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Creating ambiances, co-constructing place: a poetic transect across the city

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Abstract

Debates in cultural geography around ideas of atmospheres have been considerably enriched in recent years by engagement with the literature on ambiances particularly associated with the Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain (CRESSON). Those working on both atmospheres and ambiances are concerned, among other things, with how places feel. In the ambiances literature, however, there is much greater emphasis on undertaking active interventions with the intention of re-engineering the feeling of urban spaces.

This paper reflects on a collaborative intervention undertaken by a cultural geographer and a professional poet. Methodologically we report on a novel extension to the idea of the urban transect (Melemis & Tixier, 2010). Rather than simply recording the feeling of urban places for later analysis, we develop the use of an arts-based intervention to actively manipulate urban ambiances in the field. We thus respond to Augoyard's (2007) notion that artists alter ambiances through their creative practice, but we do so in a more democratic manner, asking non-artists to engage with poetry as a means of remaking the immediate feeling of places.

The analysis of this exercise presented here is comprised of both conventional academic and poetic writing. We conclude that the ambiances literature provides a powerful rationale for engaging in more activist collaborations between artists and scholars seeking to improve the feeling of places in partnership with residents.

Keywords

ambiance, atmospheres, poetry, arts-based methods, Cardiff

Introduction

The notion of affect has received considerable critical attention from geographers and others during the last two decades (Massumi, 2002, McCormack, 2003, Thrift, 2008, Pile, 2010 and many others). In more recent years these debates have been used as the starting point for a consideration of atmospheres, which Anderson (2009, 80) describes as 'a kind of indeterminate affective 'excess' through which intensive space-times can be created.' The debate around atmosphere has been an unusual combination of high theory and the intuitively obvious. At the most simplistic level, certain times and spaces can generate particular kinds of shared atmospheres that are co constructed between the built environment, the event, multisensory stimulation and the bodies of participants – the roar that erupts in a football stadium when a goal is scored during a critical match, for example (Edensor, 2015).

Although predating these more recent debates on atmospheres, ideas around ambiances have also been developing rapidly in the last decade, emerging primarily from a French literature associated with the Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain (CRESSON), based in the School of Architecture in Grenoble. The International Ambiances Network and its bilingual journal *ambiances* (established in 2013) signal the intention to bring these debates to a wider audience. Paul Simpson and Peter Adey are perhaps the most prominent UK geographers developing ties to the team at CRESSON, hosting the *Ambiances & Atmospheres in Translation* workshop in London and organising the 'Ambiance and Atmospheres: Encountering New Material Frontiers' sessions at the RGS-IBG conference in 2013.

There are clear overlaps between the ideas around ambiances and atmospheres but in part perhaps because of its origins within architecture, the ambiances literature has a greater emphasis on *practice*, examining ambiances with the assumption that they can and should be manipulated in order to improve the feeling of different places. In this paper we advance a novel use of the urban transect, a key tool deployed by ambiance researchers. We combine the transect with the use of an arts-based intervention, exploring place attachment in Cardiff through engagement with poetry. One output from this project is a short film.¹ More broadly we argue that engagement with ideas around ambiances validates a more interventionist approach to scholarly research. Rather than simply attempting to document the ambiances in and around Cardiff, we asked participants to temporarily re-engineer those ambiances through a creative intervention. As such we argue that far from being merely abstract debates, engagement with ideas of atmospheres and ambiances can underpin activist scholarship seeking to collaboratively alter the feeling and meaning of place in partnership with local communities.

Atmospheres and ambiances

Both atmosphere and ambiance have commonsense meanings onto which academics have heaped layers of nuanced interpretation (see, for example, McCormack, 2008). Anderson (2009) notes that the word atmosphere can be commonly used to mean a kind of feeling. In this interpretation, a place, landscape, social gathering, or era might have a particular atmosphere associated with it, from the general 'spirit of the age' to the more personal scale such as walking into a room full of friends and immediately sensing that something is amiss.

This interpretation of atmosphere-as-feeling, building on the literatures around affect, has perhaps provoked the most interesting debates in this area. The nature of literatures around affect, however, mean that it can become quite easy to be bogged down in dense, theoretical arguments. Thus while we might conventionally talk about 'feeling an atmosphere', Anderson's description of

¹ Available to view at youtu.be/NvzMb1xuNbE

atmospheres as representing an 'indeterminate affective 'excess'' needs some unpacking. Buser (2014) has argued that atmospheres disturb neat divisions between acting subjects and passive objects – both stadium and spectators are implicated in the creation of an 'electric atmosphere' at a football match. The atmosphere is shared between the spectators, but they also experience it in different ways relating to their individual characteristics. Buser characterises atmospheres as relational and constantly in a state of becoming.

By raising questions about how a space and time *feels*, atmospheres offer an opportunity to sidestep some of the hotly contested debates around the relative merits of affect and emotions (Pile, 2010) by blurring the boundaries between them (Edensor, 2012). Writing about the Blackpool Illuminations, Edensor argues that one should be cautious about claiming that this visual spectacle is able to determine how people feel about the place through generating particular affects – instead one should think about how the atmosphere of this northern seaside town is produced through the combination of the affect engineered through lighting effects, people's own emotions/predispositions/histories/memories, the weather and a myriad other factors.

We do not wish here to draw an artificial distinction between the concepts of atmospheres and ambiances. Nonetheless, Adey et al. (2013) reflect on the fact that French architecture schools have traditionally taught the idea that ambiances created by lighting, acoustics, temperature and so on can be manipulated to improve the quality of spaces. We can therefore crudely characterise ambiance research as having a strong practice-based element compared to more theoretically-driven research around atmospheres. This is not to say, of course, that ambiance research lacks theoretical nuance. Augoyard's (2007 [1979]) classic investigation of l'Arlequin district outside Grenoble is often wilfully dense, but offers fascinating perspectives on precisely how urban space can be investigated and conceptualised. The minute dissection of the multilevel shopping mall with its walkways and cut throughs and the 'wild paths' creatively carving through the surrounding exterior spaces are both highly evocative and also represent an immersion in the ways that these spaces are brought into being through a multisensory interaction between the physical environment and the people who animate it.

These minute analyses are aimed at thinking through how certain physical qualities interface with human behaviours to create more or less amenable ambiances. We see the same in Lambertucci's (2012) examination of how changing sound and smells transformed railway stations from spaces of transit to spaces of leisure and consumption through the introduction of shopping malls. Manipulating ambiance served as both driver and outcome of these changes (replacing the smell of engine smoke, for example, with the more enticing smell of foodstuffs), as well as bringing new possibilities for capitalist accumulation. The idea of manipulating ambiances is something which is perhaps more familiar within the arts. Bohme (2013) argues that the purpose of the stage set within theatre is precisely to help produce a particular atmosphere that creates a similar experience for all members of the audience. Scaling this up we can think about how cities, sporting events, even politics are *staged* – Bohme suggests that this is a reflection of the 'theatricalisation' of everyday life.

Atmospheres and ambiances can be seen as playing a major role in giving meaning to spaces in order to transform them into places. As Griffero (2014, 75) argues, 'When space has or acquires an atmospheric charge, it expresses a *genius loci*.' Conceptualising ambiances/atmospheres is also a useful way of overcoming concerns about environmental determinism. It is clear that attempting to manipulate the ambiance is not going to be the sole factor influencing people's perceptions of place nor their behaviours within those places. Indeed, the point is that ambiances are co-constructed with the personal playing a major role as much as any attempts to engineer ambiance through manipulation of the surrounding environment. Nonetheless Ambriz (2014) has raised concerns that

'hyper ambiances' within cities might misappropriate individuals' own sense of identity and belonging.

In a review paper reflecting on the creation of everyday atmospheres, one of Augoyard's (2007, 60) conclusions is that we have to rethink the process of artistic creation, arguing that 'The first task of every artist is to produce atmosphere...' This is echoed in Buser et al.'s (2013, 624) suggestion that researchers should investigate 'the potential of cultural activism as a means of creating certain kinds of 'affective atmospheres' in particular places'. Our paper represents a response to this challenge, using an arts-led intervention as a means of manipulating ambiances within broader processes of change and placemaking around Cardiff Bay, Wales.

Method

The use of the urban transect as a research tool has a varied intellectual history (Bosselmann, 2011). Geddes' classic 'valley section' explored the interdependence of the city and the wider landscape region within which it was located. Planners and urban designers have periodically revived the idea of the transect as an approach to explore and conceptualise cities. New urbanists, for example, use transects to characterise different zones within the city, particularly reflecting on density and environmental issues (Duany, 2002). Proponents of the transect argue that it goes beyond the merely descriptive and should be considered as an analytical tool. As Mantho (2014) notes, one of the key advantages of the transect is in revealing relationships between different spaces which will not necessarily be evident in plan form.

The Situationist *dérive* could be used to explore and document a neighbourhood's character, 'social morphology', feeling and ambiance (Debord, 2006 [1958]). The *dérive* is one of several inspirations – including Geddes' work – for the approach to undertaking transects developed by the team at CRESSON (Melemis and Tixier, 2010). There is, however, no single, canonical approach to the use of transects – it is an inherently flexible concept. For CRESSON, the purpose of the transect (usually undertaken on foot) is to sample the different ambiances apparent on a route cutting across many different neighbourhoods and types of space (Adey et al., 2013). In order to capture these ambiances, the team gather a variety of data, including sketches, interviews, photographs, temperature measurements and so on. The emphasis with this approach is not on mere description, but that the materials gathered will be used to inform policy and public discussions about particular issues, with a view to positively manipulating the ambiances recorded in the transect. Tixier et al. (2009) for example discuss projects looking at the urban heat island of Grenoble and solid waste management in Sao Paulo.

Taking our inspiration from CRESSON, the project described here went beyond simply *recording* urban ambiances for subsequent description, instead making a practical attempt to *manipulate* those ambiances. Where scholars at CRESSON might attempt to alter elements of urban design in the medium term, we sought to co-produce a set of short term, fleeting micro-ambiances stimulated through an arts intervention. There has been some excitement about the potential that arts-based approaches offer social scientists to gain new perspectives on established areas of research (Leavy, 2008, Walsh, 2006). Here we use creative practice to produce a novel extension to existing transect methods. The choice of poetry as the medium for our arts intervention was a straightforwardly instrumental one as this collaboration was co-designed by an academic and a poet. Needless to say this exercise would have produced quite different outcomes had we instead engaged with music or the visual arts as the underpinning of our transect.

Prendergast (2009), in reviewing how social science studies have deployed poetry, identifies two key types of work. The first is in 'found poetry' collected from participants as different forms of self-

representation while the second is in more phenomenological self-reflection by the researchers. We used both types within this project. Prendergast also highlights that both types of research undertaken using poetry tend toward affective topics, making this an appropriate artistic medium for the issues explored in this paper.

Chris has worked professionally as a poet since the 1990s, and the key to this project was his encouraging passers-by to recount favourite snatches of poetry and literature and talk about memory, history and place. These performances were filmed around Cardiff Bay during the course of one day in July 2014, walking a transect through Butetown, along the waterfront in the vicinity of the Welsh Assembly building. Informed consent was secured from participants to include their performances in a short film that was shown at a public event the following day. Chris participated within the film, riffing off his existing canon of work and different responses to the locations and people encountered. A new poem was written after the event, with Chris reflecting on the conversations with participants and his own research into the Cardiff Bay area. We include this composition in the discussion below.

Clearly any kind of arts/research activity that involves filming raises a number of practical and ethical concerns. Sarah Pink (2007, 2008) argues that walking with participants and recording the conversations via video/photography/audio can be seen as an active process of placemaking as well as a means for the researcher to understand those places. One way to sidestep some of the ethical issues involved with filming is to decentre the participant. This approach has been used by cycling researchers, asking participants to wear helmet cameras to film the view-from rather than view-of (Spinney, 2007, Brown et al., 2008). We chose instead to take a more conventional documentary style to emphasise the importance of the individual's embodied performance in the process of re-engineering ambiance. It must be noted that in order to make an entertaining and watchable public-facing output, we made editing choices that created a narrative which did not represent all of the material recorded; we have drawn on the raw footage for this analysis.

Cardiff Bay poetic transect

Cardiff Bay has undergone dramatic changes in its history, from a major port, to an area of classic post-industrial decline, to a post-devolution regeneration that has seen a major reworking of the waterfront with the Welsh Assembly building, Cardiff Millennium Centre, new bars, restaurants hotels and public spaces. Once an ethnically diverse area of cheap housing servicing the docks, immediately adjacent to these shiny new developments there is a post-war local authority housing estate struggling with problems of multiple deprivation.

The transect can be seen as representing a challenge to the kinds of hyper ambiances identified by Ambriz (2014) of globalised starchitecture and generic gentrification. The redeveloped spaces of the waterfront bring a particular theatrical quality to the environment, creating stages wherein a particular kind of urban identity is performed (Böhme, 2013). The waterfront, formerly a space of labouring and then dereliction, has become a place for visitors to promenade. Our intervention opened the possibility for thinking about how these spaces might be conceived differently. One particularly interesting encounter came with Peggy and Bill, visiting the city and strolling along the waterfront. A little unsure and hard of hearing, Peggy responded to the invitation to recite a line of poetry by saying:



"You've only got now, this minute, so get on with it."

Although this was not a line of poetry, it was spoken with an unexpected passion and rhythmic quality that was quite different the rest of the somewhat halting conversation, becoming suddenly quite poignant. Both the rhythm and the sentiment momentarily created a different ambiance from that of passive, touristic consumption, shifting the sense of place in that moment (cf. Griffero, 2014), generating the feeling that time was a precious commodity not to be wasted. The poem that Chris subsequently wrote includes the line *"Navigate the turbulence of circumstance"* reflecting the sentiment generated by this encounter that in a changeable world one should not hesitate to seize the day.

For some participants, recitations of conventional poetry became a vehicle for reflections on place and personal history. Sitting on the steps in front of the Welsh Assembly building looking out into the Bay, Matthew read Dylan Thomas' *Do not go gentle into that good night*, downloaded onto a mobile phone. The practice of becoming engaged with the poetic transect process led him to start recounting pieces of family history:



"See this spot now, that's where my granddad came in from Malaysia. Jumped boat in New York, he sailed into these docks and started my heritage in the docks."

The poetic intervention thus started to rework the relaxed ambiance created by a sunny lunchtime coffee break sitting on warm slate steps. This relaxed feeling facilitated the subsequent encounter by making Matthew more willing to chat with strangers; the poetic intervention gave an excuse to explain why that spot has an intimate, personal connection. The elegantly crafted post-modern waterfront melted away in recollections of the area's earlier incarnation as a working port. There followed a reflection on one of his family's shaggy dog stories about sailors and a monkey, which blurred the boundaries between reality and fantasy. This notion of the interplay of myth, ambiance and place became a strong theme in Chris' subsequent composition, suggesting that the Welsh landscape *"bequeath[es] each succeeding generation with the Mabinogion's hoary imagination"*.²

² The *Mabinogion* is a collection of Welsh mediaeval stories that play with folklore, myth and storytelling tradition.

One of the Matthew's friends joined him toward the end of the encounter. This resulted in an animated discussion of austerity and a somewhat uncomfortable atmosphere as Chris sought to defend not only the public money being spent on research but also his own involvement with academic-led community arts projects. Thus rather than simply being a space of globalised architecture and the leisure economy, the poetic transect produced an ambiance soaked in histories, both real and imagined, as well as an awkward, prickly complicity in the tangled politics of public spending.

The Butetown History Arts Centre was the site of the film's emotional high point. To begin with the atmosphere reflected a fairly unremarkable encounter with a gallery space. Christine, visiting with friends, talked about how inspiring the gallery was for someone who did not "know a lot about my black history" commenting that it was a place where you could see "lovely things". With gentle encouragement from Chris, however, Christine began toasting:³



"We all know the Cardiff Bay, it's our place so we will stay. We are, right now, this is where we are going to stamp our feet. Yeah yeah yeah yeah. Back in the days where I used to play, I used to play down in the Cardiff Bay. Oh yes, I had fun. And you too."

During this encounter Chris began to clap out the rhythm that was embedded in this improvised recital. The rather emotionally cool ambiance of this exhibition space was briefly enlivened, with this participant riffing off the multicultural history of the Cardiff Bay area and a personal nostalgia. The predominant feeling was one of joy, particularly because of the strong contrast of atmosphere from the slightly apologetic and embarrassed feeling of the initial conversation about visiting the gallery. The toasting about her neighbourhood seemed to come almost from nowhere, following on from an awkward chat about looking at the historic photographs of Butetown and almost-not-quite recognising people in them. The warmth of the encounter carried over into a second segment recorded sitting on a wall outside the gallery where Christine developed her riff into a sung form with Chris ad-libbing along with her. Freed from the expected codes of behaviour within a gallery space, Christine and Chris animated the street with a back-and-forth of semi-improvised poetry and singing. The presence of the camera and the poet legitimised the creation of a jubilant atmosphere unconstrained by the conventions of formal performance. This remaking of the feeling of place is reflected in Chris' poem noting how one can "*Sculpt raw space with a sense of Soul place*". As with the encounter with Matthew at the Welsh Assembly building, the arts-intervention gave a space where Christine was able to layer her own histories, briefly co-constructing a different kind of ambiance through giving voice to these personal connections. Our participants became artists, remaking the atmospheres of the spaces we encountered them in (Augoyard, 2007).

Discussion

We do not wish to revisit the very interesting debates about the intersection between geography and art, which have already been extensively explored elsewhere, particularly by Harriet Hawkins

³ A form of rhythmic, spoken word poetry, often improvised, with its origins in West Indian calypso tradition and which helped shape Jamaican DJ culture.

(for example 2011, 2012). Indeed, here we are trying to move beyond reflecting on the methodological *potential* of arts (see Madge, 2014 on poetry and geopolitics), toward actively *deploying* arts-based techniques as an unremarkable method within a conventional academic practice. After recording the transect, Chris produced an original composition, building on his research into the poetries and mythologies of south Wales, the stories participants recounted on the day and the experiences surrounding the artistic intervention on the streets of Cardiff:

*Create beauty like celestial star showers catapulting from the august womb of creation
Scale endeavours Emerald zenith like wild Salmon jousting with rapids
Exceed the expectations of doubting thomases like butterflies navigating the winds*

Vivify voice with natures velvet symphonies like Colliery clans plundering rich pits

*Enact our passions like Molten Lava jutting skyward from glutting volcanoes
Make manifest faiths pith with the indomitability of Feral Eyris Goats of
Salve the welts of kin and countrymans like a peregrine rearing her eyasses*

*Harvest the land in unison with the seasons like kingfisher yielding bountiful wetlands
Envision cities and societies like druids crafting minds masonry
Sculpt raw space with a sense of Soul place like the will wit & wonder that ceaselessly
fosters our cosmos*

*Navigate the turbulence of circumstance with the deftness of a Ninja number 9
Express innermost intent breath after breath with the zeal of Rainbow beetles
Permeate every speck of mortal flesh with the sparkle of eternity like
Heather cladds mountain and valley
bequeath each succeeding generation with the Mabinogion's hoary imagination like a
polymath in her prime
like the devoted diligent Goddess nurturing Saturn's rings
Defend territory and tradition like Abergavenny Jihadis
Forge dreams & vanquish demons with the unerring certainty of Merlin
Endure hardship and evince Glory like Ellyllon faeries
seek romance like nectar craving ravenous Conwy bees*

(original poem by Chris Jam, composed summer 2014)

The poem evokes a particular set of atmospheres that emerge through an encounter with south Wales, of tangled histories and myths, embracing the unknown, overlapping cultures, landscape and imagination. The poem's inclusion here serves as an important reminder that conventional academic interpretation is not the only way to analyse space and place. Our poetic transect was an intervention, designed to reshape space, actively resisting the god-trick-illusion of the detached, impartial observer who has no impact on the phenomenon being examined. In this we feel the literature on ambiances provides a vital inspiration to geographers and legitimises research activities that seek to manipulate and improve the way that places *feel*. We argue that, somewhat ironically, there is a tendency among some of the writing on atmospheres to be coolly detached from the embodied messiness of the atmospheres they investigate. Not being satisfied with merely examining why and how places feel the way that they do, we made a playful attempt to *alter* the feeling of places that were passed through on the transect. With our participants we co-created ambiances that momentarily imbued spaces with joy, conflict, histories and fables. We did this by asking people to rework their embodied relationship with built environment and event, reflecting on memories stimulated by the recall and rhythm of poems.

Some of the process of co-creating micro ambiances with our participants is captured in the video and the words and rhythms of Chris' subsequent poem, though these are merely reflections of those moments in the field. Augoyard (2007) contends that the business of artistic expression is to create atmosphere. The poetic transect gave a legitimate space for people to voice their feelings through creative expression, democratising this artistic power to engineer ambiance in different times and locations.

Conclusion

In this paper we have extended the potential of the transect method by integrating an arts-based approach. Researchers deploying notions of ambiance have used the transect as a means by which to analyse spaces with a view to designing urban planning interventions to manipulate how different places feel. Here our purpose was more immediate. Our poetic transect questions the accepted uses of different places, inviting participants to remake the fleeting micro ambiances of spaces in the moment, layering on personal histories and creative ideas, stimulated by engaging with poetry. This approach challenges the atmospheres that globalised spectacular architecture and gentrification can impose upon a place, opening a space for playfulness, memory and difference. It can also give creative validation and positive meaning to places otherwise dismissed as run down or socially deprived.

The poetic transect process is fleeting and transitory. The ambiances that were engineered collaboratively with our participants relate to that specific sunny day, in that place, with those people. It depended on the personalities of Chris and the film crew in how they cajoled passers-by to engage. A different day, a different team, a different mode of artistic expression, would have created a different set of ambiances. The literature on ambiances and atmospheres gives a framework through which to think about the ways that places feel and how that feeling is brought into being by the relationship between people and place. Buser (2014) reminds us that atmospheres are constantly in a state of becoming. But we can go beyond simply noting this fact or passively recording changing atmospheres. One of the key benefits of engaging with the French school of ambiances is reminding us that attempting to change the feeling of place is a valid aim of geographical research. Finding novel ways to manipulate ambiances – as we have done here with poetry – is a powerful means to achieve this aim.

As scholars we need not shy away from our potential to actively engage participants in remaking the feeling of places, positively changing atmospheres. On this point we can be accused of arrogance – what gives us the right to do this? To this we would respond that through the poetic transect we created the conditions of possibility for participants to co-construct ambiances responding to their own creative impulses. Particularly in an era where the uses of the public realm are every more regulated, the importance of giving spaces for creative expression should not be underestimated. Creatively remaking ambiances gives individuals the opportunity to improve their everyday engagement with place by imbuing it with their own imaginations, histories and aspirations.

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