting;
- Anthropology, sociology, literature.

Papers should focus on one or more of the issues raised above, without historical periods, examples and case studies being over restrictive. A range of sources may be studied.

## Submission of proposals

Authors should submit a 500 to 800 words outline of their proposed article to the editors of the special issue. The deadline for proposals is 15th May 2015. Proposals should be sent to :

[ambiances.history@gmail.com](mailto:ambiances.history@gmail.com) (see detailed schedule below).

Proposals and the articles themselves may be submitted in French or English. Proposals will be reviewed by the editors of the special issue and the journal's editorial committee. Following preliminary acceptance authors should submit their complete article, from 4000 to 8000 words by 15th October 2015 at the very latest. In keeping with the journal's usual practice, articles will be read by two reviewers, using a double-blind assessment process. Publication of the special issue is planned for September 2016.

## Schedule

- Launch of the call for papers: 15th February 2015
- Deadline for reception of proposals: 15th May (500 to 800 words)
- Response to authors: 15th June
- Deadline for reception of complete articles: 15th October (4000 to 8000 words)
- Projected publication of the special issue: September 2016.

## Special issue editors

- Olivier Balaï, architect, urbanist and faculty member, professor at École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Lyon, researcher at Cresson, UMR AAU CNRS-MCC-ECN
- Stéphane Frioux, lecturer in modern history, Université Lumière-Lyon2, researcher at Laboratoire de Recherche Historique Rhône-Alpes, UMR CNRS 5190 LARHRA.
- Nathalie Simonnot, architectural historian, researcher at LÉAV, École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture de Versailles, France.

