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Spatial empathy and urban experience: a case study in a public space from Rio de Janeiro

Cristiane Rose DUARTE¹, Ethel PINHEIRO¹

1. LASC / Proarq, Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, crduarte@ufrj.br / ethelp.31.3@gmail.com

Abstract. *As we roam through the city, the input from our sensations triggers emotional responses, which are referenced by our emotional memories. These experiences make it possible for us to align with the Other. The research shows that the sensorial experience of the body is the foundation for the development of a feeling of 'spatial empathy'. This article focuses on the analysis of a public space in Rio de Janeiro: the area around the 'Rodrigo de Freitas' lagoon, which is considered an 'empathetic place' by the regular visitors. In its concluding considerations, the article argues that the concept of spatial empathy has a greater connection to the sensorial characteristics of the ambiance rather than architectural beauty.*

Keywords: *spacial empathy, public spaces, ambiances, Rio de Janeiro*

Introduction

This article presents some reflections on the concept of 'spatial empathy' developed through years of uninterrupted LASC studies on urban ambiances, especially regarding the ability these ambiances have in constructing the collective experience in the space.

One of the issues raised by the study of ambiances is the role that social practices play in the definition of the urban environment. The ambiances act as the agent that connects the various sensations experienced by the users of the city in any given situation. In fact, the ambiances contain sensory stimuli that induce interactions in the spaces, and become the reflections and the means through which individuals explore and express relationships – interspatial, interpersonal, sociocultural, subjective – thus establishing a reciprocal exchange with the Other.

As we reflected on this, it became clear that a key element in this spatial experience would arise regardless of the collectivisation of the experience; it could be evoked through a specific condition which due to the familiarity with the cognitive memories would produce an important link to the understanding of the 'local atmosphere'. We called it 'spatial empathy', a terminology, as we will show below, consistent with the research in the fields of psychology and cognitive neuroscience.

Empathy

According to Berthoz (2014), empathy is the ability to put one's self in the place of the Other, while at the same time, continuing to be 'yourself'.

In psychology and in contemporary neuroscience empathy is a kind of 'emotional intelligence' and can be divided into two types: the cognitive – related to the ability to understand the psychological perspective of the others; and the emotional – related to the ability to experience emotional reactions through observation.

The term was used for the first time in the beginning of the 20th century by the German philosopher Theodor Lipps (Apud Jahoda, 2005) 'to indicate the relationship between the artist and the spectator who projects himself into the contemplated work of art.'

At the end of the 19th century, Robert Vischer introduced the concept of *Einfühlung* regarding the understanding of art, first as a visual expression and secondly as a motorial one. Subsequently, Lipps expanded the concept from the field of art into the interpersonal understanding and to the relationships provided by what we call spatial experience. While Lipps viewed *Einfühlung* as similar to the consolidated notion of 'sympathy', Edward Titchener, in America, believed that the term had another connotation and adopted the translation to 'empathy' once and for all (Eisenber, N; Strayer, 1987).

To Merleau-Ponty (1975), empathy refers to a relationship of reciprocity, since belonging to the same world as the Other confers the subject a perception that the world is a connecting link between 'me' and the Other. If the world affects both me and the Other, it means we are surrounded by the same atmosphere.

In fact, it would be impossible to live the experience of the Other, however we may be able to imagine ourselves in the place of this Other, thus expanding our comprehension of the possibilities and the meanings of the world. As Zielinski (2009) says, the fact that the world is the same for me and the other enables a behaviour interpretation of the other and a sense of the impact the world may have on him.

Due to this, the concept of 'Ambiances' is particularly adequate for the development of debates on the sensorial experience since it shines a light on the wide array of sensorial experiences that the city can provide. By abandoning an exclusively morphological approach to the spaces, the concept of 'Ambiance' now takes into account all of the sensorial and dynamic aspects that envelop the urban Place and consequently brings into focus the activation of an 'incarnated' body that cannot develop without the presence and the action of the space surrounding it.

Spatial Empathy

The same way that according to Lipps (Op cit) aesthetical empathy is related to the artist and to the spectator, in spatial empathy there is a process of identification of the individual with the ambiance of the place. The place becomes the Other, reinforcing the idea of otherness, which is necessary to break the protocols that inhibit difference.

Due to this relationship of Otherness we may say that spatial empathy is a direct result of the sensorial experience. In fact, is it through the sensorial experience that our body, over the course of our lives, builds spatiality notions that we constantly use in the cognitive process of spaces. This spatial experience enables us to understand the distances, the effort and the rhythm we must use when moving, and consequently the time it will take us to arrive at our destination.

Therefore, as we move through the city there is an incessant capture of impressions and sensations that trigger a process of selecting our emotional responses. And it is

precisely the activity of moving through the city that makes us resonate with the architectural [and urban] spaces causing us to develop a positive or negative empathy in relation to them (Cazal, 2014).

When Merleau-Ponty says 'it may be literally said that the space makes itself known through my body' (1975, p. 437) he seems to indicate a merger between the body and the space.

The reaction between empathy and the spatial components is not just a question of situation-relationship and is explained through various studies in the area of neuroscience. These studies show complex cerebral mechanisms working as a network which allow for spatial 'changes in our perspective' and to 'incarnate' beyond ourselves, while other mechanisms allow us to have a more distant and impassive view of the situation. According to Alain Berthoz (2013), some regions of the brain which are related to the motor experience are also activated when the subject sees an object it wishes to touch. In fact, when we arrive at an ambience, we are immediately invaded by the totality of this space and the comprehension of its amplitude allows us to imagine and determine our paths through the space even before we begin to move through it.

As Heidegger says:

'as I cross a room on my way out of it, I'm already out. It would not be possible to cross the room if I were not in some way the one who is on the other side. Never am I only here as an encapsulated body, but I am on the other side, in other words having the space all around me.' (Heidegger, 2002, pp.136-137)

We understand, therefore, that it is possible to set a merger in motion, a special consonance that connects the 'me' to the ambience. We can therefore feel that a certain place is friendly or that a certain space rejects us; that a majestic construction intimidates us with its arrogance; that a park packed with people is either happy or, on the contrary, frightening.

The search for attributes of the 'empathetic spaces'

Based on the above considerations, our research group sought to understand the characteristics of certain urban ambiances during the construction of spatial empathy.

In order to do that, we decided to analyse the Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon (Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas), a 'body' of water located in the southwest area of the capital of Rio de Janeiro. This place was chosen after a survey conducted with the locals who pointed it out as an 'empathetic space'

The research was carried out along the 7.5 km bike path around Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon, by observing the blithe and happy-go-lucky stroll of its users, by mapping out the 'lay-by' areas around the lagoon where people can stop and contemplate the view, the fun, the picnics, and the children's play. The route around the lagoon offers different points of view that alternate between areas with a lot of shadows and areas with intense light reflected by the water of the lagoon. There is also a space for professional and amateur runners and cyclists who make use of this path most of the day and night.



Figure 1. the area around the 'Rodrigo de Freitas' lagoon

Due to so many sensorial and kinesthetic conditions, and the constant presence of users, Rodrigo de Freitas Lagoon favored a direct experience approach. We chose to work with a subjective approach that would give room to the imaginary recognition of each user of the space, thus facilitating the development of symbolic conjectures about the place.

We realized that the exchanges, the urban phenomena in general, such as the case of an ambiance being experienced taking into account spatial empathy, are instruments that could possibly represent the identity and dynamics of a place. Therefore, the shared image of 'what will be found' at the place promotes a greater attachment to the space. Imagining its many uses, its cornucopia and its multisensoriality, is what contributes to such a great attachment to the Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon.



Figure 2: people can stop and contemplate the view of the lagoon

This fact supported the idea that an association of attributes – and the resultant empathy acquired – carries with it a potential for the construction of new narratives and for the assignment of new meanings to the Space.



Figure 3: picnic and birthday party at the public space

Final Considerations

The world emerges to us firstly as a sensitive object that aligns itself with our own personal representations; it is through the ‘body-to-body’, through the idea of the centrality of the ‘Me’ that our adventure of knowledge begins. There is a sensitive, primitive knowledge, a corporeal knowledge, which is prior to our symbolic and intelligible representations of the world.

The multisensory and multilocal experience of the body helps us understand the way that our corporeal existence, rich in its multiplicity, strengthens the existential and spatial experience, the feeling of ‘being-in-the-world.’

This view of the world is similarly analysed by Tixier (2004, p. 115) when he explains that the space around all living beings is not an object meant exclusively for observation, to be seen with the eyes. This space reveals itself through the other senses. It puts us to the test and is put by us to the test, reinforcing the importance of actions correlated to the corporeal experience of the man-ambiance.

We agree with Cazal (2014) when the author affirms that it is not the constructed mass or the dimensions of the open space that provide spatial empathy, but the defining characteristics of our experience in the world. It is much more than just a simple subjective projection, much more than just a simple aesthetic judgement of what is pleasant or not, spatial empathy remits us to our physical and emotional existence in the world.

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Authors

Cristiane Rose Duarte, Architect and Urban Designer, Full Professor at the Architecture and Urban Planner School of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Phd Degree at l'Université de Paris – I, coordinator of the 'Architecture, Subjectivity and Culture' Laboratory.

Ethel Pinheiro, Architect and Urban Designer, Associated Professor at the Architecture and Urban Planner School of Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Phd Degree at Proarq/ufrj, researcher at the 'Architecture, Subjectivity and Culture' Laboratory.