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Briefing Urban Atmospheric Workshops

Stirring the Vagueness of the In-Between

Christos KAKALIS1, Stella MYGDALI2, Geert VERMEIRE3

1. Newcastle University, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, xpkakalis@hotmail.com
2. University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, smygdali@exseed.ed.ac.uk
3. The Milena Principle, geert.vermeire@themilena.com

Abstract. The paper interprets the results of the Workshop Symposium ‘Silence, Narrative and Intimacy of the City’ (University of Edinburgh, February 2016) aiming to explore the specificities of the form of engagement activated by briefing urban atmospheric workshops on silence and intimacy. The thinking, writing, communicating and executing of the briefs of the actions involved is investigated here as a multi-layered process of grasping the vagueness of ambiential experiences through a stirring effect. The latter focuses on the potentialities of the realms between the different workshops, the facilitators and the participants to elucidate the organic nature of such an event and its future possibilities.

Keywords: briefing, atmospheric workshop, interruption, intimacy

Introduction

This paper seeks to answer questions about the process of thinking, writing, communicating and executing a brief on atmospheric workshops; actions that invite different groups of participants to explore the atmospheric qualities of urban landscapes using diverse methodologies. The international network Urban Emptiness examines the significance of emptiness and silence in the urban landscape through a series of actions in three cities: Athens, Edinburgh and Brussels. To fulfil this aim a number of workshops and their synthesis, happening in the same city or in different countries (in parallel or not), has been one of the key activities of the network. One of the case studies of these briefing explorations was the Workshop Symposium: Silence, Narrative and the Intimacy of the City, held by the University of Edinburgh between 15-19 February 2016. The programme of these actions involved a number of interwoven atmospheric workshops that included: i) performance events or actions that focused on the relationship of the body and the physical space and its immaterial realms, ii) digital/new media mappings of the urban emptiness and silent aura and iii) documentation explorations of the experiential understanding of urban atmospheres that challenged current representational techniques. The whole understanding of these processes was deployed around the grasping of the vagueness of atmospheric situations. As the philosopher Tonino Griffero suggests:
One might wonder (...) what the criteria of identity and identifiability of atmospheres are, (...) whether they constitute a semantic or de dicto vagueness (the atmospheric description designates a given situation in a given way) or instead, as we like to think, a metaphysical or de re vagueness (the atmospheric description designates a vague entity in a precise way), analogous to that attributable to many other quasi-things, such as colours, shadows etc. (Griffero, 2014:12)

To brief these workshops on the examination of silence and intimacy, the vagueness of ambiance was translated in a shared sense of stirring. Fostering the spatialisation of feelings inherent in atmospheric situations was also fulfilled in the interconnection of various degrees of intimacy.

**Background/Inteweaving Walking Itineraries**

Philosopher Gernot Böhme uses the term ‘atmosphere’ to describe the aural environment of the topography as a shared zone between the perceiver and the perceived. According to his words: ‘atmosphere (...) is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way’ (Böhme, 1993:113–126). Standing between subjects and objects, atmospheres become of vital importance for the experience of the urban landscape. Hence, the aural environment opens the opportunity of *attunement* between the different components of a place. Transgression qualities of these intermediate zones are connected to ‘sudden’ entering of ‘outside’ entities that are experienced as dissonances (or interruptions) at the beginning and may gradually be harmonically incorporated or expelled.

These almost *liminal* qualities of atmosphere influenced the way the workshops were briefed and executed. It was the notion of a distance between the Self and the Other, the Individual and the City that was under a performative negotiation during their conduct. Emphasis on the phenomenal qualities of urban spatiality fostered our understanding of it, that while seems to be vague and intangible, its meaning is expressed in specific material conditions that we have intended to elucidate.

The analogy between the brief and the musical score was deployed as a common ground for the composition of the event. As in the musical score, the brief is written in order to be read and interpreted by the musicians and the participants respectively. The atmospheric briefs, though, do not follow the conventional notational systems. They are not a set of instructions but rather permit an allowance for the body to grasp the material qualities of what is considered as unseen, unheard, non-tangible, vague. Reminding us the notational experimentations of John Cage when seeking to visualise the significance of silence in his works, an atmospheric brief is written organically incorporating ideas and actions of pause, interruption and stillness to frame actions and activate possible responses between the facilitators and the participants in relation to the city.

For this purpose a number of architects, artists, and scholars from disciplines such as musicology and anthropology were invited to brief and facilitate workshops and actions for the examined symposium. Three different parallel walking workshops
were included in the first event to fulfil its aim: The Urban Body workshop led by Marielys Burgos Meléndez, The Impossible Inaudible Soundwalk led by Katerina Taliani and Akoo-o Collective and The Parthenon(s): A ‘beautiful ruin’ and an unfinished monument led by Sofia Grigoriadou and Elli Vassalou. Each of the briefs interpreted in a different way the given topic, aiming to guide the participants to it through diverse lenses. During their execution, the briefs were transformed leading to interesting outputs that reflect the whole process and were revisited to inform the next events in Athens and Brussels.

Walking has been chosen as a key movement for the workshops. Real and possible movement along a route results in an opening of space and the potential of an adventurous wandering in which the ideas of ‘getting lost’, ‘surprise’, and ‘changing inner/mental maps’ play an integral role. For Michel de Certeau, walking becomes a kind of ‘travelling’ during which the individual is simultaneously reading and writing an embodied story based on his/her search for a meaningful place. (de Certeau, 1988: 127) This narrative is organised into a sequence of encounters between the different components involved in the process.

Stirring the narrative of a workshop condition reminds us the dynamics of discordant concordance that according to Paul Ricoeur is inherent in every narrative. (Ricoeur, 1983: 64–70) It is due to the dynamics of the plot that the difference between seemingly discordant episodes comes into a harmonic concordance. This discordant-concordance reveals an almost vibrating quality at the moments each of these events meets the other. Our aim was not only to suggest a plot in the organisation of these events, but also to challenge its coherence by interrupting it and creating pauses to stir the concordance of its narrative.

Stirring the In-Between

Urban Body deployed silence as a mode of experiencing the city, aiming to explore moments of silence and intimacy in a state of movement and transition. The workshop introduced a series of tasks (e.g. body awareness and movement exercises, interview-exercises, silent walks) that focused on an embodied understanding of our everyday encounter with the city. The role of the silent walking body as a carrier of both personal and collective stories was illuminated through this process, exploring the opening of (permanent and temporary) home-situations in the urban environment, and negotiating our belonging in it.

The establishment of different degrees of intimacy between the members of the group dynamically contributed to the workshop. Each of the participants was acting as an individual, as a member of a pair, and as a member of the whole group at the same time. Using this approach, diverse narratives were generated to witness another reading of the city. The kind of narratives the participants created were related to a multilayered process of recording conditions of intimacy – conditions of closeness and distancing between cities, places in the same city and people. By changing the walking rhythms and deconstructing everyday habits and rituals, the participants engaged in a process of immediacy with the surrounding environment, unfiltered of thoughts. Therefore, a staircase and its repetitive climbing are fused in a state of intensity and accelerating heart pulses. A city square comes to appearance
through fragments of experience, body temperature and interchange of public gazes.

Impossible Inaudible Soundwalk explored silence, narrative and intimacy in the composition of an audio walk in Edinburgh using the locative media platform noTours. Listening to the city, recording its sounds and its inhabitants’ stories and choosing the areas in which these sounds were going to be placed aimed to the formation of a sonorous environment to be listened while walking. *In order to compose an audio walk one should remain silent and let the air of a particular place to hit their eardrums; they should stand still, and let their skin and bones vibrate together with the resounding space*. Improvisation played a key role in the process. While prefigured, it involved the possibility of change and re-orientation. Monitoring and editing the sounds for the creation of the audio walk was decided over the map of Edinburgh narrating the participants’ interpretation of the city. Measuring walking times, testing itineraries and documentation of features of the landscape (physical, aesthetic, social, mnemonic or otherwise) led to the final result. The soundwalk was composed and installed in mobile phones to be activated by the individual during future walks.

The Parthenon(s): A ‘beautiful ruin’ and an unfinished monument sought to unfold the significance of the Parthenon of Athens and the National Monument of Edinburgh through personal and collective narratives as these are inscribed in memory and actual experience. A ‘noisy’ method (voices-narratives) and a ‘silent’ method (body-landscape performances) were going to be combined on this purpose. Due to low participation, the facilitators decided to become the participants, transforming the workshop into a personal practice-based exploration of the city. Along with the three actions taking place during the week, two additional workshops were briefed to play the role of the ‘plot’, the thread that was going to combine the former into a whole.

Performing Silence. What Happens when you shift the focus? led by Stella Mygdali was one of the thread-workshops, creating pauses in the succeeding execution of the examined event. It involved interconnected actions inviting the facilitators to become participants and reflect on their role and the creative process as a whole. The workshop called for performative communication of different perspectives on the themes explored. It created an environment that facilitated intuitive perceptions of the situations unfolded during the week and an exploration of the developed dynamics between the facilitators (also in relation to their workshop participants and the urban environment. These playful encounters aimed to reveal the potentiality of the ‘in-between’, unraveling spatial sensibilities and potential emotional responses as a level of spontaneity generated intimate encounters. Stirring is situated within these moments of interaction, which reveal the spatiality of intersubjectivity.

All tasks were devised to assist various aspects of sharing, which created ‘shared moods’ tied to a particular situation: non-verbal encounters based on proximity and directed movement, silence as a mode of being-together, associative games and site-oriented imaginary encounters. *Loving Landscapes*, for example, was a walk

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1. Interview with the leaders of the workshop, 18 April 2016.
performed as a dialogue between two facilitators, built on an intimate contemplation on personal stories, poetry and city images. Trying to sustain a relaxed but constant emotional engagement with the other person’s experiences, they created a multi-layered experience of rhythmical emotive interactions. Although building upon the idea of interrupting a sequence of events, the workshop brought them together.

*Re/Reading Urban Emptiness and Silence* led by Christos Kakalis was the other thread-action of the symposium, addressing both the participants and the facilitators of the different workshops. A number of sketchbooks were distributed to be used as a reflective device during the event. The sketchbook was designed as a site-specific piece, taking into consideration the ideas of pause and interruption and translating them through the combination of different kinds of paper, different extracts of texts, and suggestions of short actions/tasks to its user. The sketchbook worked as a choreographed device inviting the users to ‘step back’ and use it in silence. Personal stories, common actions and the material transferred by the sketchbook were involved in a dialogue, traces of which can be found on the pieces themselves.

From the 20 copies, only 9 were returned used. In them we find a dialogue between the texts, the pause actions and an almost diary-like recording of the individual’s experience. In some cases, this is limited by the use of the pages as white surfaces and less as a field of interaction between the designer/leader and the participant. Either through immediate responses to the activities or reflective revisits of the experience the sketchbook proved to be an effective way of collecting material (thoughts, memories, imaginations). And while in workshops such as the *Urban Body*, the sketchbook was used during the whole of the silent walking process, in others the sketchbook seems to have allowed pauses in it, when the participants had to stop and write or sketch something, either during its execution or afterwards. Stirring different voices, the workshop allowed for intangible qualities of the atmosphere to be expressed in a shared space carried by the individuals: *Christos’ workshop gave us the opportunity to merge all the experiences and synchronise thoughts and process. This common lab is a great place for interactions and meta-analysis of the entire process*.

The briefing process of this multi-layered network of actions is constantly interrelated with the urban atmosphere, the variety of the disciplines involved and the participant groups. Diverse approaches were deployed to orchestrate these actions to a workshop condition that is open to possibilities, never ends and can be repeated in different urban environments, complemented and further (re)used and (re)interpreted. The aim was for all the different parts of the event to be in a constant movement, a vibration that by itself would be a transposition of silence and stillness. A stirring effect filling the in-between zones of the components of the events. The interweaving of the three workshops through the two threading activities, one addressing the leaders and another the participants, also proved to be a quite effective way to fulfil this aim.

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2. *Interview with the leaders of the workshop, 18 April 2016.*
Future Stirring Actions

Exploring urban atmospheres gave us the opportunity to examine the reciprocal interaction between different performative activities in a workshop condition that dealt with the vagueness of the *aura*. The narrative in this case was not only based on the coherence of the plot, but also on its interruption and redefinition. Diverse walking flows triggered conditions of awareness, immersion and attention to enhance this process. Stirring situations of intimacy between the city and the participants, the participants themselves, and the participants and the facilitators suggested a briefing process that remains open not only to any unexpected interruptions in its prefigured itinerary, but also to possible future events. While the latter might require another briefing process, they will be still organically interconnected to the one explored through this case study. Briefing atmospheric workshops is a process in which the intervals between and betwixt the different actions and people grasp significant qualities of ambiantal experiences.

The ‘looming’ of this web of interwoven actions is still in progress. New themes have emerged that seek further exploration; the combination of methodologies and techniques is investigated as well as the possibility of relevant educational settings in art, architecture and urban studies. For example, the facilitators of the *Urban Body* and the *Re/Reading Urban Emptiness and Silence* workshops are currently collaborating on the creation of a common action that will involve a walking reading of the area of Eleonas (Athens, Greece) and Molenbeek (Brussels, Belgium). The participants of these actions will carry a sketchbook crafted on the basis of the performative understanding of the specific actions, therefore moving from a site-specific approach towards a process-specific one. This will take place in the next actions of the Urban Emptiness Network under the theme *Real and Imaginary Embodied Landscapes* (May-June 2016). Collaborations as this one have been nurtured within the workshop symposium, testifying to the experiential significance of its briefing.

References


Authors

Dr Christos Kakalis, Lecturer in Architecture, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape (Newcastle University), Urban Emptiness International Network, Email: xpkakalis@hotmail.com.
Ms Stella Mygdali, PhD Candidate in Architecture, Edinburgh School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture (University of Edinburgh), Urban Emptiness International Network, PAUST.