

Special issue: **Experimenting on ambiance with architecture**

The experimental notion and the conduct of specific experiments can be applied to a large number of research processes, but we nevertheless look at their relevance to architecture and the configuration of ambiances. In this issue we shall be investigating experimenting on ambiances, or rather through ambiances, in the sense that the aim is not just to describe existing or given situations as such (with the possibility that they may include a certain type of experience), but also to set up the modalities of 'making ambiance', in order to derive elements with a bearing on theory, method or technique. So our purpose is to confront basic concepts and tools upstream from the project properly speaking, by only approaching the latter in part, or even outside its strict normative framework. How can research on architectural and urban ambiances come to grips with experimentation? How can ambiance phenomena be explored in greater depth or discovered through spatial experimentation? Or how can such experimentation be built or conceptualized on the basis of assumptions regarding ambiance? Often presented as the basis for technical, aesthetic or indeed social innovation, what sort of experimentation can contribute to furthering our understanding, producing artefacts or setting in motion processes of architectural or urban transformation likely to encourage, drive or modify lived-in ambiances?

**The notion of experimentation:  
from the natural sciences to  
architecture**

It is commonly accepted that modern science emerged due to experimental method, particularly in natural science. Repeatable and subject to checking, intentional, pro-active scientific experimentation follows a predefined protocol to gather data on a particular field of study, and to compare a theoretical model with the facts. Observation involves noting a phenomenon. Experimentation involves consciously changing the conditions of a phenomenon to highlight certain features predicted by theory. Extending an experimental procedure originally designed for disciplines focusing on the natural world is obviously open to question, but it does have the merit of adding a deliberately active, transformative dimension to the process of research in a given field. In architecture the notion of experimentation may thus make sense provided we define the conditions of and stakes for the experiment and the type of results obtained. If we are not worried about strict conformance to the methods of modern science (often carried out under laboratory conditions, giving rise to biases, some of which have been criticised by Bruno Latour) what matters is to show how, through spatial or material experimentation, we may explore in greater depth or discover ambiance phenomena, or how architectural experiments may be developed on the basis of assumptions regarding ambiance.

**Experimenting to feel**

Starting precisely from what ambiance specifically encompasses, experience is a key component of ambiance if our aim is to centre our attention on experiencing and subject the object to a contextualized, situated, sensory, corporeal test.

With the notion of experimentation we have the additional idea of deliberately testing a situation or object by changing or limiting the conditions of a phenomenon to create particular conditions which enable us to test the situation or subsequently modify it.

Experimentation in this case is understood as an experiment used to test a constituted material object and an assessment protocol (survey, measurement, observation) enabling certain expectations to be re-formulated, but also the unexpected to be revealed.

Due to its speculative nature an experiment is more indeterminate than other types of teleological action (projects, programmes, etc.) which seek to achieve a particular goal by reducing uncertain parameters. The exploratory dimension of an experimental-research process is essential in so far as this element of uncertainty – unforeseen effects, trial and error, and correction – can be turned to advantage in the research process.

In the field of architecture and spatial development, as in art, the idea of experimentation does not connect to the cause-and-effect sequence at the basis of modern scientific research, in which gathering data on a particular area of study and comparing the theoretical model to the facts bearing on a link between cause and effect is the guiding principle in experiments guided by a working assumption.

In the field of ambiances, which questions both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, experimentation probes the test itself, or the testing of the initial sensory intentions regarding ambiance, as much as the process by which they are effectively deployed.

So we are calling for papers based on work in which a form of experimentation – be it architectural and/or urban – was undertaken to cast light on and disseminate results relating to a question of ambiance, regardless of whether it is theoretical, instrumental, social, pedagogical or creative. We expect authors to pay particular attention to the conditions of the experiment itself: context, spatial scale of work, duration of inquiry, type of assessment, instrumentation and cross-referenced methodologies, and results – all questions that need to be addressed regarding any experimentation bearing on architectural and urban ambiances. Experimental protocols should be clearly described, there being no real experimentation without a protocol that is clearly identified and implemented. The question of experimental protocols leads naturally to that of method and any methodological innovation applied to the research process.

Papers may be positioned at various levels, as for instance:

#### Experimenting with ambient systems and particular prototypes

We are all familiar with experimentation solely designed to test building characteristics, but less used to appraisal based on ambiance-related qualities or criteria, whether as part of the design or construction of prototypes subjected to experimentation, or research-by-design processes. Testing a system against a pre-defined protocol characterizes the notion of experimentation and may bear on various features: the design process, acceptance and appraisal. Attention should be paid to the various phases of experimentation: preparation, which presupposes anticipating and clearly delimiting the field of exploration (at what scale, for instance, and in what context will the experiment be performed?); experimentation questioning its own characteristics and process; appraisal querying the modalities and validity of the experience, as well as its repeatability (how long and in what manner?)

#### Experimental pedagogy -and transmission of ambiance values

With regard to pedagogy and transmission: how does your experimentation fit into existing ways of teaching architectural ambiance? Some approaches to teaching architecture see scope in experimental practice for moving from the represented object to built materiality, that can subsequently be tested against bodies in movement and factors of ambiance (light, heat, sound, etc.). The pedagogical value of the experiment can be interrogated in terms of how well it transmits ambiance values to players: how is one to experiment on an object in order to assess its potential for ambiance?

#### Experimental innovative architecture

There is no question of examining an innovative trend that might qualify as ‘experimental architecture’ – in much the same way as art or music – but papers could very well be based on certain architectural or planning practices rooted to some extent in experiment or innovation. Such practices might contribute to progress, and/or to spatial or building innovation, which deserve appraisal of their impact on the definition of specific ambiances in the light of feelings and perceptions, much as the actions and reconfiguration they might prompt or inflect once in use.

#### Generative experimentation

We are referring here to the modalities of experimentation, which, as part of research-actions, aim to generate a development process that installs an ambiance by defining the experimental modalities of exchange between players. Some of these actions aim to create new uses in existing space by adding built systems and modalities of action, presence or temporary occupation. Their aim is to anticipate certain uses and assess their attractiveness, to install transient or ephemeral forms that might become permanent or would lend themselves to a differentiated development dynamic.

#### Special issue editor

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