Ambiance is in the air

The atmospheric dimension of architectural and urban ambiances in environmental approaches

CNRS PIR Cities and Environment programme

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Scientific direction
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Abstract:
Can an urban cross-section be used to bring together global environmental issues and situated local ambienal ones that take account of the sensorial dimensions of space and city dwellers’ practices? Starting from this assumption of an urban cross-section as a basis for representing and expressing what are usually separate, i.e., built objects, the sensorial world and social practices, we have conducted exploratory research tailored to environmental concerns based on two themes for which we can readily mobilise both researchers and a decent body of research, namely urban heat (City of Grenoble) and solid waste (City of São Paulo).

We have dealt with two categories of questions based on existing research and a series of experiments:

- Those relating to the different registers of knowledge inherent in ambiance and the environment as understood by technicians, elected representatives, scientists and users. When and how are actors able to articulate (or more effectively articulate) their knowledge of territory, i.e., more implicit user knowledge or the more explicit-type knowledge of scientists?
- Those relating to representation / communication / bargaining tools. How and with what representational basis is it possible to “cross-check data” and move from a phase of reflection to a project-based mindset?

For both of these questions and realms, we need to ascertain the operational capability of an urban cross-section both for handing environmental issues in local development as well as for its ability to factor the narratives and practices of inhabitants into the whole urban project process. In light of this dual objective, these experiments propose expanding the standard applications of an urban cross-section to a tool that could be used as a practical field instrument, a representation technique, or possibly even as a project basis, namely an urban transect.

The transect could then be a process somewhere between a “clinical” profile and a sensorial perspective, drawing upon both techniques in order to “hybridize” them; as a field-based technique, the transect would be produced from drawings, photos, text and video. By rehabilitating the atmospheric dimension in architectural and urban representations and facilitating the incorporation of narratives, the transect could be harnessed to explore and express sensorial space and practical experiences of the fit between analysis and design.

The “long-table” analytic approach has been used to debate these issues and to depict and pool representations. It has proved very effective in generating speech, collating ratings and revealing actual experiences – three very useful properties for establishing a shared prospective diagnosis.
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