# ambiances.net

international ambiances network

letter N°2 autumn 2009

## editoria

The international ambiances network has well and truly started. Following the symposium in September 2008, Faire une ambiance / Creating an Atmosphere, and after several months of operation, the network is beginning to take shape. We have reached the phase when we can start developing links and projects.

#### **Recent news**

Apart from the various items of news posted online on a day-to-day basis several key events have engaged the network in recent months. The talks presented at the Grenoble symposium are now available on the website1 as a foretaste of the imminent publication of the proceedings. In addition, posted every fortnight and written by someone different each time (alternating between Frenchspeakers and other languages), the editorial has now reached cruising speed. The ambiances landscape is gradually being mapped out, with layers of voices, words and ideas. Finally, visitors to the website can listen to the three one-day forums recently organized in France on the theme of changing scene<sup>2</sup>. For non-French-speakers, summaries in English will soon be posted alongside the recordings to open the content of the forums to a larger audience.

#### Work in progress

Nor is the network at a loss for projects! Among those currently on the agenda, there is a resource centre<sup>3</sup> which should ultimately enable us to broadcast a whole range of data on ambiance (articles, bibliographies, sounds, pictures, archives, etc.). There is also a project to develop a series of thematic subjects to serve as a framework for the network's activities and scientific content. The themes of walking, changing scene, methodology, among others are possible points of access. We

## issue

## tools and methods casebook

should also mention the proposal to build up a body of literary quotes that relate to the experience of ambiance. The first stone of this edifice has already been laid with the publication online of a collection of quotes on urban sounds<sup>4</sup> collated by Marc Crunelle. It should come as no surprise that literature too can create an ambiance. Don't forget the Ambiencias Compartilhadas (shared ambiances) symposium in Rio de Janeiro, from 3 to 6 November 2009, which promises to be most stimulating. And of course plans are being sketched out for other gatherings, in Sweden in 2010, in Germany the following year ...

#### Taking part in the adventure

The network will obviously be all the more exciting and diverse if it can draw on the activities, contributions and talents of all its members. So send in your news, add your comments to an open blog, write an editorial, contribute a letter to the network, offer to organize an annual symposium with your network, etc. Above all take part in whatever way you wish in this adventure which is only just starting ...

## Jean-Paul Thibaud

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<sup>1/</sup> Creating an Atmosphere symposium, Grenoble2008» -> http://www. cresson.archi.fr/PUBLI/pubCOLLOQUE/AMBIANCE2008-communications.htm

<sup>2/</sup> Sharing urban ambiances – Experiencing a change of scene seminar, 2009 -> http://www.ambiances.net/?cat=31

<sup>3/</sup> Edito 19 : Design a shared heritage about ambiances -> http://www. ambiances.net/?p=534

<sup>4/</sup>The first database is the result of Marc Crunelle's work on Cities' sound -> http://www.ambiances.net/wikindx/

## <u>network life</u>

#### Rio symposium november 2009



Ambiencias Compartilhadas : cultura, corpo e linguagem

Shared Ambiances : culture, body and language

3 to 6 November 2009, MEC, Salão Portinari RJ, Brasil

http://www.asc.fau.ufrj.br/ ev\_ambiencias.html

## Experiencing a change of scene

As part of the international ambiances network three one-day sessions were staged in France, between January and June 2009. With the support of the Research and Technology Mission (Ministry of Culture), these exploratory gatherings focussed on sharing sensory experience in an urban environment.

They had two goals:

 to launch the theme of Shared Urban Ambiances and make it one of the prime topics for debate in the ambiances network;

- to contribute to preparing the Rio symposium on this theme.

How do urban ambiances express forms of shared sensibility and ways of being together? In what respect do they renew forms of coexistence in public spaces?

What part do sensory factors play in constituting different forms of urban culture and sociability?

The aim, in posing such questions, was to test ordinary urban culture against sensory perception.

## • The title for the day in Lyon was **Bodies and** intercorporeality in public spaces.

Organized around the work of (the philosopher and anthropologist) François Laplantine, the day sought to build bridges between sensory anthropology and research into architectural and urban ambiances.

#### • The day in Grenoble was entitled **Ordinary aes**thetics and sensory memory.

Hinging on the work of (the philosopher and planner) Jean-François Augoyard, the aim here was to explore in greater detail the aesthetic side of architectural and urban ambiances, drawing on various artistic events in public spaces and on ordinary occurrences of urban life.

# • The Paris gathering was entitled **Sensory policies** and city languages.

The morning session centred on the work of (the sociologist) Henri-Pierre Jeudy, and the sensory forms of social and political life. In the afternoon we elaborated various propositions for addressing the sensory, social and emotional dimensions of the urban experience.

## ssue

#### Collating data from questionnaires and commented walks to grasp atmospheric characteristics

The Centre for Methodological Research in Architecture (Cerma) has been hosting two doctorate students, respectively for the last one and two years. Their thesis subjects extend the scope of the laboratory's research on ambiances. Céline Drozd is working on "the representations of architectural ambiances in pictures and language". Amar Ben Salma is addressing the "characterization of visual and climatic ambiances in large housing projects". Both young researchers are working on essential problems of considerable topical interest in contemporary architecture and planning.



Céline Drozd is focussing on the spa buildings at Vals, Switzerland (designed by Peter Zumthor) and on the baths on the dockside at Le Havre, France (designed by Jean Nouvel). She shows how the users of these buildings perceive the architects' intentions regarding ambiance, prompting in turn

various questions: do the ambiances undergo changes, or even alterations, during the design process, leading to a perception that is far removed from the original atmospheric characteristics? How is one to explain the changes in these atmospheric characteristics given the complexity of the architectural design process, its many players and the difficulty of communicating an ambiance simply by representing it?



Amar Ben Salma is working on a larger body of buildings that are more uniform in character, particularly in terms of their typology and the construction methods employed. However it is difficult to determine the atmospheric parameters, demanding painstaking collation of data on a wide range of phy-

sical phenomena: how to explain the comfort or discomfort experienced in certain public spaces (building entrance halls, playgrounds, car parks) or inside dwellings (depending on which way rooms face, their layout, and the view)? Do endusers actually perceive the planned atmospheric characteristics? Ambiances are hard to grasp, describe or reconstitute. They pose numerous problems of method and demand constant innovation in this respect. How then are we to come to grips with ambiance? The four texts that follow show how important this question is, obliging us to stray from the beaten track. This brief casebook on tools and methods is the start of a new topic of discussion for the network. It also underlines the scale of the undertaking.

To answer these questions the two doctorate students are using a method involving questionnaires and commented walks. This method generally yields valuable results but its application in this case may prove problematic. How, for instance, is one to survey someone who is swimming? In a leisure context are people prepared to spend 20 to 30 minutes answering a questionnaire on their perception of space? Do the inhabitants of a large housing estate need to be physically present at the relevant location when they answer the survey or can they do it from memory in the relative comfort of their homes?

The researchers must come to grips with practical difficulties of this nature, but solutions can be found through trial and error. In some cases it is necessary to combine questionnaires and commented walks, despite these methods usually being taken separately, yielding complementary results. All in all the experience of the two thesis students shows how important it is to use a method properly, in order to obtain results that really contribute to advancing research.

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## Words given and given back words

(Exchanging words)

Exploring the everyday process of making a town often involves tuning into what one might call the narrative of place.

This narrative, though on each occasion singular, is never single. It is, by nature, plural and polyglot. It focuses on practice and ambiance<sup>1</sup>. It mixes past, present and future, instructing us – inhabitants, decision-makers and designers – in what makes up the everyday experience of urban life, for our own sake and for others.

Many consider that gathering such narratives is not yet necessary for an architectural or urban project, but at least it is a way of listening to, thinking about and putting a territory into words. For some it is really part of the project. To assist this process many methods have been produced, often rooted in urban research: commented walks, recurrent observation, reactivation techniques1.

among others. The narrative may take the form of speech, photographs, drawings, video or even bodily expression. Each place, each setting for a project and its players, is an opportunity to test and change methods for collecting and comparing perceptions and representations.

We generally hear such input, voiced by ordinary people and experts, on the spot, so place becomes a third party between the speaker and the observer. As such these methods do not count as tools for public consultation, but they are a way of putting into words the characteristics of a site, with its ambiances and practices, revealing at the same time the components

of its basic heritage. The reporting of these words then enables those involved in the project (project owner, lead contractor, stakeholders) to grasp how each party pictures the place and what is at stake for them. Lastly, by summarizing a site, the words reveal priorities, pinpoint areas of leverage and make an inventory of ideas for the project<sup>2</sup>.

But the words initially voiced take on a special meaning some time later when they are returned, in material form, to their "owners". This may be achieved in three ways: through transcription of a specific narrative (full text, photographs, etc.); reshaping of elements of others' narratives (ABC of issues, commented photo album, walks commented by several voices, etc.); or a summary organized by theme, highlighting a place's characteristics and the stakes involved. Paying attention to these "ordinary" words, with scope for re-reading one's own words, but also those of others, and responding a second time, changes both subject and interviewer. Surely this too is part of the project?

#### Notes

 Grosjean Michèle, Thibaud Jean-Paul (dir.). L'espace urbain en méthodes. Marseille : Éd. Parenthèses, 2001.
Z/ BazarUrbain (article collectif). La fabrique ordinaire de la ville à l'épreuve des usages. Grenoble : www.bazarurbain.com, 2007.

Place de la République





Booklet given to all the participants in the commented walks for the preliminary study for a development project Action BazarUrbain / DVD Ville de Paris Document : http://www.paris.fr/portail/viewmultimediadocum ent?multimediadocument-id=67839

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## issue

## « i » in the heart of ambiance

(Ambiance is above all a singular experience)

Surrounding the body, ambiance necessarily places the subject at the centre of things and, according to Thibaud (2004), ambiance is experienced, engaging with affect and emotion. Furthermore, scientific analysis presupposes the need for researchers to distance themselves from their work. With a programmatic objective the present text raises the question of the implication of researchers' experience in their observations and the formulation of results.



also "experiencing" the space, following his or her intuitions, and forming hypotheses in the course of the action.

In the field of Cultural Studies a researcher's engagement with the field is a necessary condition for the objectification of observations and, as often as not, the researcher's own career is retraced to throw light on the choice of methodology and the results<sup>1</sup>. Autoethnography pushes this process to its limits, with researchers using their autobiogra-

> phical narrative as the key to interpreting cultural facts seen from the perspective of personal experience. This approach produces original results, particularly with regard to emotions, so it is understandable that it should be gaining ground in "personal" fields such as sickness or sexuality. But what about ambiance? What would this line of research gain from a more hands-on approach, in which researchers are no longer just privileged spectators but also the observers of their own experience, bridging the gap to perceptions the subject cannot put into words, their emotions and imagination?

The study of ambiance(s) involves many disciplines including architecture, social science and engineering. In terms of inquiry one of the consequences is the large variety of methods for compiling data in the field, with for example approaches based on measurements, participatory or distanced observation (using audiovisual capture techniques, for instance). But however different these approaches may be, when researchers come to analyse their findings, they establish a certain distance, in an attempt to guarantee their observations and the conclusions they draw. In general the experience of the researcher in person is set aside, with attention focussing on the more "authorized" discourse of the subject. Ambiance nevertheless engages the body, in particular the researcher's, constantly coming to grips with situations he or she experiences, every bit as much as observing them, throughout the inquiry. For instance, exploring an itinerary (Petiteau, 2001) engages the person doing the walk much as the person accompanying them, the latter hearing and understanding what the former points out, but

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Hamel Jacques, Réflexions sur l'objectivation du sujet et de l'objet, in Paillé Pierre (ed.), La méthodologie qualitative, Paris: Armand Colin, 2006, p. 85-98.

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Thibaud Jean-Paul, La ville à l'épreuve des sens, Rapport d'Habilitation à Diriger des Recherches, Grenoble: Institut d'Urbanisme de Grenoble, 2003, 175 p.

#### Note

17 This approach, which Jacques Hamel refers to as "objectification of an ethical order", consists for example in giving an account of one's social and cultural background, one's preferences and choices, etc. (see bibliography).

> Damien Masson town planner Laboratoire Cresson, UMR CNRS n°1563 http://www.cresson.archi.fr/EQ/EQdam.htm

## The street vendor's complaint

"How do you relate to this space?" "It's tough, because sometimes the university chases us away. There are guards who treat us very badly. And that forces us, I'm sorry to say, to respond in kind. Yesterday I insulted one of them. I told him: 'Let me work, don't be a son of a b... After all, you're paid to take care of the students.' The students here get robbed and the guards do nothing. Students lose a lot of money and they keep on being robbed. On the other hand they should leave us in peace, because what we do is provide a service for the students."

Testimony of a street vendor on Avenue Jimenez, Bogotà (Colombia), 3 April 2009 (original in Spanish).

This extract from an interview is taken from a survey designed to qualify, in situ, the ambiance of several public spaces in Bogotà<sup>1</sup>.

It is an illustration of an experience that can upset the methodology of anyone working on ambiance, in so far as here, as in most of the interviews in the survey, an account of the person's life and the The conflict – of whatever nature, be it social or territorial – is not immediately apparent, given the density of the social interaction on Avenue Jimenez, which makes it a hub of intense urban activity during the day. So should we take such conflict as a backdrop for other events? Should we treat it as a particular variation on the ambiances under study, that may be pervasive or event-related?

More broadly this experience suggests that we should reconsider more explicitly the social component of the perceptible in research into ambiance, both in terms of theory and methodology. In this respect, as we may see, among others, from the work of Cintia Okamura (Cetesb, São Paolo) on conflicting ambiances<sup>3</sup> or of Pedro Garcia Sanchez (Paris University X) on increasingly vulnerable social ties<sup>4</sup>, the international ambiances network is a prime forum for exchange.

particularly difficult working conditions they endure takes precedence over the description of the perceptible environment.

Eager to justify her presence at the university by the service she provides to the students, the vendor, whose barely tolerated trade is under constant pressure, draws attention to the fact that she is poor and a victim. As the interview proceeds her account resembles what Erving Goffman referred to in Asylum as a "sad tale", the sort of narrative in which someone justifies their (ill) conduct with references to the past and unhappy circumstances. But from the point of view of ambian-

ce, what meaning can we give to such a narrative?

As Isaac Joseph<sup>2</sup> pointed out, sad tales are a way of giving an account of a situation while bringing the context into play. The street vendor is also telling us about the framework for this interview. We've been there half an hour and she has noticed the distrust the guards have displayed towards us. They are easy to recognize, with their uniform and their dogs, and several of them are constantly watching the area round the nearby university. This situation, and more generally the testimony gathered in the course of this survey, raise the question of how we should take into account the conflictual dimension of and in the public space.



#### Notes

1/ N. Tixier (dir.), C. Cifuentes, C. Rouchy, S. Fiori, J. McOisans, I.Assefa, Bogotá. A case study, Cresson, Rafael Viñoly architects, training and research programs 2009, en cours. www. rvatr.com

2/ Joseph I., « Les compétences de rassemblement », Enquête, La ville des sciences sociales, 1996, [En ligne], mis en ligne le 6 novembre 2008. URL: http://enquete.revues.org/document773.html. Consulté le 07 juillet 2009.

3/ See «le théâtre de la vie au cœur de São Paolo : des ambiances nuit et jour», in Thibaud J.-P. (dir), Variations d'ambiance», rapport n°67, Cresson, ACI TTT, octobre 2007, p. 117-141.

4/ See for example : «L'engagement à l'épreuve de la vulnérabilité chez 'l'animal borné des villes' », in Céfaï D., Saturno C. (dirs.), Itinéraires d'un pragmatiste - Autour d'Isaac Joseph, Paris, Economica-RATP, 2007, p. 261-275.

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## network life

# **Cities' sound** : 130 testimonies of travel writers from the 15th century to the present day

The starting poing for this database was the realization that references to the urban sounds of the past in the literature all referred to only three or four sources.

This frustration prompted the decision to build up a major body of quotations. Thanks to the encouragement of Murray Schafer, who saw in this a treasury of information, I decided to collect about 100 quotes. Murray also told me about a database of sound descriptions that Barry Truax had compiled in Canada.

This base only used sources in novels. As I wanted to stay closer to a phenomenological approach I mainly selected extracts from accounts by travellers.

Now that the boat has been launched on the net, it has become a form of commonwealth. Everyone can access the database, which is just waiting to be enriched with further additions.

Marc Crunelle

#### website address :

#### http://www.ambiances.net/wikindx/

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#### Using the database

The simplest way of exploring the database is to leaf through it, choosing a location (country or town) or period from the tabs on display. For more detailed research, even the quick search enables you to combine several criteria. However, as the base is still relatively small, it is preferable to use only one criterion at a time, at least initially

## Extracts

Last November I attended a conference at Rome university, enabling me to go to mass. This event confirmed my impression that there is more to architecture than just form, light, sound and materials. It is the ideal integration of everything, the human element drawing it all together. A great building only comes alive when we walk into it. Form is not imagination, form awakens imagination. The Pantheon is a powerful illustration.

#### Rome, the Panthéon, 1998

Tadao Ando & Michael (Interview de) Auping. 2007. In Du béton et d'autres secrets de l'architecture. Paris : Edition de L'Arche 36.

From time to time a delightful bell rang out in the great tower [belfrey]; this bell seemed to be singing to this town of Flemish apes some sort of Chinese song. Then it fell silent and the hour rang out in its deep tones.

So, once the last vibrations of the clock had died away, in the barely restored silence, a strangely gentle, melancholic sound drifted down from the top of the great tower, the aerial, enfeebled sound of a horn, sighing twice. Then the night's rest resumed for an hour. The horn was in fact the voice of the nightwatchman.

Mons (Belgique), la Place de l'Hôtel de ville, 18 august 1837

Victor Hugo. 1968. Extract from a letter to Adèle, 18 August 1837. In La Belgique selon Victor Hugo. Liège – Bruxelles: Desoer Edition 48–50.

Emerging from narrow streets the cars dashed across brightly lit squares. The dark mass of the pedestrians divided into hazy lines. At the points where the most powerful surges of speed intersected with their hesitant haste, the lines thickened, then flowed on more swiftly, resuming their normal pulsation after a little hesitation. The overlapping of countless sounds created a great, spiky row, its cutting edges alternately sharp and blunt, a muddle of sound from which a salient point emerged here and there, a burst of noise subsiding again into the overall murmur. On hearing this noise. without it being possible to pinpoint what made it stand out, a traveller would have recognized, without looking, that they were in Vienna, the capital and seat of the Empire.

Vienne (Autriche), vers 1900 Vienna (Austria), circa 1900, Robert Musil. 1979. In The Man without Qualities

## network life

## <u>briefitems.</u>

#### José-Luis Carles (ecologist et composer) & Ricardo Atienza-Badel (architect)

The third Encuentro IberoAmericano sobre **Paisajes Sonoros** (soundscape forum) will be held in Madrid, from 24 to 26 June, organized by José Luis Carles and Cristina Palmese, with the backing of the Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM) and the Spanish Ministry of Culture (Instituto Cervantes, Residencia de Estudiantes).

The gathering is a forum for stimulating exchange and debate between musicians, architects, artists and soundscape designers, enhanced by active input from students in the various disciplines. This edition will centre on the relation between space and sound, in the various design and creative trades.

The encounters, which consist of conferences, round table debates and workshops, are an opportunity to compare practices, query "singular" approaches and explore common issues, all in the cordial, open atmosphere particular to early summer in Spain!

The debate started in Madrid will continue in a forum that will open in June in the form of a blog, in Spanish:

#### http://foropaisajessonoros.blogspot.com/

#### Marc Crunelle (architect)

The latest issue of **Soundscape - The Journal of Acoustic Ecology** (volume 8 number 1 / Fall / Winter 2008, pp. 26-31) has a long extract from an interview with Murray Schafer, by Laura De Caro (a communication and multimedia graduate). Schafer explains the development of soundscape studies and responds to various critics, with regard to the concept itself and methodology.

#### Cristina Palmese (architect) et José Luis Carlès (ecologist et composer)

This webpage provides an overview of a series of projects exploring new openings in landscape aesthetics. The projects draw on several disciplines and senses, while giving an essential role to the inhabitants' perception and emotional reactions. The multiple dimensions that make up our idea of the **sensory landscape** are embodied with sufficient flexibility to address projects in various fields. Starting from architecture, musical composition, audiovisual art or ethno-musicological analysis, we can pose new questions while at the same time proposing new ways of representing ambiance.

## Ambiance theses online

The theses are the documents most often consulted in our libraries. As a result we very much encourage recently qualified PhDs, and even the more senior fellows, to publish their thesis online in order to reach the widest possible audience. In France theses can be filed on the HAL open archive. Ten theses related to our field are currently available on this system: http://hal.archivesouvertes.fr/AAU.

If you too have one or more theses available in digital form and accessible online, please indicate the URL by sending an email to ressource@ambiances.net. We shall inform the community.

#### Thesis vivas

• Jallouli, Jihen (2009). La réalité virtuelle comme outil d'étude sensible du paysage : le cas des éoliennes. [virtual reality for sensory study of the landscape: the case of wind farms]. PhD thesis. Université de Nantes and Ecole polytechnique de l'Université de Nantes. 280p.

• Bouyer, Julien (2009). Modélisation et simualtion des micro-climats urbains : Etude de l'impact de l'aménagement urbain sur les consommations énergétiques des bâtiments. [Modelling and simulating urban micro-climates: study of the impact of urban design on buildings' energy consumption]. PhD thesis. Université de Nantes and Ecole polytechnique de l'Université de Nantes.

• Ben Hadj Salem, Mohsen (2009). Les effets sensibles comme outils d'analyse et d'aide à la conception dans les gares du XIXe siècle. [Sensory effects as tools for analysis and design aids in 19th century stations]. PhD thesis. Université Pierre Mendès-France Grenoble II. 346 pages, online: http://doc.cresson.grenoble.archi.fr Online : http://doc.cresson.grenoble.archi.fr

• Masson, Damien (2009). La perception embarquée. Analyse sensible des voyages urbains. [Onboard perception. Sensory analysis of urban journeys]. PhD thesis. Université Pierre Mendès-France. 348 p. (vol. 1), 186 p. (vol. 2) Abstract : http://doc.cresson.grenoble.archi.fr

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