



Through thick and thin: Young people's affective geographies in Brussels' public space

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ABSTRACT

Young people's interaction with place is not only a cognitive process of identification but also an affective relation. There has been plenty of research on young people and/in public space but few of those studies have taken such an affective layer of analysis into account. In this paper we aim to shed some light on young people's affective geographies through the concept of 'thick places' as it was proposed by Edward Casey (2001), building upon ethnographic research undertaken between 2013 and 2016 in Brussels. We argue that such a concept is only useful if we consider thickness not only as a reference to 'warm', 'authentic' or 'intimate' places but also as a term that takes the 'normative architecture' of place into account. We embed this claim in a discussion of affects, atmospheres and Peter Sloterdijk's notion of nomotop.

It was always the same places in the streets, in the houses or in the parks that set off my spells. Each time I entered these spaces, the same swoon and the same vertigo overtook me. Veritable invisible snares placed here and there in town, not any different from the things that surrounded them—with ferocity they lay in wait for me to fall prey to the special atmosphere they exuded. Were I to take a step, a single step, and enter such a 'cursed space,' the spell became inevitable ... The spells belonged to me and to the places where they occurred in the same measure. It's true that some of these places contained a 'personal' malevolence, but all the others were found in a trance themselves much before my coming ... (Blecher, 2015 [1936]: 2–9)

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, quite some authors have focused on young people's feelings of belonging, attachment to place and tactics of place-making in urban public spaces (e.g. Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Malone, 1999; Pickering et al., 2012; Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2000). But, as Noble and Poynting (2008: 130) observe, "belonging, and not belonging, are, of course, not simply cognitive processes of identification, but are highly charged, affective relations of attachment to and exclusion from particular places". It is our argument that in youth geographies the affective, non-representational angle has so far been under-researched, an approach that could shed a different light on the deeply affective relations between young people and place. We believe

that, to paraphrase Adey et al. (2013: 300), many accounts "generally lack a thickness, both in description and in the attention to the material-affective relations that constitute the quality, feeling and experience of being" youth in the urban space.

This article aims to put emotional and youth geographies in communication through a simultaneously theoretical and empirical effort. Theoretically, we build on the notion of 'thick places' as coined by Edward Casey (2001), which we criticise in two regards. Firstly, we believe the notion can operationalise spatial concepts in an affective manner and make them amenable to empirical observation. However, in Casey's perspective *thickness* remains limited by an anthropocentric, subjective and phenomenological framework that reduces its potential and risks entrapping it within an unproductive rhetoric of authenticity. Secondly, the notion does not take into account a variety of other thicknesses, relating to, for instance, control, regulations, institutional power, etc.

In short, we aim to stretch Casey (2001) original concept further than he originally intended, towards the post-human, relational and ontological significance it harbours, by reframing it through three main concepts: atmosphere, affect, and *nomotop* (Sloterdijk, 2006b). These concepts point to an immanent, non-dichotomous understanding of space, in which heterogeneous human and non-human bodies get together producing social formations or atmospheres, which are neither over-determined by (supra-) structures nor denied by uncontrollable flows, but rather emerge immanently out of the common *spacing* of being-together, in all its turbulent, unpredictable, conflictual and

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nonetheless *ordered* character.

Empirically, we build upon data from an ethnographic study in Brussels. Here we intend to explore the affective layer of analysis as a meaningful, even essential element in understanding the interrelation of (young) people and place. Joining theoretical elaboration with empirical data, we explore the way young people engage with the different degrees of spatial thickness of the atmospheres in which they live and with what outcomes. This exploration allows us to show the advantage of adding a complex affective and atmospheric framework to the study of youth geographies, whilst at the same time making explicit the advantage that studies on affect and atmosphere may obtain by looking more intensely at youth geographies, as well as the necessity for them to test their philosophical categories empirically, through the thick and thin of space.

2. Hanging out in Brussels

This paper builds on data gathered in ethnographic research undertaken between 2013 and 2016 in Brussels in which young people were formally interviewed about their social, spatial and affective geographies. This life-world research was aimed at finding out more about young people's activity of hanging out in public space: firstly, about the spatial patterns, architectures and designs of young people's places and mobilities; secondly, about the social interaction in their public and parochial realms; thirdly, about the emotional and affective relations between young people and place. The latter research interest is going to be explored in this paper.

48 participants were interviewed individually or in focus groups, between the age of 11 and 25, although many more were met in a non-interview context during the ethnographic fieldwork. These young people were encountered through local partners such as youth clubs (Samarcande, Chicago & D'Broej Peterbos), a cultural organisation (Beeldenstorm) or a secondary school (Sint-Guido Instituut). Fieldwork was done in five cases (Jacht-Jourdan, the Chicago area, Peterbos, Sint-Guido and Kuregem) with some demographic differences. Chicago and Kuregem are deprived neighbourhoods with a bad reputation in the city region and throughout Belgium, with high densities, high levels of (youth) unemployment and dilapidated public spaces. Peterbos is a small area with 19 high-rise social housing apartment buildings in the middle of a lower middle-class residential area. Kuregem is a peculiar neighbourhood in a former industrial area that is host to a very large open-air marketplace and a collection of car dealerships whose mechanics mostly tinker on cars outside, in the busy Heyvaert Street. Sint-Guido and Jacht-Jourdan are lower middle-class residential areas that house both working class migrant families and young white families, less dense in terms of population and public spaces in relatively agreeable conditions. The latter area is located near the European district of Brussels.

The sample was quite variegated when it comes to gender, ethnicity and age, and also between cases the number of participants varied quite a lot. Only one third of the total of participants was female. Especially in the cases of Peterbos and Jacht-Jourdan few girls or young women were interviewed. Nearly all of the participants had a migration background with most of them being second- or third-generation migrants. Of the whole sample around half had roots in North-Africa, particularly in Morocco. Also a handful of sub-Saharan youths were interviewed. In terms of age, the sample consisted of 12 younger teenagers (between 11 and 14 years old), 27 older teenagers (15–18) and 9 young adults (19–25). All participants were lower- or lower middle-class, with most of them living in deprived areas of the city region.

Methodologically, this research was set up as an urban ethnography of hanging out involving verbal (interviews and focus groups), visual (observations, photographs, mental maps, film) and participatory methods. During the process participants were asked if they wanted to do an interview before a video camera, the result of which was collected in a documentary available online. Apart from the interviews and

focus groups, around 115 h of observation were done in the public spaces of those neighbourhoods. Some of the observations were done during group walks with participants showing the researchers around in the neighbourhood, others were part of *dérives* through Brussels, in the psycho-geographical tradition of Guy Debord.¹

3. Youth affective geographies

By definition in a transitory stage in-between, no longer children, not-yet adult, always in becoming, in the public space of the contemporary city youths tend to be out of place. Yet, often lacking privacy at home (Skelton et al., 1997), it is exactly in public space that a significant proportion of young people spend a good deal of their time. It is here, among themselves, in the in-between of streets, parks and squares, that novel social skills are learned, relations and behaviour are negotiated, rules are bent or broken, identities are developed (Aitken, 2001; Cahill, 2000; Hörschelmann and van Blerk, 2012). In the daily interaction with the built environment youths evolve as social subjects, self-defining and self-expressing through their daily 'doing nothing' (Toon, 2000: 145), not only developing spatial and navigational skills (Spencer et al., 1989) but also feelings of belonging, ownership, attachment, and identification (Hopkins, 2010).

Recently, much valuable ethnographic work has been done on the (micro-) geographies of hanging out, either in public space (Karsten et al., 2001; Malone, 2002; Skelton and Valentine, 1997; Valentine, 2004) or in malls and shopping areas (Matthews et al., 2000; Vanderbeck and Johnson, 2000). Despite their decreasing availability and youth's increasing hanging out in virtual spaces, public space remains crucial for them, "especially for fulfilling important social functions such as the construction of identities" (Van Lieshout and Aarts, 2008: 497). On the one hand, the choice for (quasi-) public spaces as terrains for leisure reflects "relatively mainstream desires, such as to be safe, to interact with other young people, and to feel a sense of possibility and choice, which they cannot successfully enact in other spaces" (Matthews et al., 2000: 5). On the other hand, this is often a forced choice, as for a significant proportion of urban youth, public space is the only space they are able to 'claim'.

"In order to claim places", Childress notes,

young people must appropriate and occupy the places of others. This makes territorial markers and behavior the primary mode of spatial claiming among teens, but adults tend not to recognize the legitimacy of territory in a tenured or ownership-based spatial system (Childress 2004: 195).

This delicate and complex negotiation is exacerbated by the shortage of space typical of deprived and high-density neighbourhoods, often resulting in conflict with other groups and the building of territories (Pickering et al., 2012: 945; see also Leonard, 2006; Lieberg, 1995). An enhanced sense of place attachment may severely limit physical and social mobility and subsequently impose sanctions on access to leisure, education, or employment.

Many of the above-mentioned studies of youth geography talk about 'sense', 'feeling', 'emotion' or even 'atmosphere', perhaps unaware of the analytical toolkit offered by non-representational or affect theory, while in affect theory too little attention has been spent on empirical work, risking instead to slip "too easily into the ether of philosophical abstraction" (Pain, 2009). It is our argument that there is much to be

¹ This strategy is exceptionally suitable for our purposes: "from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortices that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones" (Coverley, 2010: 62). Given its sensibility to mapping the interaction between bodies, objects and affects, noticing, describing and mapping different unities of atmosphere, "psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord in Coverley (2010: 87–8); Debord, 1958).

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