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Constructing Situations or Phenomeno-Praxis

Izabela WIECZOREK

Arkitektskolen Aarhus, Denmark
iw@aarch.dk

Abstract. *This paper explores the re-framing of the notion of atmosphere through Situationist practices, focusing particularly on the project of New Babylon by Constant. In this context, not only do the Situationist endeavours set a field for approaching atmospheres as milieux of inter-sensory and synaesthetic reactivation, involving a wide spectrum of sensory mechanisms, but also expand our understanding of ambiance by connecting it to practical and creative activities. By bringing the notion of ‘constructed situation’ into play, the intention is thus to identify conditions and processes under which the sensory (aesthetic) intersects with the social – that is, processes in which staging of atmosphere also becomes a staging of social reality.*

Keywords: *atmosphere, ambiance, praxeology, situationists*

Between Perception and Action, Theory and Praxis

Architectural atmospheres – identified with spatially discharged intensities and feelings – affect our emotional and bodily states. Such a capacity to affect points towards atmosphere’s *in-betweenness* that lies not only in the relationship between the material and the immaterial, presence and absence, the subjective and the objective, but also in the relationship between *perception* and *action*. It is through this correspondence that the German philosopher Gernot Böhme (2003, p. 5) regarded atmospheric space as ‘*sphaera activitatis*’. Accordingly, since ambiance (or atmosphere) ‘triggers a certain form of tension in the body that requires action,’ as succinctly noted by the French sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud, ‘this underpins a *praxeological approach to perception*’ (2011, p. 208 emphasis in original).

Such an approach invites one to think of atmosphere as a dynamically engaging spatial phenomenon, one that conjuncturally acts as a detonator of action and interaction in both individual and collective terms. Hence, if we consider atmospheres’ spatiality (i.e. physical manifestation), the gestures embedded in them should be then discussed as materially performed. Consequently, *atmospherics* – not as a theory but as a material practice identified with ‘a practical, or better: a poetic phenomenology’ (Böhme, 2008, p. 8) – draws our attention to *how* something is brought to appearance and imbued with suggestiveness. Such an association leads us to nothing other than a situationist *praxeological* and *phenomeno-practical* approach. That is, to practices through which terms such as *atmosphere*, *ambiance* or *constructed situation* – the latter given by Situationist International to define an

alternative practice of refashioning the city landscape – consolidated their position in architectural vocabulary¹.

Accordingly, Situationists offer a range of tools and methods that are used in conveying an atmosphere. Yet, not only do their endeavours set a field for approaching atmospheres as *milieux* of inter-sensory and synaesthetic reactivation, involving a wide spectrum of sensory mechanisms, they also expand our understanding of ambiance by connecting it to practical and creative activities. More importantly, situationist practices allow the exploring of atmosphere as an affective formation – relational and processual – also presenting as co-producers those who are immersed in its affective field. In what follows, by bringing the notion of ‘constructed situation’ into play, the intention is to identify conditions and processes under which the sensory (aesthetic) intersects with the social – that is, processes in which staging of atmosphere also becomes a staging of social reality.

Towards an operational poetics

It might be useful to begin with a terminological clarification offered in Situationist Questionnaire published in 1964. ‘What does the word “situationist” mean? (...) It denotes an activity aimed at *creating* situations, as opposed to passively recognising them in academic or other separate terms’ – in other words, a ‘phenomeno-praxis’ (Internationale Situationiste, 1995, p. 178 emphasis in original). However, it was already in 1957 that Guy Ernest Debord (a central figure to SI) – building on the principles of psychogeography and actions of the *dérive*, initially defined by the Lettrist International – advocated new perspectives of practice, tracing conceptual contours of ‘Unitary Urbanism’. It would mark a shift in understanding space and the city not as fixed forms, but as atmospherically changing assemblages, in which architecture, as proclaimed by Debord (1995, p. 38), would be rather a question of ‘the atmospheric effects of rooms, hallways, streets – atmospheres linked to the activities they contain.’ It defined an integral practice in which ‘all arts and techniques [were] means contributing to the composition of a unified milieu’ (p. 38). Such a definition with an embedded awareness of the intrinsic relation between atmosphere and social and urban dynamics as well as their importance in shaping human environment and behaviour, became a powerful reason for convincing Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys – a Dutch painter and sculptor converted into a visionary architect, better known simply as Constant – to join Situationists in 1958. After the dissolution of CoBrA in 1951 – an avant-garde group of which he was one of the founding members – Constant continued developing some of its ideological and creative frameworks, yet expanding the canvas into space. Space appeared to him as a new and powerful medium, in which colour and construction were regarded as paramount. These tectonic and spatial interests led Constant to become actively involved in architectural debates which at that time waded around the notion of the city, and which unfolded vigorously in the Dutch CIAM circle represented by the modernist groups De 8 and Opbouw.² It was a time of a paradigmatic shift in the

1. *Situationist International (SI)* was founded in July 1957 as a fusion of the Parisian group *Lettrist International*, the *International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus* (known as *MIBI*) and the *London Psychogeographical Association*.

2. It is noteworthy that in Constant’s engagement with architecture, of great influence was his friendship with the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck (strongly influenced by phenomenology).

understanding of habitat; a shift of focus from mere functionalist categories towards societal and behavioural aspects recognised as the core questions in the rendering and shaping of the built environment.

These were also aspects that required collective research and interdisciplinary collaboration, or even, as advocated in 1955 by Constant (1998a, p. 75), a total *unity* that would involve the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries. Nevertheless, before formulating this rather radical agenda, it was clear to Constant that it was the role of the artist to expand the domain of architecture towards the sensorial and the emotional, complementing the role of the architect. Along these lines of thought Constant (1998b, p. 78) pursued what might be referred to as a new *operational poetics* – ‘at once lyrical in its means and social in its very nature.’ That is, poetics that goes beyond beautiful appearances commonly associated with atmosphere in architectural discourse. Beauty indicates a contemplative distance that would return us rather to what Walter Benjamin (2008, p. 23) defined initially as ‘aura’. Both aura and atmosphere are spatially extended phenomena, which emerge, permeate and envelope. Nevertheless, while aura through contemplation traps the observer in a certain passiveness, atmosphere implies engagement and affective immersion. Accordingly, Constant (1948, p. n.p.) argued for a ‘new ideal of beauty’ ‘based on the total influence of matter on the creative spirit’ and the replacement of the passive role of spectator with interaction and active engagement in the creative processes. Thus, the new beauty and poetry that Constant dreamt about carried a hidden and expanded meaning. They were processual, full of gestures and suggestiveness that would unfold in play.

***Homo Ludens* – Constant and the New Babylon**

The new stage was to come – one of the construction of situations on both micro- and macro-scales, as proclaimed by Constant and Guy Debord in The Amsterdam Declaration (1958) – the first of Constant’s contributions to the Situationist International Movement. Henceforth, for almost 20 years (until 1974), Constant would work on the materialisation of these ideas in totally new city for endless *dérive*, for which Debord would suggest the name of New Babylon. Following Situationist premises, Constant regarded *dérive* as both a joyful practice and an effective means of studying urban environments as phenomena. Phenomena such as ‘activity in a certain street, the psychological effect of different surfaces and constructions, the rapidly changing appearance of space produced by ephemeral elements’, which ‘should be taken into account along with all the factors to be planned’ (Constant, 1996, p. 63). Accordingly, New Babylon was conceived as a city for a totally new, creative and ludic society; a city, in which *Homo Faber* (Man the maker) would be replaced by *Homo Ludens* (Man the player)³.

However, despite the fact that New Babylon concerned itself with the construction of ambiances, identifying Constant with an ‘active engineer of atmosphere’ (borrowing Jean Baudrillard’s definition (1996, p. 26)) would not be entirely correct. In his imaginary city it was not an architect, but the ‘people circulating in this enormous social space [who were] expected to give the space its ever-changing

3. *Homo Ludens* refers to *Homo Ludens*. A Study of the Play-element in Culture written in 1938 by the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga whose theory Constant adopted as a keystone for his city.

shape; to divide it, to vary it, to create its driftnet atmospheres, and to play their lives in a variety of surroundings' (Nieuwenhuys, 1964, p. 304). It was a city of participatory situations in which the inhabitants were rendered as creative appropriators. Yet, within its open and speculative dimension New Babylon was more than a utopian vision or a critical theory. Constant can also be recognised as more than a mere 'analyst of the poly-atmospherical "society"', as the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk labelled him (2009, p. 139). New Babylon – as defined by Constant – was an 'in depth study of the means of creating an ambiance, and the latter's psychological influence' (quoted in (Wigley, 1998, p. 25)). Thus, it can be seen as a materialist and, more importantly, instrumental account revealing how atmosphere can be 'determined by an abundant manipulation of colour, sound, light, climate, by the use of the most varied kinds of apparatus, and by psychological procedures' (Constant, 1971, p. 178).

Material suggestiveness and 'ludic formlessness'

For Constant the starting point of the culture of New Babylon was 'the mode and the atmosphere of life', in which 'the ephemeral, the passing of time [was] an essential and positive factor' (quoted in (Schaik, 2005, p. 116)). Constant's statement is interesting not only for his awareness of atmosphere's dynamic nature, but because he further asserted that it had the power to shape social relations. Accordingly, in New Babylon, materiality and phenomena were translated into *social space* – that is, a conducive and affective environment that enables things to happen.

Such ideas of spatial practice, based to the greatest extent on a positive transfiguration of daily life lead us, not coincidentally, to Henri Lefebvre. It was Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* and his theory of 'moments' that were pivotal for defining Situationist vocabulary (Internationale Situationiste, 1996, 100-101). As Lefebvre pointed out, the common point was 'to create an architecture that would itself instigate the creation of new situations' (Ross, 1997, p. 72), exploring urban environment and its relation to freedom and creativity and establishing 'non-commodified' social relations; defining a new field of action.

Arising from this belief, architecture was conceived of in the 'idiom of ludic formlessness' – as the architectural historian Adrian Forty described it (2000, p. 171). It was an architecture lacking any permanent structure or form – transient, ephemeral, capable of re-arrangement and open to appropriation. An invitation to a continuous and playful drifting from space to space where interaction and creation become social practices and the basic condition of everyday reality, and where palpable and persistent spatial identity would dissolve into an endless network of constantly varying situations. Shifting floors and walls, mobile and interchangeable elements, were to constitute a dynamic labyrinth, giving rise to those constantly changing atmospheres that emerge from the interplay between the material and the immaterial. Atmospheres artificially manipulated by advanced technical means: light, sound, smell, or temperature.

If we turn our attention to the contemporary theory of atmosphere, and more precisely to the way Böhme defined agencies by means of which atmosphere is created, we might find striking similarities with situationist premises. Böhme (2014, p. 51) writes: 'it is not a question of what form a building has or how a city is structured, but of what these features cause it to radiate or in what way it co-

determines the dispositions of the inhabitants.’ The latter ‘produce the urban atmosphere through their own activities’ (p. 50). This was precisely what Situationists postulated.

In exploring the influence that space has over our behavioural and psychological dispositions, it was materiality that was in fact regarded by Constant (1948, n.p.) as the activating agency with ‘suggestive power’ leading to an ‘interrupted variation of life-atmosphere, play of atmospheres, play with and against the surroundings’ (quoted in (Schaik, 2005, p. 116)). Here, Thibaud (2012, p. 4) might again be instructive, as he drew our attention to the fact that ‘it is the very materiality of the city that is screened by sensory perception, revealing and detailing the “lived features” of built environments.’ What is more, in this context perceiving does not entail merely interpreting the world, but ‘it also involves *integrating a situation* – that is, it requires us both to pull the various components of a context into a consistent whole and to get involved in activities from a practical standpoint’ (Thibaud, 2011, p. 208, emphasis in original). Accordingly, in the context of New Babylon, materiality was one of the means of re-modelling that social space, expanding it towards the imaginative and creative milieu through active engagement and self-realisation. Moreover, Constant displaced the creative act from the realm of the individual to the social, moving towards the relational – a collective transformation of reality.

In this context, the concept of ‘*décor*,’ which was pivotal to constructing situations, is not reduced to merely decorative aspects. What lies behind it is the ability of space to stimulate or liberate sensibilities and behaviours – that is, its affective power. To understand the appropriateness of this assumption let us consider again Böhme’s (2008, p. 3) association of the art of the stage set and the aesthetics of atmosphere. As he asserted: ‘It is, after all, the purpose of the stage set to provide the atmospheric background to the action.’ Such a staging, Böhme continues, ‘does not want to shape objects, but rather to create phenomena. The manipulation of objects serves only to establish conditions in which these phenomena can emerge’ (p. 6). What is more, understood in these terms *décor* requires the active engagement of the beholder. Accordingly, in the context of New Babylon the notion of atmosphere also expands its meaning. In addition to all the senses in which the term is and has been used – meteorological and aesthetical –, in situationist context, it had been given a particular inflection. It acquired a practical and social dimension, thus signifying the conditions of life in the city.

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Authors

Izabela Wiczorek is a co-founder of the Madrid-based architecture firm g + w arquitectura. She graduated at Wydział Architektury Politechniki Krakowskiej (Poland) and earned a Ph.D. from Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura UPM (Spain). Currently she teaches at Arkitektskolen Aarhus (Denmark). Her research, teaching agenda and practice focus on the relational dimension of architecture.