

## Atmospheres in Urban Light

*Des atmosphères dans la lumière urbaine*

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## Introduction

- 1 Atmospheres are not only a part of how we perceive and make sense of our experiential worlds, they are also crucial in how we understand and find meaning in them. Inescapably spatial and located in experience, understanding atmospheres and their impact means close empirical attention to how they arise and are constituted, how they impress upon us, how they circulate and are shared, and what configures to make them feel differently for diverse people. They weave together the representational, the immaterial and the affective, as they signal activities and appropriate ways to behave. As such, they can prompt us to action, a point that Jean-Paul Thibaud (2015, p. 40) makes when he asks, ‘what does an ambiance make it possible to be, to experience, to do, to perceive and to share?’
- 2 In this article, we advance a dialogic autoethnographic methodology for attuning to, exploring and understanding atmospheres that accounts for them as they arise in the ongoing flow of experience of light. This ethnographic approach brings together theory and experience at the site of the investigation, rather than being focused in the subsequent analysis. In this approach, we research *in* atmospheres – that is, in the ongoing flow and change of shifting impressions and feelings constituted spatially by a multiplicity of elements (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018), but especially in light. In doing so, we seek to interrogate our experience of atmospheres in light, but also to understand their effects if they are purposefully constituted or designed.
- 3 We demonstrate this approach through a discussion of a recent ‘light walk’ in Melbourne’s city centre. Here, three researchers walked together - two women and one man, aged from our late forties to early sixties, and none of us raised in Melbourne - attending specifically to light and the different moods, feelings and impressions it afforded in the urban night. One of the researchers wore a body-mounted GoPro camera, thus recording some of what the team saw and heard in their surroundings, as

well as our conversation, gestures, movements and pace as we moved together. We walked, talked and videoed an hour-and-a-half journey into the heart of Melbourne, building on previous work on 'commented walks' (Thibaud, 2013), and on the investigation of automation on 'light routes' experienced by city commuters (Pink & Sumartojo, 2018; Sumartojo & Pink, 2017). We extended this, however, through the use of video and the specific attention to the lit world. Moreover, our conversation was *part* of our journey, both unfolding in response to the light we encountered and helping to gather our attention and direct our next steps. Walking, talking and videoing together were thus all integrated into prolonged attunement to light and lighting, a focus that occurred *in situ* rather than somehow occurring separate from it.

- 4 As we will show, in the context of the night time city, this included a spectrum of impressions, from bright conviviality to shadowy menace, from rippling mystery to blazing consumerism. By combining walking, talking and videoing we demonstrate that emplaced sensing, feeling and analytical knowing should all be treated as part of the same unfolding experience, and that moreover, such an approach is well-suited to investigate atmospheres precisely because of their excessive and ineffable qualities.
- 5 We will also show how such a methodology opens up ways of understanding atmospheres that are of particular use to designers. Indeed, atmosphere is a longstanding area of interest for designers and architects. Architect Juhani Pallasmaa (2014, p. 230), for example, insists that designers must hone in on the experience of built form beyond a simply visual apprehension, instead attending to the 'complex multi-sensory fusion of countless factors which are immediately and synthetically grasped as an overall atmosphere, ambience, feeling or mood.' Architect Peter Zumthor (2006), purposefully orients his practice around the creation of sensory impressions that extend to emotional experiences when people enter and move in his buildings. Elsewhere, Bille and Sørensen (2016, p. 159) explore how 'less tangible phenomena such as light, sound and air, are part of the sensuous experience of buildings, and how manipulations of architectural form through the use of lighting technologies, heating and so forth influence the experience of built space'. As we will show, while atmospheres remain an ongoing focus of design and research, they also resist attempts to control or define them, and this requires particular forms of attunement, apprehension and analysis.

## Atmospheres and light

- 6 Our focus on light as a productive way to think about and describe atmosphere is well-established. Scholarship focused on urban lighting design has long recognized it as central to how urban atmospheres are constituted and experienced (Ebbensgaard, 2015; Shaw, 2014; Slater, Sloane, & Entwistle, 2015; Edensor, 2012, 2015). Such atmospheric effects are conjured by the different qualities of illumination, as Cochrane (2004, p. 12-13) insists, including 'texture, accent, spatial transition, visual cues, security and perception of security, moods, cerebral temperature and drama', radiating diverse qualities of sparkle, glow, glare, highlighting and diffusion. These diverse lighting effects guide understandings about how to act and manoeuvre within distinctive spatial and social settings. This spark to action is also accompanied by affective, emotional and subsequently communicative responses that further mix in with the unfolding atmosphere.

- 7 As Tim Ingold (2011, p. 258) explains, light is ‘a phenomenon of experience, of that very involvement in the world that is a necessary precondition for the isolation of the perceiver as a subject with a “mind”, and of the environment as a domain of objects to be perceived’. Light is integral to the perception and experience of our surroundings and our sense of ourselves as spatially and socially located. Gernot Böhme (2017, p. 202) goes further, arguing that ‘illuminations are perceived as atmospheres’ because ‘all of what is seen takes on a tint that turns the diversity of what is seen into a unified whole’. Here light draws together the visual world into a way of feeling and understanding our surroundings.
- 8 In terms of urban illumination, a wealth of historical examples show how urban lighting has long been associated with particular ways of feeling in cities (Isenstadt, Maile Petty & Neumann, 2015). Culturally specific examples include the distinctive sense of Danish cosiness, or *hygge*, produced in part through carefully arranged candlelight (Bille, 2014), the use of light in displaying and constituting feelings of honour and religious belief in Indian villages (Kumar, 2015), and the role of domestic lighting in Bedouin homes in Jordan as an integral part of culturally specific hospitality practices (Bille, 2017). In cities of the west, lighting design both signals the intended uses of a place, such as a brightly lit metro entrance, and tinctures these with particular feelings, such as the excitement engendered by the sparkly animation or vibrant neon signalling a nightclub. In other words, light and lighting are not simply about visual perception but are deeply cultural in their indexation of particular activities or places, often resonating with familiar artistic and media representations, in augmenting the constitution of spatially extended and shared atmospheres.
- 9 In a study of the ‘lit world’ and automation, Sumartojo and Pink (2017) identify how illumination of various forms mixed and mingled with many other elements of their research participants’ surroundings, creating feelings and impressions that were well beyond what the designer of any one of the light sources may have intended. For example, car lights through a curtained bedroom window moved along a bedroom wall, resulting in a compelling aesthetic effect that was intensified in combination with other light sources and the materialities of room walls and curtains, and creating a moody, mysterious feel (Pink & Sumartojo, 2018, p. 845). Here the relationship between light and materiality was paramount.
- 10 However, light often exceeds material boundaries, seeping into neighbouring spaces, bouncing off surfaces and angles in unexpected ways and mixing with other lights, sounds, smells and hapticities (Pink & Sumartojo, 2018). In this sense, light also carries and communicates atmospheric impressions because it resists perfect control. Bille (2017) discusses how the ‘ecstasies’ of a thing mean they ‘transcend their own tangibility’, for example when light shines through a coloured window and suffuses a room or casts its hues across a floor. Illuminations thus ‘radiate presence, projecting their qualities outwards and colouring the environs’ (Thibaud, 2011, p. 211). Here light is part of how atmospheres are conditioned and how affects and sensations circulate and are shared across the relational setting of which they are a part, effects to which we may respond and to which we become attuned in various ways. As a key element in the constitution of atmospheres, illumination cannot be bounded, for example, as it fades into darkness, blends with other lighting or transfigures the bodies and shapes of people or things.

- 11 Yet, although light is often a potent element in forming atmospheres, it is invariably accompanied by other elements; indeed, atmospheres are typically characterized by their multiplicity, by the diverse energies and forces that coalesce in changing configurations to foster their continuous emergence. In enrolling different configurations of things, agencies and people, atmospheres are dynamically constituted by 'qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements' (Stewart, 2011, p. 445). For instance, as well as light, the quality of air and temperature, and sonic, aromatic and haptic stimuli add to the atmosphere of a setting and an occasion. The general mood might be tuned by practices that express mundane habits or conversely, by the buzz generated by a festival or other special event. Moreover, atmospheres are never temporally or spatially discrete but emerge according to the time of day or season, to the levels of activity and movement, to the weather, personal experience and predilections, or by previous experiences in place, not to mention unexpected occurrences and encounters.
- 12 In attempting to design atmospheres, light designers typically endeavour to create 'tuned' spaces that resonate with particular tonal intensities, colours, animated forms and signs that excite consumers, visitors and others (see Edensor, 2017; Cochrane, 2004; Langanier & van der Pol, 2011). In contemporary times, strategies for designing atmospheres are becoming more sophisticated and varied, as businesses attempt to lure would-be-consumers and local authorities strive to enhance place-image. In transforming the urban realms through which we move and linger, such instrumental practices seek to alter the sounds, odours, lights, colours and scents of places, to produce a tuned atmosphere rather than an overt, concentrated spectacle. As Thibaud (2015, p. 42) asserts, 'urban design no longer just focuses on objects but also what is between the objects.' Here designers attempt to produce atmospheric tonalities through such qualities as soothing sounds, lively tactilities or aromatic impressions that augment the apprehension of space. Yet light is also deployed according to the different imperatives of the artistic creators of the imaginative installations that accumulate at increasingly popular and diverse light festivals. Here light might be utilised to encourage points of convivial congregation (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2018), accord with annual visits to annual illuminations (Edensor, 2012) or be designed in vernacular forms to foster a sense of community (Edensor, 2018), all occasions at which light-generated atmospheres surge.
- 13 Atmospheres, however, cannot be perfectly designed, simply because they are taken up in individual experience by people with their own imaginations, histories and subjectivities (Anderson, 2009). Instead, atmosphere can best be understood by way of what configures into our experiential worlds; we must therefore attend to memory, temporality, movement, sensation, material and immaterial surroundings (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018). It follows that attempts to describe and thereby understand atmospheres are most productive when we are immersed within them rather than regarding them from a distanced or outside location. In the next section we turn to our immersed, collaborative and mobile methodology, before recounting our shared light walk and the ways in which our experiences mixed the sensory, imagined and representational elements of urban public place.

## Theory and methods in dialogue

- 14 The practice of urban walking as a way to research experience of the city is well established (de Certeau, 1984; Ingold & Lee Vergunst, 2008; Pink, 2008; Pink, Hubbard, O'Neill & Radley, 2010; Thibaud, 2013). Walking in an environment is part of how we come to incrementally learn and know (Ingold, 2007; Harris, 2007) both in everyday life and in ambulatory research encounters with others (Pink, 2007, 2008). In our existing research, we have engaged walking research techniques variously. We have walked in cities with participants in research (Pink, 2007, 2008), researched our own experiences of walking (Edensor, 2012) and asked research participants to undertake and document their urban walking experiences (Sumartojo & Pink, 2017). In each of these methodological iterations, we sought to understand what it feels like to walk through specific localities, what particular ways of knowing and sensing are engendered as we walk. As such, we have developed walking as a research technique that is tailored to investigate the theoretical concerns outlined above. These walking methodologies have also enabled us to develop new concepts for understanding what it feels like to be in the city in 'the lit world' (Pink & Sumartojo, 2017), as part of 'public atmospheres' (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018; Closs Stephens, Hughes, Schofield *et al.*, 2017) and at light festivals (Edensor, 2012, 2018).
- 15 The light walk that underpins this article involved the three of us following a route chosen by one of us. Rather than the routine paths that we take through our city nearly every day, this route was sensorially and affectively unfamiliar. In walking, we deliberately sought to articulate and share our feelings about walking through light with each other, together creating an ongoing discussion through which we explored what and how we experienced the lit atmospheres that we moved through. While our focus was intentionally on light, we were aware that both theoretically and experientially the visual experience of light could not be separated from other sensory inputs or modalities, and that these do not exist singularly either as part of our environments or in human perception. Our walk therefore continuously wove in and out of our individual experiences as we went, which we were consciously focused on interpreting in relation to light. This helped engender modes of consensus that drew on our different existing knowing and expertise about the area, lighting and people, as well as our individual senses of aesthetic and physical comfort.
- 16 In video recording our conversations and aspects of the visual environment as we walked, we were able to talk freely, without taking notes, and together build a set of impressions that were negotiated and built a shared way of knowing and articulating experience that made sense to the three of us together. This way of knowing was partially derived from our embodied experiences, but was inevitably framed by our shared theoretical and analytical understandings of light, movement and space. In this sense, our discussion could be seen as productive of embodied theory: ways of feeling and knowing that emerge from experiences that are framed theoretically as they come about and become known on those terms. This was possible only because as three researchers with shared theoretical commitments, we were able to co-shape both sentiments and theory, as such extending the scope of what we were able to propose empirically and analytically beyond the accounts of either the single auto-ethnographer or the interviewer of a research participant.

- 17 At its core, the research exercise was a form of mobile and collaborative attunement to our atmospheric surroundings, and we followed Brigstocke and Noorani's (2016, p. 2) notion that '[t]o attune is to tune in or to tune out; it is to calibrate our bodies as instruments' as we moved through and sought to comprehend Melbourne's different social, sensory and material worlds. Through shared discussion, we purposefully turned our attention to forms and modes of natural and artificial illumination, asking ourselves what they looked and felt like, what activities or cultural structures they indexed, and how they related to other aspects of our imaginations and surroundings. Methodologies that prompt such forms of attunement (Stewart, 2011) include commented walks (Thibaud, 2013), go-along interviews (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018) audio and digital recording (Drozdowski & Birdsall, 2018), and public art installation (Sumartojo, Lacey & Hillary, 2017). The key point is that attuning from within is a valuable approach to understanding both the constitution and experience of atmospheres, and that this can be done in multiple ways. Our approach, and the phenomenography it made possible, offers a close description that extends and deepens existing scholarship.
- 18 This methodology advances beyond conventional modes of autoethnography or researcher-participant dialogues. Instead, by engaging in a three-researcher discussion we sought to create a mode of engagement that brought together, and interweaved, experiential and analytical registers within the dialogic research encounter. Our discussions could be divorced from neither the immediacy of the experience of light nor from our respective biographies of scholarship and research concerning light. Thus, whereas the anthropologist Paul Stoller (1997) writes of how what he refers to as the sensible and the intelligible (or we might say, the sensory and the theoretical) might be interwoven or moved between in ethnographic writing, in the research encounter demonstrated in Figure 1, these registers already become visible in the research encounter itself. This creates a particular mode of ethnographic knowing, which differs from that produced through auto-ethnography or interviewing, because it positions the researchers' analytical sensitivity as relational and negotiable within the research encounter.

Figure 1: Low lighting discussed by the researchers

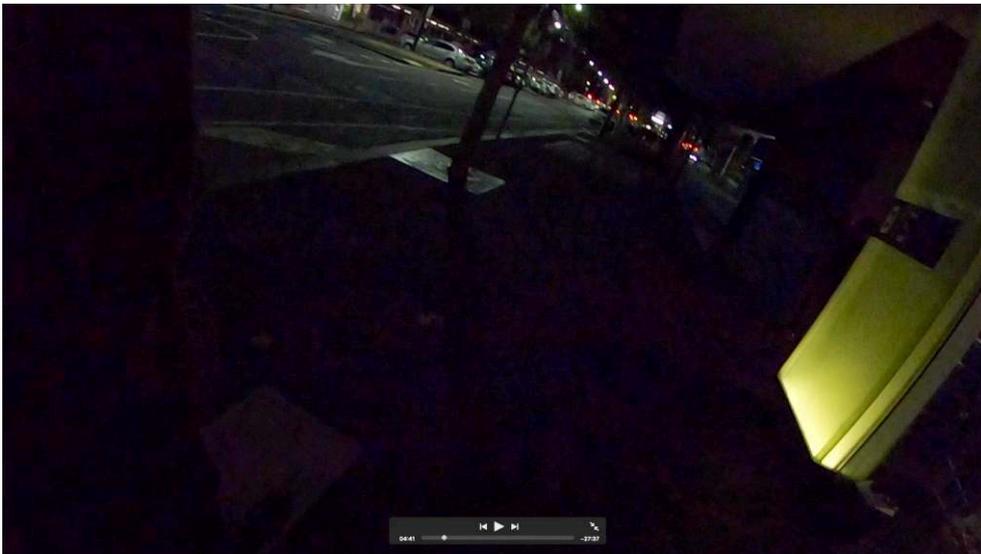


Photo: Shanti Sumartojo

- 19 For example, during an early segment of the walk the concept of atmosphere (which all of us have written about) was raised, relating to our interests in the ways atmospheres are constituted as ongoingly emergent phenomena. We walked through a zone that felt to us as if it was ‘closing down’ as people worked, cleaning the building interiors at this time on a Friday evening. As these selected fragments from our evolving discussion show, our conversation moved between accounting for what we felt, and our attempts to engage the concept of atmosphere to explain this:

**Sarah:** “If we’re talking about atmosphere as much as light, there’s the sounds and the feel of it, the light’s all part of it...”

**Shanti:** “... It’s like you can hear it but you don’t know where its coming from...”

**Tim:** “... It’s that time of day though when the light goes down... I think it’s worth noticing how low the lighting is, with some signature features, with the lower lighting” (Figure 1)

**Shanti:** “And then you’ve got this kind of harsh road style lighting here... functional”

**Tim:** “Yes but I think the sort of attempt to produce stylish lighting also conveys the atmospheric... at least it attempts to convey the atmospherics...”

- 20 Thus, within the encounter we talked beyond the immediacy of the experience of the moment, but related this back to categories that we had discussed in earlier research. Such a mode of practice and the self-reflexivity it can generate, we suggest is a characteristic of this methodology.

## Light walk, Melbourne, 15 March 2019

- 21 In the following account of our light walk, the sensory, affective, representational, material and cognitive aspects of our surroundings all belong to the distinctive atmospheres we moved in and through, conditioned by constantly changing natural and artificial light conditions. We structure this passage chronologically, focusing on several moments in our walk where we apprehended atmosphere gathering most thickly, or where we had the strongest impressions concerning how it felt to us and

what it signalled or invoked. The account also points to some key aspects: built form, temporality, materiality, other sensory experiences such as noise, weather and the representational qualities of illumination, that configured into atmospheres. Accordingly, we describe how our walk unfolded, and how each distinctive atmosphere surged, ebbed and beaded together over the course of our journey.

## Victoria Harbour

- 22 We began by meeting in the Victoria Harbour precinct of central Melbourne at 20.00, just as the sun was setting. In summer and spring, Melbourne's radiant sunsets bestow the city with a potent affective and sensory charge. The fleeting, glowing twilight generates an overwhelmingly melancholic sense that the day is coming to an end; the stilling of the day advances and augurs a period of welcome respite, of the end of the day and the week. Yet this is accompanied by an anticipatory surge that the evening is beginning (see Davidson, 2015, for an account of the twilight's multiplicities and cultural interpretations). With the associations of nocturnal urban enticements and the possibilities that might lie ahead, people are gearing up for the night.
- 23 The steely grey of the water reflected the vibrant sunset and the shapes of the large office blocks that surround the harbour start to become blurred while their lights intensify. The giant Bolte Bridge, a cantilever construction that spans the harbour and the Yarra River, is an urban engineering spectacle that was accentuated by the silhouettes of its two vertiginous concrete towers against the luminous peach sky of the gloaming, and the vivid rows of blue and then red and orange lights that dramatize its horizontal form. This atmospheric scene was supplemented by the flickering lights of the cars of commuters as they are driven home across the bridge, underscoring the impression of day's end. Here, the temporality of the scene was critical, for atmosphere accompanies and registers the collective rhythms to which we are habituated, infuses regular arrivals, phases and departures, and such events are announced by light and dark: the lights are switched on to guide us on our way or lure us towards pleasures, daybreak triggers us into action and twilight solicits us to think of home. This encounter with the harbour, and the distinctive conditions of twilight began our light walk.
- 24 After leaving the harbour, we arrived in front of the *Light House* (Figure 2), an innovative permanent light installation devised by Melbourne-based Ramus Illumination Pty Ltd to transmit incoming data about the weather in real time. Powered by solar panels, the towering LED lights situated either side of the building's narrowly angled corner responds to this information through the dynamic, animated play of diverse colours that signify rain, wind and sun in conveying a sensory impression of the weather to come. The installation affords a sense of being in a city that is invariably enfolded within a dynamic weather world (Ingold, 2010) with its cycles of precipitation, temperature, light, cloud and wind, attuning us to the broader dynamic forces that circulate around urban space. The work thus conjures up atmosphere in its double meaning, as articulated by McCormack (2008): the climactic atmosphere that contributes to the affective and sensory atmospheric effects that condition our apprehension of the city.
- 25 Through the changing display of light, the city is shown to be located within a space of rhythms and flows, both human and non-human, that produce the vitality of the world,

and as such, the work chimes with other installations that acknowledge the often concealed or invisible energies, rhythms and processes that (re)constitute places. For instance, Yann Kersalé arranged a series of translucent rods in the garden of Paris's Branly Museum that were also connected to the database of a nearby weather centre and programmed to react to the surrounding levels of heat and cold, with white signifying cold, pale blue a mild temperature and intense turquoise on warm evenings (Auboiron, 2010). While a knowledge of the meaning of the *Light House* display fostered an appreciation of these circulations and an anticipation of the weather to come, even without this knowledge, the dynamic pulses of changing colour along the sharp edge of the building excitingly inferred the city's cultural vitality and creativity, its openness to new designs, artworks; the work seemed to offer a promise that many things await discovery in Melbourne and introduced an electric vitality to this subdued part of the city. This first stop thus primed us to attune to light on the rest of the walk.

Figure 2: *Light House*, 2017, lighting design by Ramus Illumination Pty Ltd



Photo: Shanti Sumartojo

## Docklands

- 26 The animated excitement of *Light House* did not last long, however, as we started walking eastwards. The Docklands development was initiated in 1997, and like many harbourside regeneration schemes around the world, has been primarily financed by private capital. The precinct currently consists of an aggregation of modish apartment blocks, offices and corporate headquarters while retaining some historical structures and several contemporary artworks. Yet it has not successfully generated a lively nocturnal environment. We trod through quiet streets lit by functionally designed, low wattage streetlights, their pavements unanimated by the light spillage from shops, and

only sporadically interrupted by the twinkling illuminations from bars and cafes, and the lively hubbub that spills out from these premises. The atmosphere here was somewhat eerie, and since the sun had only recently gone down, the sense was of an evacuated realm, a dead zone in which the adornments of apartment blocks and businesses with stylish signature light designs to index sophistication intensifies the impression of desertion. The silence and gloom gathered to produce a sense of unease as we moved from pools of light reflected in the pavement outside shops and restaurants and back into the shadows. Here light signalled activity in some limited places, but also highlighted the lack of people in the streets and alleys in general. We moved rapidly through this area, discouraged by its subdued, somewhat depressing feel.

- 27 Approaching the Yarra River, looking rightwards towards the main part of the city, the nightscape was dominated by a crowd of tower blocks topped with the baleful glare of corporate logos: ANZ, TRANSURBAN, KPMG, MYER. This was a bland landscape devoid of people at street level, but colonised by looming signs promoting commerce and business, static, blocks of illuminated perspex lettering blandly and impassively imparting a banal corporate occupying presence. This seems to constitute what David Nye (2015) refers to as an 'edited landscape' which thwarts the creation of an 'orderly legible city' that expresses the values of private enterprise while keeping most other spaces clothed in darkness. In the pared down visual landscape of the urban night, the powerful are able to imprint their presence on space, by privileging particular buildings and blazing logos and advertisements that lure attention, whereas in the ambient visual array of the day, such dominant, colonising space-making strategies are less effective. They radiated an oppressive atmosphere in this dim and reduced nocturnal setting.

### Webb footbridge

- 28 Escaping the impositions of corporate illumination, we were lured over the River Yarra by the Webb footbridge. Lucent white strips of LED illumination demarcated the sides of the footpath at ground level and picked out the distinctive curvilinear, web-like structure of the enclosing ironwork. The bridge gleamed coldly against the contrastingly thick dark backdrop of the river. Yet, rather than focusing upon this tenebrous anterior, the brightness of the lighting revealed that the brightly lit steel skeleton was distressed in texture and in need of a new coat of paint. Despite this sense of neglect, a more distanced view suggested the bridge was a portal to another, livelier realm in which white and blue luminaires were the archetypal markers of distinction. A feeling of anticipation built as we moved on from the subdued atmosphere of the Docklands (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Webb footbridge from the Docklands to the South Wharf area on the river, with two of the researchers discussing the bridges lights and materiality



Photo: Shanti Sumartojo

- 29 Immediately upon reaching the other side, we walked beneath a large road bridge with wide concrete supports set deep beneath the river's surface. Here, much less glaring white LEDs had been subtly placed to reflect the rippling fluctuations of the water, transforming the flat functional appearance of the concrete. This inculcated an atmosphere of calm and reassurance as the melding of water and light produced a hypnotic, meditative patterning that mesmerised us. We paused and looked at the light, discussing how it supported feelings of safety despite the noise of the traffic passing overhead and the somewhat gloomy conditions. This was because the illumination created an underpass that deviated from the typical associations of such settings with crime and danger. Instead, the use of light here suggested a caring, generous approach to making public space that was designed to solicit pleasure and generate soothing vibes. The illuminated ripples also reminded us of the non-human currents that flow through the city, here the salty and fresh waters that ceaselessly swelled and ebbed, a liquid dynamism that was given extra prominence by the reflected light playing across the river's surface, revealing tidal flows, turbulence, calm and the water's interplay with weather. Shortly after, we noticed a small boat sailing upstream, perhaps going out to sea, illuminated with green, red and white lights and with a shadowy figure moving on board. This seemed mysterious and connoted nautical adventure, a solitary vessel afloat, but it charged the atmosphere with intimations that we were walking through a maritime city with a long history of comings and goings by sea and river (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Melbourne city lights reflected in the rippling River Yarra with a small mysterious boat picked out in red



Photo: Shanti Sumartojo

## South Wharf

- 30 Soon, we came to a riverside area lined with a succession of large bars illuminated with functional, rather dull, off-white lighting that seemed aligned with their purpose as sites for cheap drinking. It was the end of the week and the bars were packed with night-goers, with rowdy noise and dense dance beats pouring out of their entrances. There were large screens prepared to broadcast the weekend's Formula One race in the city, but there was little attempt to enchant this realm with felicitous lighting or indeed any other form of deliberate design. The rowdy, relentless hubbub testified to the animated conversation and boozy excitements that add to the atmosphere of the Friday night out. After a kilometre or so we passed the lurid, blaring and unsubtle lights of the vast Crown casino complex, a visual riot of multicoloured illuminated panels, lit columns and brazen lettering and logos that simultaneously imposed an intrusive, garish gaiety on the scene and signalled a transition to the more expensive drinking and eating outlets that stretched further east alongside the river.
- 31 At this point we noticed how the lighting design became more sophisticated, with stylish, signature lampposts and trees festooned with strings of fairy lights. This dense array of illumination seemed over-coded, however, its atmosphere overwrought, with light serving to loudly broadcast this space as a glitzy realm of serious leisure. The noise was equally intense and together with the effects of the light and the movement of celebrants, the ambience was a marked contrast to how this space feels by day, where it is a more sedate place for shopping and dining. At night, catalysed by crowds, piped music, chatter and illumination, the atmosphere was entirely transformed, and we began to quicken our pace to move rapidly through a stretch that none of us found appealing or pleasurable.

## Southbank

- 32 And then we suddenly found ourselves amidst a crowded, brightly illuminated array of temporary stalls, selling commodities connected to the forthcoming weekend's

Formula One race in Melbourne (Figure 5). An array of racing car simulators, memorabilia, souvenirs, clothing and videos of drivers vied for attention, as the recorded din of the whining engines of high-speed vehicles filled the air. The stoked atmosphere of this unexpected scene was generated by the tendencies of cities to host large scale sporting events, conferences, concerts and festivals, and for these to be signalled by distinctive sensory changes to light and sound. These strategies of ‘eventification’ temporarily bring enthusiasts who catalyse the city with their fervour, supplementing the usual ebbs and flows of the city’s atmosphere. Doreen Jakob contends that this intensified ‘eventification’ saturates urban redevelopment strategies and that such events incorporate the ‘deliberate organization of a heightened emotional and aesthetic experience at a designated time and space’ wherein places are ‘transformed into an aestheticized place of consumption’ (2012, p. 448-449). Such strategies seem to be designed to amplify atmosphere and generate a sense of a ‘happening’ city, and while this clearly works for some enthusiasts, others may regard the intensified sense of occasion as cynically manufactured and over-hyped. Here, the intense blasts of luminosity from screens and stalls were deployed to augment this intensified ambience of the event.

Figure 5: The light from a driving simulation game spills onto the bluestone pavement, creating overlapping shadows with the visitors’ bodies



Photo: Shanti Sumartojo

- 33 As for ourselves, we felt sensorially overloaded by the event and the general fervour on the South Bank. We seem not to have not developed the kind of blasé attitude that Simmel identified as a means to shield the self from the onslaught of urban sensation and so we escaped the glare and din by heading for the lower path along the river, a calmer, quieter passage where we could reattune to the illuminated urban vista on the opposite river bank. We wondered if our attempts to escape the atmosphere of the upper bank was a factor of our age and if we were younger, whether we would feel less exhausted and disoriented by the sensory environment. Indeed, the revellers on the South Bank seem happy and animated, suggesting that certain atmospheres attract some and repulse others, and that the experience of them is also conditioned by the moods that you bring with you.
- 34 As we neared the city centre, unlike the somewhat indistinct environment on the opposite side of the river where light was not deployed to highlight landmarks or

render space legible, the illuminated vista was one of complexity and diversity, a panoply of diverse levels, an alluring mix of heritage and contemporary buildings, with cathedrals alongside tower blocks. As we stood and looked at this vista, we noticed how the variegated illumination, of diverse colours, tones and intensities, and with particular architectural elements highlighted, was further supplemented by the illuminated cranes that stood high above the city and signified the current building boom. This archetypal nocturnal domain viewed from afar, was a potent signifier of cosmopolitan modernity and urban romance. To reach it, we crossed the river by descending into the Flinders Station underpass.

## Flinders Street underpass

- 35 We immediately noticed how the subway was suffused with a pale-yellow hue, and the thick girders arranged across the ceiling were illuminated so that their steely form was brought to attention while minimising glare. This ceiling was very low, and pedestrians were channelled along, with echoing footsteps and conversation echoing through the passageway. The light, the noise and the movement conjured a potent atmosphere that contributed to the sense that this is an explicitly safe, civic, egalitarian, public space, a space in which we could comfortably be together with strangers. It was also certainly a functional space but one that nonetheless afforded shared pleasure in moving along and towards or away from departing or arriving trains alongside others. This linear space, including the distinctly unfashionable two strips of whitish-yellow lighting embedded into the low ceiling along the length of the passage, has not been subject to modish design but despite this, its affordances and the dispositions of people moving through it constituted an atmosphere that was augmented by the expectations of the start or end of a journey. For us, like the bridge we discussed earlier, it also offered a move from one urban realm to another, from the entertainment zone on the South Bank to the city centre, to a realm of urban screens, bright advertisements, diverse illuminated window displays, differently lit buildings, and the lights of vehicles and passing trams rumbling past, all combining to form a different lightscape and very different atmosphere. The underpass felt like a transition zone, a relief from the frantic feel of Southbank, and a passage to the more familiar city street we emerged into. The less stylish but functional lights of the station entrance felt comforting after the frantic feel of the Southbank zone, the atmosphere a more banal and familiar one, of people coming and going from the very centre of Melbourne (Figure 6).

Figure 6: The underpass of Flinders' Street Station, with its stark lighting scheme



Photo: Shanti Sumartojo

## Parklands

- 36 We concluded our walk with a drink in the popular Federation Square, in a bar that overlooked the Domain Parklands on the South bank of the River Yarra. In contrast to the bright lights of our journey so far, this extensive green playground was swathed in darkness, almost bereft of any illuminated landmarks. The contrasting sense of night and the unseen possibilities and dangers that may lurk in this crepuscular environment gave a frisson of excitement to the city, which suddenly seemed wilder and less regulated. The damp grass, the shrieks of nocturnal birds, the muted traffic, the leafy cover and the indiscernible forms of this arboreal shadowy realm could be readily imagined, as could the thick atmosphere pervading this space.

## Implications

- 37 In walking through Melbourne at night, exploring the atmospheres conjured by light through a phenomenography that involved regular reflexive conversations with each other and continuous filming, we experience a wide range of illuminated effects. The atmospheres of the walk were certainly partly conditioned by diverse factors, including the time of day, week and season, the weather and the events staged in the city (which the *Light House* installation keyed us into at the start of our walk). The atmosphere of Victoria Harbour, for instance, was profoundly charged by the effects of twilight and the stream of commuters far away. Certain spaces had most certainly not been subject to assiduous design strategies and this contributed to different effects. The bland,

lifeless, alienating atmosphere of the Docklands was exacerbated by the blunt dominance of corporate signs and only alleviated by the energetic *Light House*, itself of course, an object of advanced urban light design. However, elsewhere, quite modest designs were especially effective, notably the white light that transformed the dishevelled Webb footbridge into a somewhat magical portal, the simple lights that illuminated rippling water on concrete that transformed the usually forbidding atmosphere of an urban underpass, and most of all, the basic, yellowish lighting used for the Flinders Street underpass that inadvertently contributed a felicitous tone to a linear space of conviviality and anticipation.

- 38 In contradistinction to these under-designed realms, and despite what we interpreted as attempts to design fun and convivial atmospheres of shared pleasure in the Southbank precinct, we all felt uncomfortable and bullied by the loud noise, the brightness and movement of lights, the shiny, reflective surfaces and the forms of consumption on display. This was subsequently intensified by the brightly-lit Formula One jamboree. Our reaction was to move away from this sensory barrage to the quieter, lower level of the bank nearer the soothing, shadowy river. Here, we enjoyed the compensatory pleasures of the promise of the sophisticated nightscape on the opposite side of the river, which, like the thick darkness of the Domain Parklands, was richly charged with associations generated by numerous mediated images and narratives, as well as our own previous experiences of these places.
- 39 These latter two examples advance Margaret Wetherell's contention that certain theories of affect are not well served 'by dividing representation from the non-representational, marking out the former as the province of consciousness and deliberation, and the latter as the province of the unconscious and the unconsidered' (2012, p. 22). It is the same in the case of atmosphere, where representational, emotional, affective and sensory impacts continuously meld, as Ben Anderson notes in claiming that atmospheres 'mix together narrative and signifying elements and non-narrative and asignifying elements' (2009, p. 80).
- 40 More broadly, in considering the unpredictable and emergent qualities of the atmospheres that we successively experienced, Bille *et al.* (2015, p. 34) urge us to conceive 'atmosphere as a space of political formation... [that] cannot be controlled in any simple and unambiguous way'. For while atmosphere might be intended to strengthen agendas of consumption, politics or corporate power, its very ambiguity makes it unpredictable and changeable. Accordingly, when we attend to how atmospheres might be designed or staged, we must consider how they do not necessarily conform to the intentions of those who seek to produce them and how instead, they might complicate or exceed the vectors along which this power is exercised. Indeed, if we treat atmosphere as a form of potential - because it is always in emergence - then we will acknowledge that it is never completed (Anderson, 2014). As we have elucidated in this article, methodological approaches that attend to the experience of atmosphere through the moments of immersion in it, and predicated on the ongoing flow of experience, can be fruitful in revealing its complex effects.
- 41 A key point that follows from our approach is that atmospheres themselves cannot be designed as such, because we cannot predetermine, control or predict people's experiential worlds. Instead, the role of design is to create interventions that make possible the circumstances that might encourage particular types of atmosphere to emerge (Sumartojo & Pink, 2018). It thus follows that design is never a complete

process, and this is clearly shown in our phenomenography of atmospheres in urban light. In altering our route along the South Bank, we exemplify how we all make ongoing adjustments to improve our surroundings or routines, even if these are considered minor or insignificant. In this project, our use of video was able to show our movements and conversation about this, making these activities available for subsequent analysis. This impossibility of completion applies to designed objects, services or other things active in the world as well as atmospheres. Therefore, interventions that create the contexts in which atmospheres are produced involve both intentional designerly modes of making as well and the improvisatory forms of making, of co-design, that saturate everyday experience (Sumartojo and Pink, 2018). Accordingly, as we have demonstrated, attunement to atmospheres requires ethnographic methodologies that are sensitive to the emergent and contingent qualities of our experiential worlds.

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## ABSTRACTS

Inescapably spatial and located in experience, understanding atmospheres and their impact means close empirical attention to how they arise and are constituted, how they impress upon us, how they circulate and are shared, and what configures to make them feel differently for diverse people. In this article, we advance a dialogic autoethnographic methodology for attuning to, exploring and understanding atmospheres that accounts for them as they arise in the ongoing flow of experience of light. In this ethnographic approach, we research *in* atmospheres – that is, in the ongoing flow and change of shifting impressions and feelings constituted spatially by a multiplicity of elements. Taking a ‘light walk’ through inner city Melbourne as our example, we interrogate our experience of atmospheres in light, and also address how they might be purposefully constituted or designed.

Inévitablement spatiale et située dans l’expérience, notre compréhension des atmosphères et de leur impact suppose une attention empirique portée à la façon dont elles apparaissent et sont constituées, dont elles nous marquent, dont elles circulent et sont partagées, et ce qui fait qu’elles génèrent différentes émotions chez différents individus. Cet article propose une méthodologie auto-ethnographique dialogique pour s’adapter à, explorer et comprendre les

atmosphères. Cette méthodologie rend compte de ces dernières lors de leur apparition dans le flux continu de l'expérience de la lumière. Par cette approche ethnographique, nous menons une recherche *dans* les atmosphères, autrement dit dans le flux continu et dans les changements d'impressions et de sentiments en évolution et constitués spatialement par une multitude d'éléments. Par l'exemple d'une « marche lumineuse » dans le centre-ville de Melbourne, nous questionnons notre expérience des atmosphères en lumière et abordons la façon dont elles pourraient être constituées et conçues délibérément.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** atmosphère, lumière, obscurité, design d'éclairage, méthodes en marche, ethnographie visuelle, autoethnographie dialogique

**Keywords:** atmospheres, light, dark, lighting design, walking methods, visual ethnography, dialogic autoethnography

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