

The atmospheric gaze as a guiding principle in destination development

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Abstract

It is well-known that tourists are not primarily attracted by products or services, but they choose and recall destinations based on experiences. A critical though neglected aspect of tourist experiences are atmospheres, which can be conceived as the diffuse and difficult to grasp holistic entities that consist of a combination of spaces and feelings. Based on an interdisciplinary exploration of traditions of atmospheric theorising, this paper aims to delineate and motivate an “atmospheric gaze” as a guiding principle in destination development. With its recognition of *genius loci*, that is the quasi-objective spirit of a place, the atmospheric gaze is sensitive to the affective characteristics of places and understands them as unique assets in tourism development as well as regional development. This paper argues that the focus on emotional, symbolic, and interactive aspects of places, which is inherent to the atmospheric gaze, can help to achieve a more long-term orientated and balanced destination development.

Keywords

Tourism development
Destination development
Atmosphere
Design
Genius loci

Introduction: From the tourist gaze to the atmospheric gaze

In his seminal publication, Urry (1990) describes the tourist gaze as a characteristic approach that tourists adopt to experiencing and “consuming” places. Tourists look at the destinations they visit with a particular curiosity and this gazing becomes a key part of their behaviour and motivation. Urry highlights how this gaze is socially structured, learned and at least partially predetermined. Dominated by visual perception and heightened attention to visual features, the tourist gaze captures the sensory approach that tourists exhibit towards the destinations they visit. It typically stresses aspects that appear unique, different to everyday life and authentic. The picturesque, photogenic, and romantic are common targets for the tourist gaze. Hereby, the consistency between anticipated or projected images (as transported through tourism advertising or through films, literature, and other media) and the actual experience on-site is critical in tourists’ perceptual filtering. In a sense, the tourist gaze is about hunting the proto-typical, idealised and often stereo-typical signs of places as they are socially constructed in the mind of tourists. Tourists often track down the images they have been shown beforehand and desire to capture some proof (e.g., photos) that they have been successful in this endeavour: “As everyone becomes a photographer so everyone also becomes an amateur semiotician. One learns that a thatched cottage with roses round the door represents ‘ye olde England’; or that waves crashing on to rocks signifies ‘wild, untamed nature’; or, especially, that a person with a camera draped around his/her neck is clearly a ‘tourist’” (Urry, 1990, p.139).

While the “spectacle-isation of place” (Urry, 1990, p. 156), as captured in the notion of the tourist gaze, clarifies tourist motivation and behaviour - after all, it remains a descriptive concept. While highly critical, it is not of a transformative nature and does not directly advise how the tourism industry can transform their operations for the better. Building on what Urry meticulously described as the tourist gaze, I am therefore proposing that the idea of an atmospheric gaze can channel

transformative energy on the supply side, while integrating the tourist gaze’s demand-side insights. The atmospheric gaze can be conceived as a heuristic for destination development that is sensitive to the aesthetics that fuel tourist behaviour, but also wary of overly accentuated spectacle-isation that is a common side effect of tourism industries solely chasing the tourist gaze.

An atmosphere is understood as the room-filling, diffuse and hazy something that can be sensually experienced “from within” through immersion (Latka, 2020; McCormack, 2008). Spaces are never empty but always filled with an ethereal mood or feeling which transcends bodies and human beings but also embeds them into a space (Böhme, 2016). We often use words such as “ambience,” “aura” or “tone” to describe this affective engagement with our surroundings. As Gandy (2017, p. 355) puts it, atmospheres are “marked by a range of cultural and material constellations that can invoke a spectrum of affective and emotional responses”. Please note that the meteorological meaning of atmospheres is not the focus of this intellectual tradition (Gandy, 2017).

A particularly intriguing trait in the common conceptualisation of atmospheres is the idea that they are “quasi-objective feelings” (Schmitz, 1967) or sorts of collective emotions including moments of “collective effervescence” during religious events or dance and music performances (Durkheim, 1912). While situational and “creatures of the moment” (Shyldkrot, 2019, after William Dean Howells), atmospheres can be inter-subjectively sensed and described, and can be relatively persistent as some of their building blocks remain steady. The Roman concept of “*genius loci*” (that is, the spirit of a place) captures the entirety of these lingering meanings, feelings and relationships that are associated with a particular place and can be sensed when immersed into the place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Volgger, 2020). Albeit broader in scope, concepts such as “sense of place” have also attempted to incorporate the notion that places can exhibit specific characteristics (Foote & Azaryahu, 2009).

A potpourri of disciplinary traditions of atmospheric theorising

There have been many strands that have contributed to a better understanding of atmospheres. Whilst remaining a “heterogeneous array of perspectives drawn from disparate fields” (Gandy, 2017), these traditions helped to inform, apply, and advance the toolset used to describe and analyse atmospheres. In the following, I will briefly and eclectically skim over a few of these traditions of atmospheric theorising to highlight some dimensions (and ongoing debates) associated with the concept. Note that this short excursion does not claim to be exhaustive by any means, and what I am capturing as atmospheric theorising has not always been coined in this way by respective authors.

Subjective versus inter-subjective perception of atmospheres

One strand is ontological and epistemological; it blends the disciplines of philosophy (in particular, phenomenology) and architecture/design, which share a fascination for aesthetics (see also Shyldkrot, 2019), as well as cultural anthropology and cultural geography. The ontological focus here has been on sharpening the concept of atmospheres; epistemologically, these traditions have been stressing the importance of corporeal experiences where sensations, feelings and emotions are central and appear intertwined with spaces (Böhme, 2016; Gandy, 2017; Schmitz, 1967). There is an ongoing debate regarding a more subjective versus objective understanding of atmospheres (Böhme, 2016; Schmitz, 1967), with Böhme (2016) arguing that atmospheres sit “in between” and “mediate the two sides”. In contrast, authors in cultural anthropology clearly side with the inter-subjective interpretation of atmospheres (Schroer & Schmitt, 2018). They have typically been understanding atmospheres as inter-individual behavioural moods and styles, sometimes called “tones” (Mauss, 1926), sometimes “ethos” (Geertz, 1973). This objectification of atmospheres also underpins the aforementioned idea of the genius loci, which aims to capture an “intrinsic quality of places” (Foote & Azaryahu, 2009), and was reintroduced into architecture by Norberg-Schulz (1980). However, both cultural geographers (see McCormack, 2008) and cultural anthropologists (see Ingold, 2006) were less sure about where to situate the boundary between the material and immaterial and, like the phenomenologists, found the atmosphere concept useful in questioning these boundaries (Gandy, 2017).

Perception versus creation of atmospheres

Another strand in atmospheric theorising is practical, and has seen extensive contributions from marketing scholars, in addition to authors working in design and architecture. There is agreement that “atmospheres can be produced” (Böhme, 2016). Hence, atmospheres are generally conceived to encompass both intended atmospheres (as a product of manipulation) and experienced atmospheres. In this context, Böhme (2016) distinguishes production aesthetics from reception aesthetics. The possibility of atmospheres to be staged is also the foundational idea of the approach to “atmospherics” dominant in marketing. Since Kotler (1973) requested more emphasis on the “total product” marketing scholars have been analysing in a very practical sense how changes to light, scent, sound, and temperature can transform consumer behaviour and the experience of a particular “servicescape” (Bitner, 1992). The emphasis placed on the creation of atmospheres, as captured in Böhme’s “production aesthetics,” also ties up with the writing on placemaking in urban planning and architecture (Lew, 2017). Lew (2017)

distinguishes the organically emerging place making (which is akin to the genius loci idea) from the intentional and planned placemaking which is “the process of creating quality places where people want to live, work, play, shop, learn, and visit” (Wyckoff et al., 2015, p. vi). Lew also brings us back to the dualism between the material and immaterial, and stresses that creating or manipulating atmospheres remains incomplete if either tangible or intangible attributes are omitted. The latter, of course, also includes aspects of destination branding (Pfister, 2013).

Expected benefits of adopting an atmospheric gaze

Why should destination developers and tourism professionals adopt an atmospheric gaze as a guiding principle? Why should they engage with a conceptual area that is a multi-disciplinary patchwork, loaded with unresolved conceptual tensions? In abstract terms, the reason is to be found exactly in these unresolved intricacies that the *atmospheric holism* implies. The strength of the atmospheric gaze lies precisely in its attempt to achieve a holistic understanding of the affective spatial connotations that results from a composite of people, their practices, and relationships, as well as material and immaterial features. This is neither easy nor without contradictions but appears imperative to achieve destination development that values the (evolving) character of places and thus is successful in the long-term and for all its stakeholders.

The atmospheric holism leads to an *atmospheric balance*, which helps destination developers in rethinking the relationship between the individual and collective perceptions, the lived experience, and the intended atmosphere, as well as the tangible and intangible aspects at the interface of body and place (see Schroer & Schmitt, 2018). By shifting away from a consumer-centric attempt to reconfigure destinations based on interpretations of the tourist gaze, adopting the atmospheric gaze will allow to appreciate affective interactions that local residents have with “their” spaces at least as much as affective projections of tourists. Destination development cannot renounce at a comprehensive consideration of material elements, people’s practices, and immaterial dimensions as they are all essential building blocks of atmospheres. In planning their interventions, destination developers thus are well-advised to consider landscapes and builtscapes as much as peopescapes and storyscapes (Lew, 2017; inspired by Appadurai, 1996).

The atmospheric gaze recognises that the affective tonalities are negotiated between all actors involved with a particular space, *and* that they transcend these actors at the same time. In this sense, the atmospheric gaze is aware of the importance of subjective interpretations and situational constellations, but also opens its senses to the place-based affective features that exhibit continuity beyond a particular situation. Thus, in my view, the most important planning guideline stemming from the atmospheric gaze heuristic is related to the normative interpretation of genius loci and could be called *atmospheric respect*. When Norberg-Schulz vigorously lobbied for the genius loci idea in architectural circles, he used the idea in a normative sense: He implored architects to respect existing places and their affective connotations, to enter a dialogue with them and to cautiously balance interventions to build relationships and to create holistic and meaningful entities. Atmospheric interventions are an essential component of destination development (Volgger, 2020), but conceived under the pupils of the atmospheric gaze they should be carried out in a manner that respects and potentially enhances the “spirit” of a place. Whether the atmospheric gaze is a substantially new

perspective or a semantic change is secondary. Instead, central is the hope that it is included as a guiding principle for action in destination development.

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