Mapping the Atmospheric Experience.

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Abstract. Atmosphere, the pervasive yet elusive soft space that resonates with our senses, is known to effect the way we feel about a space, the self and others. Yet, despite its influence on everyday lives, Boch (2014) reminds us that this phenomenon isn't always consciously recognised and we may not be aware of the positive or negative impact the urban environment has on us. So it becomes pertinent to investigate atmosphere in order to better understand the correspondence between spaces and people. The More London Estates in London, UK, is an example of uncompromising urban design where the spectacle of architecture and the culture of an ideology appear to shape human experiences. It offers a distinctive atmospheric encounter and this project puts forward a set of evaluative fieldwork methods to investigate how design decisions within the site contribute to the formation of atmosphere and underline how atmosphere can effect behaviour. The interest of the fieldwork, situated at the boundaries between spatial and ethnographic practices, lies in its ability to illustrate the elusive, to delineate atmospheric conditions and corresponding behavioural culture.

Keywords: atmosphere, sentient, environment, experience, affordance

Thematic

This project is driven by a desire to articulate the perceptions of atmospheres, to better understand how the characteristics embodied in a man made environment provide, by design, a stage for multi-sensory experiences that define people's actions and interactions. It explores methods of documentation that uncover insights into the perceived environment and corresponding behavioural culture. Architect Joy Monice Malnar and artist Frank Vodvarka explain (2004: 51) that we perceive by sensing environmental messages around us. This qualitative information is then filtered through our mind and transformed into mental images. Therefore, we make sense of the world through our senses and, according to Professor of Philosophy Gernot Böhme, atmosphere is thus 'experienced as an emotional effect' (2014: 46). Architect Peter Zumthor also indicates that the perceptual process is visceral and biological when he tells us that '[w]e perceive atmosphere through our emotional sensibility - a form of perception that works incredibly quickly, and which humans evidently need to survive' (2006: 13). Therefore, the link between atmosphere and the way we feel is potent. According to Architect Juhani Pallasmaa atmosphere has 'a forceful impact on our emotions and moods' (2014: 20) and accordingly, corresponding actions. Yet, even though atmosphere permeates the environment, it remains intangible. Architect Rochus Urban Hinkel (2008) speaks of spatial software and Social Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011: 132, citing Berleant) of a fluid medium. Thus the visceral, emotional and elusive characteristics of atmosphere denote that we don't always consciously recognise its influence even though it has a profound effect on our lived experiences. It is tempting to say that when enriched, atmosphere fosters well-being, positive interactions and inclusion and that when impoverished, it fosters ill-being, social disconnection and exclusion. However, experiencing atmosphere is far more complex and nuanced that a simple enriched-impoverished duality. According to Philosopher Tonino Griffero, as atmospheric qualities embodied in the environment resonate with our senses, a form of 'spatialised feeling' (2010: 6) connects us emotionally to our surroundings. We expose ourselves to the atmosphere and experience the impressions it makes on us. Pallasmaa explains that, when '[…] we enter a space, the space enters us, and the experience is essentially

an exchange and fusion of the object and the subject' (2014: 20). Böhme also speaks of a 'co-presence of the subject and object' (2014:45). Consequently, atmosphere doesn't just influence the way we feel about a space but also the way we feel about ourselves, and others around us. So developing knowledge of this correlation helps provide new insights into the culture of a place. Experiencing atmosphere is meaningful, potentially transformative and certainly social. Therefore, alongside a spatial analysis, this study uses methods associated with ethnography to facilitate the documentation of atmospheric experiences and explore the correspondence between environment and behaviour.

Context

The project is set within the public pedestrian areas of the More London Estates located in London Bridge on the south bank of the river Thames. Completed in 2003 this self-contained business development incorporates offices and a few commercial units (figure 1). It's carefully planned architecture, seemingly claiming its place as an extension of the City of London situated directly opposite across the Thames, makes a powerful statement about London as a thriving international financial centre. Developed in only 5 years, a total conception of spatial unity, it is shielded from empirical change by an environment controlled through design and human monitoring. The site, regularly patrolled by a maintenance team, is immaculate and repairs are carried out immediately. Man made materials dominate. 'In order to defeat the cyclical times of days, seasons and years, shiny, hard, immutable surfaces are employed to shrug off the effects of weather, dirt and accident' (Till, 1999: 3). The logic of perfection creates an environment where an appreciation of time and past human occupancy experienced through the weathering and patina of materials is impossible. Thus the estate offers the perfect image aligned to the culture of its high profile tenants. However, 'the atmosphere of a city is not the same as its image' (Böhme, 2014: 48), and the site documentation sets out to establish the ecological coherence of the architecture. It raises the following questions. How is atmosphere experienced in this ocular centric paradigm? What is the correlation between atmosphere and behaviour? Is the More London Estate experienced as a space or a place?

Figure 1. Main pedestrian axis cutting through the site

Two key concepts underpin the study. The first structures the taxonomy of the investigation and borrows from principles Zumthor (2006) tells us contribute to the making of atmospheres. They encapsulate: the

perceived presence (or body) of the architecture, materials and their relationships, the sound of the architecture, temperature, objects, movement, thresholds, scale and distances, light and shadows. The second relates to Gibson's (1986) description of the environment where medium, substances and surfaces afford perceptions and animate movement. For instance, air, the medium in which we move allows the transmission of light and vibrations so we can see and hear, as well as chemical diffusions so we can smell. Substances refer to the solid elements such as building materials and the body, while surfaces are the intermediary elements between substances and medium, including the human skin. Accordingly, the mindset created by the notion of the meaningful environment is essential to our understanding of spatio-sensory experiences.

Methods

Anthropologist Albert Piette (2009) emphasises a focus on the documentation of lived experiences rather than on epistemological debates. Thus, the research process is inductive, drawing on an interpretative analysis of the documentation to elucidate the interrelationship between the atmosphere of the site and its occupants. The investigation is site specific and its outcome represents an illustration of a social and cultural context not a universal conclusion. Nevertheless, the methods and techniques used are transferrable to other sites of enquiry. Fieldwork follows an auto-ethnographic style methodology influenced by the work of Sarah Pink (2015) on sensory ethnography. The documentation, conducted from the perspective of the active participation of the researcher immersed in the site, places the reflexive sensing body at the centre of the experience and analysis (Pink, 2015: 12). This mode of enquiry was chosen because '[a]tmosphere emphasises a sustained being in a situation, rather than a singular moment of perception; atmosphere is always a continuum' (Pallasmaa, 2014: 20). Thus, the site documentation took place over a period of two months and visits were conducted at different times of the day and week to verify the appropriateness and relevance of the data. Tools and techniques used included: photography, audio and video recordings, mapping drawings, observation and reflective (self-observation) notes. An evaluative visualisation of the data into mapping drawings and diagrams enhanced its legibility and supported the analysis of the site. The following paragraphs, illustrated by visuals of the documentation, summarise observations and underline conclusions drawn from the study.

Observations

An initial survey shows that the spatial composition of the estate is structured around an assertive diagonal pedestrian axis cutting through the site. It has a public square at each end, one adjacent to Tooley Street and the other with spectacular views of the river Thames. The main axis affords striking sight lines and the 21st Century architecture of the Shard at one end contrasts sharply with the Victorian architecture of Tower Bridge on the opposite side. There are also two transversal thoroughfares linking the main axis to Tooley Street and the Thames respectively. The immediacy of the experience of being in the environment brings about a feeling of formality and stiffness (figure 2). The atmosphere lacks congeniality and although the location feels safe, a perceptible feeling of distance between people and the site permeates the environment.

Figure 2. The formal environment.

Despite their generous proportions and the provision of furniture, planting and water features, the public squares are under populated in contrast to the density of occupancy in surrounding areas. Few people occupy the site for extended lengths of time; it is mostly used as a thoroughfare. When visualised into a motion sequencer diagram (figure 3), data shows, predictably perhaps, that the density of occupancy is higher during the week than at weekends and fluctuations in density and speed of movement map to office hours. The site is busiest in the morning when people arrive at work, peaks again at lunchtime and again early evening when people go back home. These are also the times when people walk the fastest, with little focused attention given to their surroundings, including others around them.

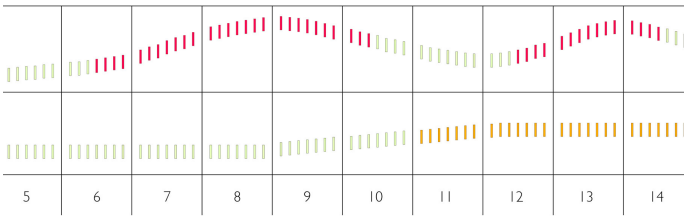

Figure 3. Inspired by the graphic interface of a music equalizer, the Motion Sequencer diagram is designed to show the levels of occupancy and velocity through the site's main axis over a period of 24 hours (in this section, between 5am and 2pm). The higher the curve, the higher the levels of occupancy. Red shows high levels of velocity, orange medium and green low. The top curve represents weekdays and the bottom one weekends.

Most activities recorded through observations - people walking fast, smoking, chatting on their phone, talking to friends – are common to many other urban locations. Context however adds a layer of interest. It isn't so much what people do but how they do it. In this instance, most activities are performed while walking when people appear absorbed into, and even protective of, the micro-scale of their immediate surroundings. This behaviour denotes a degree of familiarity with the site that marks people as either seasoned Londoners or office workers from the estate but could it also be linked to the scale and materiality of the environment? By contrast, visitors and tourists distinguish themselves by walking at a more leisurely pace and through a higher level of attention directed towards the macro scale of the architecture. By the third visit, perceptual distinctiveness between different parts of the site revealed themselves and accordingly, it was divided it into five areas, based on three criteria: the degree of enclosure, perceptual thresholds (such as transitions from light to dark) and the primary activity afforded

by the environment (whether it is considered a square or a street). Dividing the site into sections brought clarity to the process of documentation and facilitated the evaluation of similarities and differences between its constituent parts. The documentation was structured as a sensory journey and recorded personal spatio-sensory experiences, annotating immediate impressions as they occurred while moving through the site. The sensory journey data was organised using Gibson's (1966) classification of perceptual systems (visual, haptic, taste-smell, auditory, basic orienting) and Marina Panos's sensory chart (in Malnar and Vodvarka, 204: 281). It was essential for the researcher to move through the site while carrying out the documentation. Gibson (1983: 66) explains, 'a point of observation is never stationary, except in a limiting case. Observers move about in the environment, and observation is typically from a moving position.' Atmosphere is temporal and dynamic, and as we move through the environment, our perceptions adjust to new conditions. Thus the researcher's grasp of atmosphere occurs in motion, through a gradual perception of stimuli.

Visual representations help synthesise the evaluation of the data collected during the sensory journey. A map (figure 4) provides a visual reference of atmospheric qualities across the site and a sensory flow diagram (figure 5), inspired by Malnar and Vodvarka's Sensory Slider (2004: 248), highlights levels of intensity across perceptual systems.

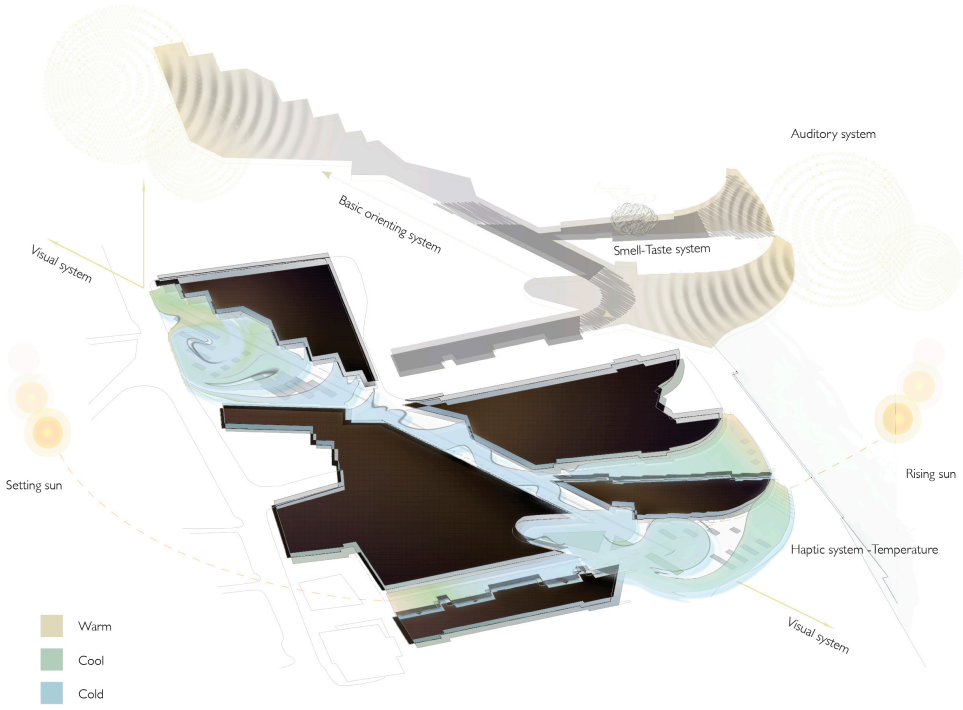

Figure 4. An illustration of atmospheric qualities recorded within the site during the Sensory Journey.
The drawing shows an overlay of two isometric plan view of the pedestrian areas.
The information depicted references Gibson's (1966) perceptual systems:
visual, auditory, smell/taste, haptic/temperature and basic orienting.

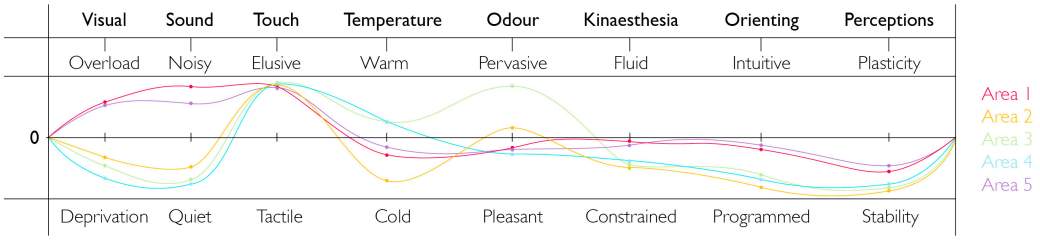

Figure 5. The Sensory Flow diagram shows levels of intensity of perceived sensory stimuli across the five areas identified within the site. The curves reveal similarities and differences between each area more easily than text would allow.

Atmosphere

Adjacent to a busy main road, the public square near Tooley Street is noisy. However, once inside the site, the combined height and mass of the buildings creates a protected environment. The sounds of footsteps and conversations reverberating across hard surfaces envelop the body and reduce the auditive scale. As the site widens on its Thames side, the auditive scale increases when it becomes connected to the visual depth afforded by the view over the Thames. Although the mass of the buildings protects people from unwanted noise, it also blocks sunlight and at its core, the site remains devoid of sunlight for most of the day, especially in the winter months. Combined with the strong winds channelled from the Thames through the main axis and the cool tones of the glass and metal surfaces, the environment feels cold, even on a sunny day. Temperature also impacts on other haptic perceptions and this feeling is exacerbated when grey metal meets grey sky, which in London is often. Limited use of textures, large expanses of glass and metal, surfaces that are hard and cold to the touch, reflect people away rather than invite them in. The transversal spaces are mostly deserted despite offering protection from the wind. One has a sunny disposition but seating is uncomfortable and the atmosphere is dominated by the repetitive rhythm of an authoritative metal pattern. The other is dark and mostly featureless, yet offers enticing vistas across the Thames. However, low level of details across large vertical areas give the location a desolate feel. Seating is also uncomfortable and overlooked by diners in a restaurant nearby, while, at the time of the study, an unpleasant smell of cooking oil permeated the environment around meal times. The resulting atmosphere channels people through the site in a continuous flow and rhythm of linear motion.

Nevertheless, the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour cannot be entirely restrained and although appropriation is rare, it sometimes occurs in spite of the efforts of the maintenance team to keep an orderly environment. It transpires that a water feature provides the ideal site for acrobatic roller blading once candle wax has been surreptitiously applied to its long edge. Other forms of appropriation include a family using part of the site as an impromptu living room (figure 6) and children playing with one of the design features, a thin hollow of water cutting through the length the main axis. Such ephemeral moments temporarily shift atmospheric conditions. In the first instance, a small crowd of onlookers gathered to watch the spectacle and the mood became more relaxed and convivial. In the second and third examples, the intimacy of the situations simply softened the atmosphere. The site also integrates interesting reflections into its design. Although this appears largely unnoticed by most people who tend to look straight ahead, towards the ground or at their phone, looking up exposes a view of clouds moving across the glass panels of the buildings. The organic textures and reflected motion of the clouds across the smooth glass surfaces alleviate the feeling of rigidity embodied by the perfect man-made material even though these glimpsed natural qualities have to compete with the sharp soaring edges of the buildings. At ground level, the intensity of visual stimuli is enriched in parts by reflections across the

numerous glass panels of the facades and by mirrored views of some of London's landmarks, notably the Tower of London, Tower bridge and City Hall. Together, these embellishments could provide grounds for poetics and human narratives as they permeate the atmosphere.

Figure 6. Spatial appropriation. A family brings a sense of domesticity to the site.

Conclusion

The meanings embodied by the architecture of the More London Estates express a highly rational intent. The site functions extremely well and is accessible, creating a convenient link between Tooley Street and the River Thames. Its powerful architecture and spatial composition display high levels of legibility. The high calibre of the architecture is undeniable. Even so, the investigation reveals an atmosphere programmed towards the production of an image, a man made representation of an ideology though not an ideology made for man's sensuous spirit. The uncompromisingly Cartesian architecture, with sharp edges and hard reflective surfaces, and a forceful identity resulting from the repetition of form, materials and patterns, create a geometry that dominates the body. The diagonal forces that constrain the ground intensify the perception of perspective, which, further emphasised by the monumental scale of the buildings, suggests masculine strength. The spatial composition, including furniture and landscaping, is ordered, organised into small areas and the rigidity of the layout offers little opportunities for meandering or serendipity. The site is designed to control movement and condition behaviour to predetermined activities, resulting in low levels of interactions and little scope for alternatives. It is a '[p]erspectival space [that] leaves us as outside observers' (Pallsamaa, 2014: 38), a low affordance environment. In his theory of affordances Gibson explains that '[t]he perceiving of an affordance […] is a process of perceiving a value-rich ecological object' (1986: 140). So affordances relate to the values and meanings embodied by the site and how they inform people's actions. Consequently, in spite of a few poetic encounters, the dominant forces, embodied by a design conceived independently from the body and where intimacy is ruled out, foster an atmosphere whose divisive effect reduces opportunities for thriving social interactions. The atmosphere is, by design, assertive and powerful, and the behaviour thus becomes regulated by efficiency and transience. The culture engendered by the atmosphere minimises opportunities for human interaction. It is then possible to determine whether the location is perceived as a space or a place. According to Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan '[s]pace is transformed into place when it acquires definition and meaning', through experience. Sociologist E. V. Walter takes the notion of experience even

further by making places 'the locations of experience and as such evoke and organise memories, images, sentiments and meaning' (In Malnar and Vodvarka, 2004: 233). Thus, in order to become a place, the estate needs to embody qualities that are dependent on its occupants' actions and emotions. However, the outcome of this study shows that, aside from a few poetics and instances of appropriation by individuals, the atmosphere of the estate doesn't foster such intimate relations and as such, this low affordance environment cannot truly be experienced as a place.

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