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The interplay of materiality and sociality in the constitution of cozy 3rd place atmosphere

L'intériorité confortable. Interaction entre matérialité et sociabilité dans la constitution de l'atmosphère confortable des 3^{èmes} lieux

Jeppe Trolle Linnet

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Exploring the sociality of coziness

- 1 In the urban experience of ambience in public space, how does the presence and spectacle of other people partake in constituting atmosphere? In a subject's multisensory perception of atmosphere, how does the social buzz of the urban crowd, and the reflexive subject's observance of other spectators, interweave with other factors? The social spaces investigated in this research are cafés, or so-called 3rd places (Oldenburg, 1999); the public spaces for leisure and urban encounter that have been central in the rise of civil society, and which as a contemporary consumption experience offer a stopping point between, and a contrast to, 1st places (the home) and 2nd places (the workplace). The material presented below suggests that, in 3rd places that aim to provide customers with coziness, a pleasurable sense of interiority is furthered by the co-presence with other consumers; the presence in space of their bodies and the circles that they form. If we include in our analysis of urban atmosphere these instances of commercialized, anonymous co-presence, we may become attentive to new aspects of everyday urban ambience.
- 2 The analysis presented below highlights the role of co-presence in the commercial orchestration of cozy atmosphere at 3rd place venues. As shown in the empirical material, visitors to cafés see coziness as a pleasant characteristic of the atmosphere that these offer. Characterizing the atmosphere as cozy, they seize upon certain aspects of the co-presence with other guests that are interesting from the theoretical viewpoint of atmospheres and ambience. In conceptualizing the subject-object dynamics of atmosphere, Gernot Böhme calls attention to different types such as the strained, the oppressive and the serene (1993, p. 119). The present paper explores cozy atmosphere. It

looks at the role of co-presence, an intersubjective dimension which seems not to have been explored in the texts that outline the field of atmosphere and ambience research. Taking its empirical point of departure in 3rd places, this paper adds to research on urban ambience by exploring one of the “forms, processes, and conditions under which an urban experience occurs” (Thibaud, 2011, p. 212).

- 3 The present study contributes to, and resonates with, others that look at specific aspects of how coziness arises. Both in works on *hygge* (Hansen, 1980; Linnet, 2011) and lighting specifically (Bille and Sørensen, 2007), it is argued that lighting is a fundamental aspect to *hygge*. Bille and Sørensen (2007) show that lighting technology is important in creating atmospheres such as *hygge*, as it orchestrates social interaction and expresses cultural expectations around space, sociality and proximity (Bille, 2015). From the vantage point of the home, using lighting and other technologies are important practices for subjects in regulating the visibility of themselves and their neighbors, and thereby their experience of relating to neighborhood and surrounding community. In spite of the clear relationship between light and sociality evidenced by the research referenced here, the latter does not ask how the presence to and by other people as such, technologies of visibility aside, takes part in building the sense of atmosphere. This paper agrees that shaping social interaction and facilitating a sense of mutual presence between people is central to objects and technologies that create coziness, but goes further than previous works by conceptualizing the role of urban sociality in the perception of atmosphere, analyzing urban intersubjectivity as a form of atmospheric media. This widening of the ambience field's exploration of atmospheric factors acknowledges the multi-sensory character of the latter (Böhme, 1993; Thibaud, 2011). Taking steps towards such a conceptualization is the contribution of this article. The paper argues that anonymous urban co-presence is a central factor, if not sufficient, in the commercial delivery of a 3rd place atmospheric experience. The analysis suggests that researchers should appreciate how social patterns align with material structures, in a layering upon layering through different media that effect the building of “bubbles” which allow a sense of dwelling. The work of Schutz (1970) is used in the discussion of interrelations between 3rd place consumers.
- 4 The article builds on the author's previous work on the Danish concept of *hygge* (Linnet, 2011), the type of atmosphere on which this paper bases its references to coziness. For the purpose of this article, the author will not delve into the cultural particulars of *hygge* but see the latter instead as a manifestation of the experience known more generally as coziness. However, in light of the fact that *hygge* is a cultural concept generally seen as difficult to translate, a qualification of this use of terms is in order. Readers' associations to the Anglo-Saxon notion of coziness may or may not suffice, depending on the individuals' own filter of cultural interpretation in this regard, which is of course never a replica of any overall cultural pattern. Terms in other European languages than English do go some way in approaching the meaning of *hygge*, such as German *Gemutlichkeit* or in particular (according to comments to the author by Dutch colleagues and readers) the Dutch term *Gezelligheid* (see also Pennartz, 1999). Rather than listing cultural terms however, what needs to be said about *hygge* – and the meaning of coziness in this article – is that it represents an idealized feeling of being at home, even if outside an actual home. Homeyness is the quality of being at home (Pennartz, 1999), that is not found only in actual homes (Winther, 2006), but also in 3rd places such as cafés (Oldenburg, 1999; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Laurier, 2008a, 2008b), that seek to involve consumers in the

co-construction of hospitality (Lugosi, 2007). In this paper, coziness is a commercial proposition delivered in spaces outside the privacy of the home, among consumers in cafés whose mutual presence to each other takes part in setting the mood. With that site in mind, coziness can to a large extent be understood as homeyness: as an experience of basic experiential qualities that home and family life are often idealized as having, and which people hope to experience and offer in their home or those of other people. A feeling of relaxation, warmth, friendly reception, physical comfort and shelter, being cared for with relative absence of a requirement to reciprocate, the possibility of regaining energy, the permission to take a break from work, production and strategic presentations of self and often, an interior that carries traces of someone's personal history and everyday life. Important for the following analysis, McCracken notes that the experience of homeyness rests on a structure of layered space, "the embracing property" where "the surfaces of the homey environment exhibit a pattern of descending enclosure" (McCracken, 1989, p. 172).

- 5 The "descending enclosure" formulation suggests that *interiority* is a central feature of homeyness and coziness. With McCarthy (2005) the author understands interiority as the perception of being "in", "during" or "at" – being present within a bounded entity. This can be in spatial terms:

Containment, confinement, enclosure, imprisonment, privacy, protection, security, shelter:
These are words to which understandings of interiority adhere. (McCarthy, 2005, p. 112, italics in the original)

- 6 It can also be in temporal terms:

"Day" or "night," identifiably discrete and bracketed by the setting and rising sun, become seasonally shifting instances of interior containment. (ibid., p. 120)

- 7 In the analytical framework presented, interiority is the most abstract, overall concept, and coziness (in this article often termed *hygge* when moving closer to the empirical material) is the explicit kind of interiority discussed. The empirical illustrations provided below point to the importance of spatial and temporal boundaries for cafés in providing consumers with a sense of dwelling in an interior, and thus deliver an experience of coziness. Conversely, a pleasant sense of being sheltered and comfortable is almost always described by Danes via the term *hygge*. The author has also previously argued (2011) that in Denmark, notions of interiority are immanent to cultural meanings around *hygge*. As is characteristic of interiority, a sense of *contrast to an exterior* is central to coziness, at least in the Danish form known as *hygge*. The reader might wonder however, why not simply conceptualize the matter as an analysis of homeyness, if that concept denotes the experiential quality discussed, and is more thoroughly theorized than coziness? The reason lies in the dominance in the empirical material of the term *hygge*, and the Danish emic use of terms. While cozy and homey are close as synonyms, cozy in the form of noun (*hygge*) and adjective (*hyggelig*) is in much more frequent use, covering a wider semantic field, than homey (*hjemlig*). The semantic field around *hygge* includes but goes far beyond the meanings of homeyness. To stay focused on the issue at hand, *hygge* is more often used by subjects to describe their experience of a place, rather than the place as such. People will enter a place and exclaim "oh this is so *hyggeligt*" but they will never say "oh this is so *hjemligt*" (homey). In use by Danish native speakers, *hjemlig* points to more isolated reflections on design and aesthetics, than the totality of *hygge*. *Hygge* also covers the perceived quality of interaction with people at the site – exactly the phenomenon with which this article is concerned. Since *hygge* is also constantly referred

to by marketers who advertise the experience of cafés towards consumers, focusing on that, rather than homeyness, brings the analysis closer to a terminology relevant for the empirical field of cafés and other 3rd places.

- 8 The specific question here is how social-material dynamics – the presence of other people – contribute to building an atmosphere of coziness. The original sense of curiosity that led the author to engage with this issue stems from the observation, both introspective and while collecting empirical data, that it matters to people whether other customers are present in a café: They want them to be there, even if no direct interaction occurs. Customers arrive at the doorstep of a café, look around, and if it is empty, are often likely to turn around and find a different spot. There is something to be said for the role of other people simply in signaling, especially for a consumer browsing new places e.g. when traveling, that the service there can be expected to be pleasant. But the value of the social buzz seems to exceed this function of signaling appreciation: As suggested by the material presented, it has to do with the way that the presence and movement of bodies in urban space induces an atmospheric effect upon local spaces, through an interaction of stillness and movement and an exchange of gazes between sedentary consumers, who rest for a while and perceive a place, and the surrounding urban crowd.
- 9 It is however not cafés as such that are of interest here but the theoretical issue of how the anonymous co-presence that they allow, as a feature of urban social interaction, partakes in creating a sense of cozy interiority. Thus while examples are taken from cafés, for the purpose of this discussion the article does not go into the particulars of café society (Laurier, 2008b).
- 10 Beyond its theoretical contribution to the field of atmosphere research, the uncovering and conceptualizing of ways that atmosphere comes about in commercial settings can also open up a dialogue with commercial practitioners concerning the principles of atmospheric design. This potential is suggested by one founding marketing thinker's understanding of *atmospherics* as the management of visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory elements towards
the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in buyers [that] distinguishes, in the experience of consumers, a provider from competitors, even if products or services are in themselves quite similar. (Kotler, 1973, p. 50)

Methodological paths in and around this study

- 11 The empirical material presented here focuses on Danish cultural perceptions regarding material conditions and interactional forms that afford an experience of *hygge* atmosphere in commercial 3rd spaces. The analytical framework builds on a 2007-2010 research project on consumption and *hygge* among families in Copenhagen, and on Danish understandings of *hygge* as an ideal for home and family (Linnet, 2010, 2011). The project resulted in the first international, peer-reviewed article published on *hygge* (Linnet, 2011). The conclusions and interpretations reached in this project have also figured in foreign commentators' work on Danish culture (Booth, 2014).
- 12 Research proceeded in 2011 with a second phase of investigation on the cultural associations between *hygge*, cafés and restaurants in Copenhagen. The *hygge* research project in its entirety sheds light on *hygge* as experience, discourse and practice, and on social and material factors that are conditions of *hygge*, or facilitate its coming into being. It explores the home-centered culture of the Scandinavian welfare-state (Gullestad, 1992),

looking at cultural practice, normativity and materiality regarding homelike spaces and social relations, both in “actual homes” – places that most people would perceive as someone’s home – and in public sites, including commercial spaces.

- 13 The project reported on here is an anthropology at home, an ethnography characterized by the opportunities and limitations of being native to the field. Because one is to some extent already socialized towards the rules for everyday conduct in one’s research field, and shared meanings of practices and idioms, the most commonly known limitation is the difficulty of achieving a sense of cultural surprise and hence epistemological distance (Otto, 1999; Hastrup, 1991; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). Ethnographers have traditionally sought the experience of complete puzzlement by removing themselves from their everyday life and relocating to cultural conditions, in which they as aliens could truthfully ask “what on earth is going on?”, and learn about culture while trying to grasp the rules of everyday life. It is furthermore commonly recognized that the validity of ethnographic work (Sanjek, 1990; Otto, 1999), native or not, requires a laying out of the ethnographic “path” towards the material presented, including a transparent account of the characteristics of the ethnographer, and how these provide a specific viewpoint for observing and interacting with the surrounding world. Accounting for this is not navel-gazing but a way to seek maximum objectivity within the non-positivist epistemological criteria of hermeneutics and social constructivism, by recognizing that data collection and interpretation are always matters of “positioned knowledge”. Hence the author should provide readers with the option of reflecting upon and re-interpreting the analysis on the basis of knowing this position (Haraway, 1991). For a native ethnographer specifically, achieving validity demands on how their position as natives dispose them to take certain phenomena for granted, as well as cultivating possible sources of distance and even alienation to the native cultural scene:

I see the systematic maintenance of a certain epistemological distance as a major challenge for anthropology at home. A thorough training in understanding other cultural worlds by means of fieldwork and reading ethnography can certainly be of help. Other tactics are systematic questioning and observation (also of the “obvious”), the use of comparative anthropological theory and continual self-reflection, preferably with a partner. (Otto, 1999, p. 53)

- 14 In acknowledgement of these criteria, it should be mentioned that this author would seem a complete insider to the culture being studied: A 42-year old male of upper middle-class background who is socialized towards the research object himself e.g. in his appreciation of constructing a “*hyggelig*” ambience at home, of living in a gentrified neighborhood known for its urban bohemian charm, and habits of going to cafés (including some mentioned in the empirical material) for socializing and laptop work. The author uses the different sources that native ethnographers have for achieving cultural distance to the home scene: Like other anthropologists who switched fields (Gottlieb, 2012), the author draws on the sense of contrast that comes from previous experience with ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological work in a society, where norms e.g. on hierarchy and equality run counter to those of the present research scene (the author has previously done work on post-Soviet Latvia). Part of this cultivation of alienation also means systematically noting cultural differences to the native research object when visiting societies with markedly different cultural approaches to the research object, e.g. different linguistic patterns around love, friendship and family, forms of greeting and ways of moving in and structuring public space. For this author, a recurrent reminder of cultural alterity comes in particular when visiting the US regularly

for professional purposes. The analysis of *hygge* also draws on ethnographic readings into closely associated matters, such as how in the Arab world, lighting is used in a different way than among Danes when setting the stage for home sociality (Bille and Sørensen, 2007).

- 15 For all its dilemmas and challenges to convention, the native position as ethnographer offers opportunities. It gives access to what Okely describes as the possibility to see from several angles at once, and a knowledge that is “double” in the sense that while the ethnographer is surrounded by signs from the social world to which he or she belongs, they simultaneously take a distanced, analytical perspective (Okely, 1984). If one uses as a constructive analytical lens the sense of alienation, that is reproduced by repeated abstract thinking over how people conduct everyday life in one’s own culture, there are unique opportunities for data gathering in the many political and cultural domains of a society, with which an intellectual would usually be familiar. They offer the possibility to let one’s sociological imagination run free in tracing an object of analysis over a wide range of everyday encounters and media for cultural communication. In the *hygge* project, data are also constituted by all kinds of situations and passing encounters in the author’s life as a native ethnographer. One example is the overhearing of conversations in supermarkets and public transportation, points from which have been jotted down in years of note taking, and contributed to the analytical pattern that has emerged. A typical example would be shoppers or sales staff using the formulation “it’s just *hygge*” [in Danish] to convey that what they seek or offer is ordinary but pleasant, and is meant for domestic consumption e.g. by them and their closest family. When referring to the “just *hygge*” product (e.g. bars of chocolate or wine), what people mean is that they are looking for a good, substantial, “functional” experience: A product or service that will provide pleasure but, in the social consumption act, not take center stage in terms of remarkable design, novel attributes or prestigious brand meanings. Thus it is expected to be affordable, and while not necessarily wedded to the continuities of tradition, it represents a well-known brand and/or product category.
- 16 The material presented focuses on notions of *hygge*, both at sociocultural and more basic experiential levels, as they are expressed in Danish customers’ and professional reviewers’ evaluations of 3rd place experiences. Examples are mainly drawn from reviews of cafés appearing in the entertainment section of the major Danish newspaper *Politiken*. As described by the TNS Gallup research agency, it is a newspaper directed towards a well-educated, relatively community-oriented segment of society with a strong preference for the consumption of cultural experiences in urban space, and a center-left leaning political orientation. The newspaper accordingly has a heavy focus on offers for leisure activities in Copenhagen, new architectural developments of the city. Reviews of cafés and restaurants figure prominently in the “Going Out” section of the newspaper, and many of these authors clearly appreciate and look for *hygge* in its relaxed, somewhat urban-bohemian shabby-chick variant with a penchant for the authentic, romantic and gentrified. One could ask whether the form of coziness analyzed here is then biased, in being anchored in a specific cultural and political segment.
- 17 While the coziness depicted in this article is anchored in specifics of national culture and social class, the author expects elements to be recognizable to most readers familiar with what, in broad terms, can be called urban Western café culture. We are concerned here with a form of pleasant atmosphere that sits uneasily with, and may come at the expense of, qualities such as order, elegance, luxury and exclusivity. These domains may not

everywhere, historically and culturally, be set apart. Their separateness and mutual tensions are predicated upon a Western romantic ethos of authenticity (Taylor, 1992) and the “depth ontology” (Miller, 2010) that posits the immediate appearance of people and things to be less “true” than what is presumed to exist “beneath” what is allegedly surface. The analysis aims to understand how at a general level, urban sociality is involved in the commercial construction of a pleasant atmosphere. This choice, to speak generally on the basis of research into the particular, adheres to the spirit of the famous line by anthropologist Clifford Geertz: “We don’t study villages, we study *in* villages” (Geertz, 1973). Yet there are limits to the generalizability of this analysis, and these should be recognized even if they cannot be specified in exact geographical or social terms. It is necessary to keep in mind the specific location in social space of consumers, and professional media workers, who strongly prefer a laid-back, informal and homey atmosphere. At one level we are talking about a type of ambience that is specifically Danish. The observations made by this author suggest that *hygge* is sought, experienced and referred to by all groups in Danish society, albeit in different ways. More specifically than just being “Danish”, the norms that characterize *hygge* do resonate with a specific social and political outlook. We are talking about a set of norms for public interaction centered on being informal and spontaneous, yet civil and non-challenging, whereby the middle-class distinguishes itself from other (imagined or real) social layers of society (Linnet, 2011). At the level of discourse, if not actual behavior, this informality-centred worldview shies materialism, exclusivity, competition and outward displays of wealth. It is supportive of an inclusive welfare state that strives for the leveling of economic wealth, and for a cushioning of the individual vis-à-vis social and economic pressures to perform on career terms. These traditional traits of the Scandinavian societies resonate entirely with the readership of the newspaper *Politiken* from where these reviews are taken, as mentioned above. Comparisons with other segments in Denmark could indeed be relevant, but for a different analysis than the one presented here. This author finds the segment well suited for a study of Danish *hygge* because the core norms and aesthetics of the latter exactly have their origin in the middle-classes which arose in the 19th century, as an urban bourgeoisie of wage-earning administrators of industrial society. They were oriented both towards the urban consumption of leisure, towards cultural authenticity and scientific rationality, and towards the intimacy and civilized comforts of home and family life (Frykman and Löfgren, 1987).

- 18 The reviews have been read and decoded for patterns of tropes whereby reviewers appreciate or criticize venues, paying particular attention to how they evoke other people frequenting the 3rd place; what these are doing or how they seem to experience the site, and how that plays into the constitution of a *hygge* atmosphere. The author considers the writers of these reviews to be cultural intermediaries (Wynn, 2011). In exercising their power to bolster or destroy the reputation of a café, they channel cultural perceptions of atmosphere, sociality and commercial service from the realm of culture to the consumer (McCracken, 1986).
- 19 Eighteen articles are quoted in the text, references to these are provided (see Sources section). All text extracts have been translated by the author from the Danish original, which can be viewed online via links provided in the references. The examples presented are drawn from a wider, and still growing, base of data built during eight years of research on the phenomenon of *hygge*. It includes cultural texts and visual representations, paper and online, contemporary and historical, that refer to *hygge*.

These representations originate in the everyday realm of newspaper articles, marketing material, blogs and other social media. There are travel features on Denmark from international media, blogs produced by Danes reflecting on their own culture, and by foreigners sharing their experience of living in Denmark, there are Facebook comment threads where people have been asked by a restaurant chain to explain what *hygge* means to them, numbering thousands of comments, there are cultural representations of a long range of phenomena where *hygge* figures as a central carrier of meaning; from scented candles to the Danish war effort in Afghanistan. The entire universe of texts gathered and decoded via the same analytical categories numbers around 200. There are observation and interview notes from the author's participation in events that market Denmark as a *hyggelig* destination for traveling. Interview transcripts and observation field notes are coded via the same analytical categories as textual and visual representations.

- 20 The methodological approach used for most data presented in this article consists of a structured, inductively guided decoding (using NVivo software) of media content on *hygge*. The entire body of codes used in the *hygge* research project as such, only a section of which are relevant for the study presented here, specify dimensions of *hygge* according to the type of people relating, the material constituents involved, temporal aspects of the experience recounted, the presence of various discursive tropes e.g. about national character and differences in people's taste and economic situation, and a range of other dimensions. The coding has been arrived at through interaction between inductive reasoning and theoretical inspiration, and continues to be adjusted accordingly. At this stage of high analytical saturation for the *hygge* research project as such, it incorporates a substantial list of "things to look and listen for" that previous research has shown to be significant.
- 21 In gauging the significance of a cultural term such as *hygge*, it does not really make sense to provide numbers for its quantitative prevalence or dominance. Highlighting certain meanings and regularities is an analytical choice not necessarily guided by quantitative considerations. Rather in a hermeneutic perspective, the interesting aspect to look for is the similarity of meaning carried by the cultural term of *hygge* across a wide range of different domains. This does not mean that there is no consideration of "volume" or regularity here: The overwhelming presence of the term *hygge* in everyday Danish talk about social interaction is a clear, simple fact that is readily observable by looking at the words native speakers use. The use of term *hygge* in marketing is not as common, but when one looks at descriptions of commercial 3rd places that offer a respite from the pressures of work and family life, the term abounds. It is clearly "top of mind" to any Danish customer expressing his or her appreciation of such venues. This shows in the ubiquitous, unproblematic manner by which the concept is used in interviews and informal conversations as an unremarkable, yet appreciative term for the quality delivered. Each instance of data on commercial coziness represents a situation in which a customer or manager, as they perform their position on the market in cultural terms, are drawing upon and adding their bit to the ongoing, collective weaving of a Danish cultural whole. Analyzing their accounts is a stepping-stone in applying to the perception of atmosphere a phenomenology of urban density, its rhythmic shifts and proximities.
- 22 While the main body of material presented here are newspaper reviews of the atmosphere at commercial 3rd places, some data are drawn from participant-observation on *hygge* in cafés in Copenhagen, in which the author has interviewed guests and managers. These interviews have focused on how people perceive the atmosphere of the

particular venue, and the different material and social elements that contribute to their experience. As in earlier interviews with family members on the good family life, an important methodological point is that these interviews do not concern *hygge* explicitly, but explore a wider field of discourses and narratives on pleasant social encounters and physical spaces, in which the theme of *hygge*, while not probed directly by the interviewer, figures as a central emic concept. As an example, when Danes refer to experiences that are inherently social such as dining or going on vacation, whether in everyday talk or marketing campaigns, the concept of *hygge* appears as an adjective (*hyggeligt*) that is thoroughly positive but also, always, an entirely unproblematic and unremarkable adjective – it embodies the positive experience talked about, but is never itself the explicit object of talk. It very rarely is, which is why the analytical choice of this author is to circle around it in the choice of interview themes, rather than to focus on it directly. In Danish cultural terms, questioning people upfront about *hygge* is like asking them to stare at the sun.

- 23 The methodological phase involving 3rd place interviews is ongoing at the time of writing, a handful have been carried out. While more are planned to follow, using examples from the ones that have been made is deemed useful here, for triangulation purposes, on account of this material's agreement with the rest of the ethnographic material outlined above, and the basic analytical understanding of *hygge* built over eight years of *hygge* research. The correspondence with that saturation, and theoretical relevance for the field of ambience studies, are the two main criteria according to which the examples presented here have been selected. There is a coherent correspondence not only between references to *hygge* made in the different texts, as exemplified in the article, but also between those and the interviews, which in turn resonate with statements made by public figures and "ordinary" members of the public on a range of economic, political and social issues, in which the concept of *hygge* is invoked. The latter shows a consistent pattern in how the concept of *hygge* provides moral clout in a wide spectrum of debates on issues such as family life, welfare state services, urban planning and other architectural matters, military intervention, educational policy, work-life balance and other issues.
- 24 To conclude this methodological account, in judging which material about *hygge* to highlight as significant, the author relies not merely on material collected for this study, but on a cumulative gathering and analysis of data during which the phenomenon has been approached from different sides in the course of eight years of research. All of the different kinds of analytical "resonance" mentioned have one thing in common: They center on a broad range of everyday encounters in which *hygge* is used in different ways as an appreciative term.

Cozy 3rd places: Some basic features

- 25 What are some of the ways that coziness happens in the world? What characterizes places that people appreciate for providing this experience? While not a systematic attempt to judge which criteria are more frequent than others, the following demonstrates how different atmospheric media build a sense of cozy interiority, giving analytical priority to the role of the social.

Urban oasis

- 26 In appreciating the cozy atmosphere of both cafés, as well as other smallish types of dwellings such as courtyards, urban gardens and some apartments, the spatial metaphor of “oasis” is often used to indicate both their size and their ability to bring sense of relief from the outside world. One text about a café reviewed as cozy begins with the headline “The new oasis of Runddelen serves a damn good coffee” (Palle, 2011b). On a web forum where customers rank different cafés, one is dubbed a “sofa-oasis in the middle of the city”, and characterized with the words:

Retro is a wonderful place. The mood is relaxed, people are *hyggelige*, and they have Hoegaarden on tap. And then they have two floors with soft sofas that are just screaming for people to lounge in them and forget time, while listening to a bit of live guitar music, or whatever might be on the program for that day. A perfect place if one is not looking for fancy-smancy cafés with too loud music and stressed-out waiters¹

- 27 In several reviews of cozy cafés, they are in a similar manner described as providing a “haven of *hygge*” in contrast to the surrounding area. Resonating with the metaphor of the oasis, people often describe their presence at the café as a “break” or “pause” from performing the duties of their professional and family-related roles in the exterior realm.

Small spaces

- 28 With few exceptions, reviews of venues associated with *hygge* describe these as being both small in themselves, as well as containing within them further small spaces that are set apart from each other. One text substantiates the claim of cozy atmosphere by indicating the cage-like character of the space, purporting that “there is only room for 15 guests” (Palle, 2010).

- 29 In the same downtown Copenhagen café as the one mentioned on the user forum above, which is frequented by a diverse clientele with a majority being students, who enjoy the low prices and relaxed setting with cushy furniture, Thomas and Stine describe various features of *hygge* and emphasize the importance of small spaces:

[Thomas] I like that it is kind of quiet in here. And besides it is just so homely, so cozy, so soft – there are places where you can sit and do homework, there is a fireplace down below, there are board games, and there is good coffee and good beer.

[Stine] The room is very much partitioned here, like, into little spaces. And there is old cozy furniture mixed together, and ambient light.

- 30 The scene around Thomas and Stine is typical for a cozy café: Sofas placed around low tables, with lamps hanging at a height that creates a circle of light centered on a table. As we shall return to, such an arrangement creates several semi-closed, permeable spheres: The warm light emitted by the lamp, a pervasive element when people mention coziness, forms a boundary to surrounding space, as does the table and the boundary set by the backrests of the furniture. Several such spheres are found within the café, each marked by their own lamp, and by the ensemble of guests that gather around them.
- 31 Looking at the way that writers appreciate cafés for their coziness, lighting is frequently mentioned as literally having atmospheric force:

The atmosphere is nice in the glow of the living lights [candles]... The place delivers a cozy ["hyggelig"] total experience. (Behrendtzen, 2011b)

- 32 Scents are not mentioned as frequently but can be, such as the "smell of Christmas" (Kjær, 2011a). A small cozy place that grinds and sells coffee is described as having a scent that is "good and safe" [god og tryk] (Kjær, 2011b) – the latter a frequent association in the semantic universe around *hygge*.
- 33 Even before entering a venue, while approaching it, the promise of a cozy experience beckons via a decrease of scale in the surrounding physical environment, or what McCracken calls the principle of "descending enclosure". Says one review:

There are probably many people in Copenhagen who do not know that the place exists. That is at least the feeling one gets, when one moves from the well-known paths of Ny Østergade and into the old, stooping courtyard where Beau Marché Café À Vins is hiding. (Behrendtzen, 2011b)
- 34 Depending e.g. on the level of traffic around the café, it differs between neighborhoods as to which medium provides this pleasurable sense of contrast – whether it is a change in spatial scale, sound level or another sensory factor: Says another café review:

Being taken by the mood, one forgets for a while that one is standing just meters from the roar of [major urban thoroughfares] Jagtvej og Tagensvej. This place could be like a really nice cafeteria if it was not for the traffic noise that booms into and ricochets around the room, so that having a conversation becomes hard. (Christensen, 2012b)
- 35 In texts about cafés situated outside the old city center, along busy traffic and a relatively uniform mass of residential blocks, the former are implied to offer a respite from the "supermodern" non-places that serve commuters and shoppers (Augé, 1995). As an analytical confirmation of the power of atmosphere to overwhelm the subject, in reviews such as the one quoted above, tropes of "forgetting" describe the effect of entering: The writer describes the contrast to larger urban space, that he experiences upon entering, as a passage not only to a different architectural realm but a different state of mind: A descent into an existence that has been forgotten by other people, and which itself, once he is enveloped by it, makes him forget about the world.
- 36 Coziness is predicated upon a perception of contrast to an exterior. This is not limited to smaller spaces such as courtyards, buildings or the rooms they contain. In a Russian doll-like dynamic of fractal repetition at different levels of scale (Wagner, 1991; Jensen, 2007), Danes ascribe "*hygge*" also to for example neighborhoods, villages or whole geographical regions. These need not be Danish; the term is frequently used in travel stories and newspaper features on tourism. Thus under the headline "Be cozy in New York's relaxed workers' district of Brooklyn", a newspaper fawns over the borough:

The New York borough of Brooklyn has everything that the heart can desire – except for extravagant skyscrapers and stress. In Brooklyn there is less of a struggle for space on the pedestrian walkway, not as much busyness altogether and at times a village-like mood... The inhabitants go their own way. There are not many business suits, but an incredible number of checkered lumberjack-shirts. Here is far between the multinational corporations, but there is instead an ocean of small microventures that produce everything from pickles to unika t-shirts. (Thirup Beck, 2012)
- 37 Again coziness is conveyed by emphasizing differences between exterior and interior, both in spatial scale, and other parameters relevant to the ambience of a neighborhood.

Such as the speed by which people move around, used above to convey the perception of a whole lifestyle shared by its inhabitants.

- 38 The empirical illustrations provided above as a whole suggest that when a quality of coziness is ascribed to cafés, it is a sense of interiority that they point to. This experience can build up as people move through the “descending enclosure” that McCracken refers to. The experience of being sheltered by layers comes about as a sequence. As Thibaud states,

an ambiance is not necessarily a stable and invariable state, but a dynamic process comprising different consecutive phases. (Thibaud, 2011, p. 207)

- 39 Coziness is in that regard similar to McCracken’s depiction of homeliness as a layered structure that encompasses different media and sensory registers: Physical structures but also spheres of sound and scent within the home that increase in sensory intensity as one approaches ever more homely areas, such as the kitchen (McCracken, 1989). This principle also shows in the part referring to Brooklyn. In a major city with a financial district, the atmosphere of coziness emerges in a series of contrasts while passing from steel and glass to the older parts. The latter, while appearing to the visitor as a cozy interior in relation to the larger city, is itself also an exterior: Of homely places such as cafés, the atmosphere of which visitors gets primed for by passing through the consecutive phases of layered enclosure.

Urban co-presence, a balancing act

- 40 The research carried out for this project indicates that the presence of other guests is a central factor in constituting the atmosphere of a venue. How urban co-presence plays into 3rd place coziness is traced here by seeing how it figures as a trope, when the cultural intermediaries recommend a venue for its coziness. Evoking again the concept of interiority, we see how these other guests, who are in a sense props of coziness, are described as being withdrawn to spaces of their own, or perched on the edge of them.

By the tables people are sitting in close conversation, if they are not preoccupied with their aluminium-macs and another type of conversation. (Kjær, 2011a)

Several guests look like they are close to merging with their computers, quiet friendly chitchat and giant mugs of coffee. (Palle, 2010)

- 41 The co-present guests establish these personal zones *within* the café through different workings of the social and material. Another individual’s space can be provided by his or her mobile technology for networking, entertainment and work. It can also be constituted by the companionship that he or she brings to, or encounters at the site: Social spaces that are private yet on public display, and in which unfold exchanges of friendly mutuality or romantic closeness. A synergy of informality, withdrawnness and visibility is at work here:

As soon as one arrives to Kaffekunsten in Larsbjørnsstræde, one senses that here one does not need to put on airs. One can feel that people are here to chill, to chit-chat with each other, surf the web or listen to soft music from the spinning vinyl gramophone of the place. (Palle, 2010)

- 42 Interpreting these texts in the light of Böhme’s observation of the overwhelming character of atmosphere, one notes how this effect is described as instantaneous, as something that impresses itself upon the senses right at the commercially crucial moment of arrival. On a similar note of informality:

No stiff collars here. In Sankt Hans Street, there is Jamaican ska music on the record player and a presence of many small, cheerful parties, who seem to prioritize chattering and togetherness above dresscode and seduction. (Gudme, 2013b)

- 43 In the latter excerpt, the writer experiences the unguarded sense of movement and presence that is a feature of *hygge*. In these idealized accounts of feeling at home among other people in public space, it is implied that the ability to relax is served by the informal “no stiff collar” vibe of the social life unfolding around the subject, which is idealized as removing, from this scene, the status anxiety of urban social consumption. The visibility of other guests’ preoccupation with their own social worlds seems to relax the setting and make it more informal. When looking for social tropes whereby writers convey coziness, we see that these point both to social behavior and to substances engaged with at a sensory level. There unfolds a witnessing at a distance of other people’s behavior, and a “reading” of whether they find the site pleasurable and are at ease:

The “waiter” seems genuinely interested in the guests. And it is part of providing the place with a relaxed charm, that he sometimes disappears onto the street to smoke. (Behrendtzen, 2010)

- 44 Judging whether other people are pleased is done partly by an “each to his own” principle: Witnessing from the site of one’s own subjectivity over the rhythmic patterns of other people’s withdrawal to and seeking of satisfaction within their own space; such as some people’s regular attendance to his or her vice of smoking.

- 45 The relevant social scene includes staff, about which an informant says in our interview:

[Thomas] It seems like they are close friends, without me actually knowing any of them. And I think that rubs off on us when we are here, we are seized by their mood, the mood they create behind the bar – I think it spreads into the room.

- 46 It can be noted as a general feature, that the presence of other people is beneficial to a cozy atmosphere if it unfolds in an environment that allows the formation of social circles at a distance: A distance across which people can read and resonate with the mood of others, and establish the level of direct acknowledgement that they are comfortable with. A basic balancing act between the desire for signs of other life and the risk of being overwhelmed by them underlies these texts. The presence of others has to unfold with an appropriate distance. The ability to close off one’s own social circle and enjoy some privacy matters. Says Thomas in my interview with him and Stine:

[Me] What makes this place homey?

[Thomas] The furniture, among other things, and maybe the space. You are not placed in rows where a servant is constantly circling about, you can sit in groups pretty much by yourself.

- 47 Having other too close would create a spill-over from other social circles into one’s own:

[Thomas] I guess four people can sit here and drink beer, but more people I think would be too loud for other people, and I would not allow myself that in this place.

- 48 While the quality of relaxation can evidently be supported by a degree of privacy in co-presence, and a sense that people are comfortable as individuals but in a shared way similar, there is the balance act. Quietness and self-absorption are also problematized as mood-spoilers e.g. in the context of mobile technology, a debate that particularly unfolded one year ago at the time of writing, at which point one café owner banned the use of laptops in his café:

She [a guest] understands that a café will try with a ban, because her experience is that laptops make guests sit and stare into a screen instead of talking to each other. “It can kill the mood” says [name of guest] (Kjær, 2013).

- 49 While some privacy is sought for, emptiness is most definitely not. A social horror vacui runs through reviews that judge a venue as failing, wholly or partly, in creating an attractive mood. These often use the image of the empty place as a way to convey the low probability that it will offer anyone an enjoyable experience. A café deemed bland and average is introduced with the lines:

Wide stairs lead from H.C. Østedsvej to the lobby of a grand patrician villa. As we enter, the service people outnumber – we are the only guests of Café Cadeau. Later on two-three additional guests show up. (Gudme, 2012)

- 50 Illustrating the opposite effect, some writers indicate that the presence of a diverse crowd helps constitute coziness:

There is only one waiter. It is pleasant that the place is nicely warm in spite of the large window sections. The room is well filled, and it is *hyggelig* that there are people of all ages here. (Behrendtzen, 2011a)

A vantage point upon diversity and movement

- 51 As a description of what spending a good time at café is partly about, “sitting and looking at people” is a sentence that, in some version, will probably be recognizable to most readers. Providing a vantage point upon the social goings-on of others is, as illustrated above, described as a positive feature of 3rd places in the reviews that evoke a cozy café atmosphere. Specifically, the observation that there is a “varied clientele” evokes the spectacle of the urban crowd in a positive way. The Danish term for varied is *broget*, which literally means a multi-colored mix, but as metaphor for sociality indicates a variegated blend of generations, styles and people at different life stages. Evoking this mix is another conveyor of cozy atmosphere, a carrier of positive connotations that in itself, as cultural trope, seems to need no further explanation.

Kaffekilden is located just a few meters from [main traffic roads] Jagtvej and Tagensvej. Never the less, *hygge* is at the forefront of the experience offered inside, and in the course of its brief existence so far, the place has attracted a wonderfully diverse [broget] clientele. (Christensen, 2012a)

- 52 The depiction of cozy atmosphere as being predicated upon its embedding within a wider, diverse social scene is mirrored in the description of the world of cozy objects. The aesthetic style of cozy cafés is frequently described by these writers as eclectic or downright messy, devoid of the uniformity that may come from a central, organizing principle in terms of design:

It is hard not to feel at home in Olde’s Kaffetaars offhand mix of genuine oriental carpets and Victorian style sofas. (Gudme, 2013a)

- 53 The insight that bohemian messiness is itself a style that is kept deliberately jumbled is not lost on all of the writers:

The interior is imperfection driven to the extreme: Most of the furniture is for sale, and there is no stylistic consequence, which creates a total impression somewhere between habitable lumber-room, Kreuzberg-nonchalance and student dig. But very cozy. (Palle, 2011a)

- 54 Palle (2012) also describes the social scene as *broget* at a café that is complimented for its *hygge*. He praises Istedgade, main strip of the Vesterbro neighborhood where the café is located, as a “universe onto itself, with its own syntax and changeable mood”. He evokes what from his viewpoint, and presumably the journal’s readership, makes for delightful urban variation among the inhabitants of the Danish capital in the year 2012:

A lesbian couple in love stroll by, hand in hand. A dad on parental leave pushes a terrain-going stroller past the club for immigrants, where a group of dark-skinned men are chain smoking in the light of the early day. The writer Gordon Inc passes by, energetically biking along with a tall Russian fur cap – and heavy metal boy lurches past, with bright black hair and headset.

55 As further indicator of the atmospheric effect induced by the urban crowd and other consumers at the café, one writer mentions the positive opportunity to take up “seats right on the edge of the busy street crowd of Istedgade” (Kjær, 2012).

56 The atmosphere of 3rd place *hygge*, in all its sedentary being, seems amplified by both the contrast towards, and a detached engagement with, the stream of urban life. In these texts, the opportunity to engage with a mixed urban crowd and sense its composition, proximity, volume and movement is evoked as an attractive, atmosphere-inducing aspect. The metropolitan masses are not pure visual spectacle, but also a rhythmic sensory envelopment. Most people just pass by. Others enter and briefly become fellow consumers at the site, but remain in a “to go” mode rather than take up themselves the stillness of *hygge*. The contrast to a busy urban scene is a standard textual device:

Cortado is furnished both as an on the go coffee bar with tall stools and tables for the city-busy and career-preoccupied, as well as a real *hyggelig* cage with sofas and tropical furniture, in which one can sit and enjoy food and drinks... in the air one detects both music and reminiscences of the heavy and busy traffic of Nørrebrogade: Bus line 5 A is the city’s most frequently used bus line, and on top of that comes an armada of taxis, delivery vans and other good stuff. (Palle, 2011b)

57 Some writers suggest that 3rd place coziness is supported by the opportunity of tangible interactions with strangers, the possibility that someone might emerge from the variegated mix of passers-by to instantiate a direct social contact. These need not be guests at the venue, but can also be passers-by. About the café Bang & Jensen and the crowd of surrounding Istedgade, main strip of the neighborhood, Palle says that

it is a really nice place, and the risk of being addressed by various prowling fellow beings contributes to the experience. (Ibid.)

58 Readers from societies where middle-class urban space is more tightly regulated, such as in the US where the tolerance of police and venue owners towards disturbances seem low compared to Scandinavia, may immediately register the cultural grounding of the romanticized image of harmonious urban flow, that these texts idealize: The absence of references to security, an experience predicated upon the embedding of the subject within a safe, if lively and colorful urban environment.

Interiors and flows

59 The presence of others without any direct contact and with observance of a certain distance is conducive to a cozy atmosphere. As Simmel observed, anonymity is a fundamental trait of urban life (Simmel, 1950 [1903]). The suggestion here is that an experience of anonymous urban co-presence, with some degree of mutual recognition and visibility to each other, is conducive to a cozy atmosphere in 3rd places. The research presented here suggests that this anonymity is never absolute, except as an idea associated with urbanity, against which actual encounters are measured. The stream of unknown faces, the possibility of stepping into and joining it, even if unrealized, provides a sense of enchanting contrast to the actual witnessing and practicing of close social encounters, such as when café guests are spectators to other people *not* being strangers to

each other. We may understand the resonance with other people's enjoyment, and its role as a factor in tuning the quality of the atmosphere, as an instance of Alfred Schutz' alter ego-dynamic whereby the other is perceived as having that "similar in kind to one's own consciousness and feeling" (Schutz, 1970, p. 31). An empathic dynamic of inter-social resonance may be at play by which people acknowledge, not necessarily with any conscious reflection, that other social circles are centered upon the same experience as their own. There is an ongoing transcendence of one's own subjectivity to an intersubjective being-with others, based upon observing, that other people's bodies are reacting to the same events and conditions as one self; that one shares a "communicative common environment" (ibid.) filled with objects and events apperceived by all, though from different subjective vantage points.

- 60 The experience is however predicated upon a balancing of emptiness and fullness in the flow across spheres of signs and sensory presences. Taken together, the evaluations of atmosphere presented here point to a sense of pleasure that requires a balance of elements; the experience that a place "has life" yet also provides proper degrees of distance and privacy. For the social experience of coziness that café *hygge* most often refers to, spaces with no people do not offer the opportunity to be enchanted by resonance with the consumption acts of other guests present. There is a thin line between that however, and being intimidated by the sensory outbursts that emanate from the joyous socializing of others, as well as the effects upon other bodies of various substances consumed. As we have seen, while this co-presence is a beneficial factor, people also attach ambivalent feelings to it. The unfolding social life of other people can enchant but it can also intimidate, depending on the physical distance and the intensity of the sensory influences that travel between people, e.g. the level of sound as mentioned above, as well as other airborne substances such as cigarette smoke, as implied by official attempts to limit that factor.
- 61 These spaces are both social and material. Sloterdijk observes that
 life, the formation of spheres and thinking are different expressions for the same thing... wherever human life is found, whether nomadic or settled, inhabited orbs appear. (2011, p. 11)
- 62 He hereby points to the fundamental role in human life of forming "bubbles" and seeking "spheric security" (ibid., p. 27), a thought that extends to the self-perception of being located on a globe protected from cold space by atmosphere (in the climatic sense). We know with McCracken that a layered structure is immanent to the homey atmospheric effect of such environments. The material presented above suggest that the cozy scene is structured in interiors that have porous boundaries through which signs of life are given off, and gazes travel as cross-cutting flows. While it is easy to see from the material presented, that this form of enjoyment necessitates the sheltering that these spheres offer, it is also evident that it requires permeability between them. Passers-by form a spectacle by moving past the café, people enter it and leave, and gazes travel between individuals and groups. The phenomenological angles that are here brought to bear the constitution of a cozy atmosphere have to do with how "we are emplaced in a world that always outstrips the expanse of our being" (Desjarlais & Throop, 2011, p. 90). As Merleau-Ponty says, presences carry "the invisible" with them as a "lining". This imagery inspires this author to recognize how the exteriority of urban space makes itself felt in the interior, as an ebb and flow of other people into the place, and the spectacle of their movements past it.

- 63 A dynamic of building and transcending interiors repeats itself in the permeability of the discrete social circles to which people are spectators, the opportunity that they offer for people, while being turned towards their own social realm, to also be aware of each other's sociality. It is argued here that we should recognize how that structure achieves its atmospheric effect through a synergy of material and social dynamics, and that for capturing that synergy, we should draw on the potential for the concept of interiority to, as it does not discriminate between different media nor between time and space. We have seen how the formation of different social circles is an important feature of a cozy atmosphere, and how that social dynamic is influenced by means that we already know to be effective in creating atmosphere, such as light and the material design of the room, its furniture and various partitions. The proposition here is that both material and social dynamics are instances of interiority that amplify each other and together build up a cozy atmosphere. It is suggested here that like material structures, social groups can also be seen through the lens of interiority; they are interiors within interiors. Part of the atmosphere-inducing effect that their presence has lies in the interiorizing principles that also characterize the materiality of places. Sociality partakes in constituting an atmospheric interiority that is simultaneously social, auditory, olfactory and visual. The whole scene is a structure of spheres within spheres of different media, where physical, material and social practices mirror each other and create the homey effect of the embracing property.

The cozy consumer: Sedentary yet resonant

- 64 A composite picture of 3rd place coziness emerges when reading across the consumption experience texts presented above. The café guest is still, safely seated with the assuredness and comfort that a consumer enjoys for the duration of the service encounter. As a sedentary observer they experience a sense of contrast to the urban crowd and its hurried movements. He or she is comfortably and safely set apart from, while thriving on the contrast towards, the forward-leaning, counter-tapping on-the-go customers who are propelled forward in their movement by the need to fulfill obligations (and who will, presumably, reward themselves for this with *hygge* at some later point). Along with that sense of contrast, the consumer of coziness mirrors his or her sensory experience in the individual or collective consumption acts of other people present at the site, resonating with the signs of comfort that abound.

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APPENDIXES

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NOTES

1. <http://mitkbh.dk/cafe-retro/> (consulted on October 5th 2011)

ABSTRACTS

The atmosphere of coziness, or "hygge" as it is referred to in Denmark, gives certain places such as cafés a particular appeal, that of providing an experience of pleasant relaxation in the here and now. This article argues that coziness can be seen as a pleasant experience of interiority, and

that there are new and valuable understandings of such urban atmospheres to be gained by considering the role of co-presence with other people: How subjects relate both to fellow consumers on site, and the surrounding urban crowd. The article calls attention to the way that social and material dynamics interrelate in constituting this form of urban ambience, as the weaving of intersubjective space mirrors the interiority and porosity of material form. What arises is an experience of being pleasantly, anonymously co-present with other people's social circles and urban movements.

L'atmosphère de *coziness* ou « *hygge* » comme on l'appelle au Danemark, confère à certains lieux comme les cafés un attrait particulier, celui d'offrir une expérience de détente agréable dans le moment présent. Cet article soutient que le *coziness* peut être vu comme une expérience agréable de l'intériorité, et qu'il est possible d'obtenir une compréhension nouvelle et utile de telles ambiances urbaines en considérant le rôle de la coprésence avec les autres personnes : quelles relations les sujets entretiennent à la fois avec les autres consommateurs du lieu, et avec la foule urbaine environnante. L'article attire l'attention sur la manière avec laquelle les dynamiques sociales et matérielles interagissent pour constituer cette forme d'ambiance urbaine, comment le tissage de l'espace intersubjectif reflète l'intériorité et la porosité de la forme matérielle. Ce qui en ressort est une expérience d'être agréablement et anonymement coprésent avec les cercles sociaux des autres et avec la dynamique urbaine.

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Mots-clés: Atmosphère, confort, hygge, cafés, intériorité, urbanité, présence, consommation

Keywords: Atmosphere, coziness, hygge, cafés, interiority, urbanity, presence, consumption