

... where it's always safe and warm

Places and Social Media as Stages of Social Life – Atmosphere vs. Identity

Walls, roof and togetherness – Alberti

As a starting point, I would like to take a glance at Alberti's dictum about the social function of architecture, to which Jörg H. Gleiter and Tom Steiner (2013) refer as a kind of motto for this symposium on »Architecture and Social Media in Network Societies«:

»Some have said that it was fire and water which were initially responsible for bringing men together into communities, but we, considering how useful, even indispensable, a roof and walls are for men, are convinced that it was they [sic!] that drew and kept men together.« (Alberti, Rykwert, Leach and Tavernor 1988:3)

Without doubt Alberti focuses on the constitution of *communities*. Nevertheless he states that the social effect of architecture is due to a certain usefulness or indispensability of buildings. In the sentence that follows the above quote, Alberti explicitly speaks of the »safe and welcome refuge from the heat of the sun and the frosts of winter« (ibid.) that walls and roof provide. Thus the social function of architecture that Alberti underscores in his statement – to draw and keep man together – is not independent of, but rather a consequence of its function as a shelter.

Fire, comfort, togetherness and building – Vitruvius

One of the thinkers who credits fire with creating social life is Alberti's famous predecessor, Vitruvius. In the chapter on *The origin of the dwelling house*, he recounts how our savage ancestors, scattered inhabitants of the woods, were taken by surprise one day by an accidental fire. As Vitruvi-

us reports, they »were put to flight, being terrified by the furious flame« (Vitruvius, Morgan and Warren 1914:38). He continues:

»After it [the fire] subsided, they drew near, and observing that they were very comfortable standing before the warm fire, they put on logs and, while thus keeping it alive, brought up other people to it, showing them by signs how much comfort they got from it.« (ibid.)

»In that gathering of men,« Vitruvius claims, architecture, as well as language, had its origin:

»Therefore it was the discovery of fire that originally gave rise to the coming together of men, to the deliberative assembly, and to social intercourse. And so, as they kept coming together in greater numbers into one place [...] they began in that first assembly to construct shelters.« (ibid.)

Thermal comfort, shelter and togetherness

If we neglect the question of origin haunting the tales of both authors, we may resume: thermal comfort – whether provided by a tamed fire or by walls and roof – is inviting for human beings. The microclimate of a fire is a kind of atmospheric envelope (an airy kind of shelter), walls and roof are insulating, among other things, a blob of air from the surrounding atmospheric conditions. In other words: fire in itself has an architectural aspect (as put forward by the Spanish architect Fernández-Galiano [2000/1991]) and producing microclimatic effects is not the least of architecture's many uses. Indeed it is well known, that dwelling (home) and tamed fire (hearth) are often found together and have become idiomatically inseparable; the latter in many languages is a metonymic label for the former (in Alberti's text on architecture, e. g., »ancestral hearths« [Alberti, Rykwert, Leach and Tavernor 1988:62] is a synonym for old buildings). Within a house, for a long time, it was especially the hearth that solicited togetherness (Flandrin 1980; Heschong 1979; Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; Silbermann 1995).

Thomas Thiis-Evensen, who also noted that the warmth of a fire »conveys an instinctive feeling of being inside« (1987:81), further points to the centering effect of the fire's light: »As a structure too, the fire is the centre [sic!] of an interior space. The radiating flames of a bonfire at night welcome us to a cave of light, beckoning us into safety from the devouring darkness around [...].« (ibid.) Bille (2014) provides a nice ethnographic account of contemporary practices of *Lighting up cosy atmospheres in Denmark*.

Together, atmospheric envelope and shelter

Close proximity of bodies to each other produces a change in the locale microclimate (in particular, but not exclusively, if the local atmosphere is insulated in one way or the other). As low temperatures initiate *social roosting*, such as huddling in birds (Elkins 1995:102–106), metabolic combustion of nearby grouped human bodies can serve, admittedly to a small degree, as a substitute for combustion in the hearth. This is especially true for intimate groups in narrowly enclosed architecture (as in the case of people in a small tent or a family inhabiting the icy walls of an igloo; cf. the scene in which Flaherty's [1922] *Nanook of the North* allows us to look at the sleeping arrangements within the igloo).

People standing, sitting or walking near to each other also afford a certain protection from aggressors like wild animals or enemies. Assembled individuals may function as a physical barrier (a living shelter) or as a mob with the ability to disorient even superior attackers (which is a common feature in the animal kingdom; cf. Driver and Humphries 1988); additionally the distributed or combined attention of several individuals enhances the possibility of early detection of potential predators.

Thus, the thermal comfort and safety produced by walls and roof that solicits coming together is further multiplied by the congregation it attracts. On the other hand the presence of other (non-hostile) people in the surroundings may contribute to a feeling of safety even outside or between buildings, e. g. in urban street-life (I'll come back to this point). In any case, physical togetherness may not only be understood as produced by architecture but – in itself – as a kind of proto-architecture and as integral part of the life between buildings.

It is well worth noting, of course, that the beneficial effects of gathering have limits and under some conditions are replaced by adverse experiences of crowding (e. g. in situations of public transport).

Hearth, cooking, ingestion, relaxation

Human beings assemble around the hearth not just for the sake of warming their bodies from the outside in. It is also the place where meals are prepared and ingested as a precondition for ongoing metabolic combustion. Physiologists label ingestion and digestion as a *trophotropic* state of the organism, i. e. calm moments in which the body stores energy (in contrast to an *ergotropic* spending of energy in fight and flight or work; cf. Krampen 2013). – The intake of food along with thermal comfort and safety contributes to a relaxed state of body and mind.

1 Bollnow (1984), however, insists that ultimate relaxation is found in the warmth and security of the bed.

Also therefore (besides the producing of an agreeable microclimate) the hearth (or the kitchen) has been traditionally viewed as the center of social life within the dwelling (cf. Aicher 2006; Alexander, Ishikaw, Silverstein and Jacobson 1977; Bollnow 1984;¹ Ishige 2001; Tönnies 1922).

The facilitation of socializing through the relaxing effect of ingestion is present in various habits or rituals of private and public life (including business transactions) in cultures all over the world (for the enhanced social facilitation through the collective intake of alcoholic beverages see the next paragraph).

This aspect of life around the hearth is often exploited in the cinema. Here regularly stiff or tense habitual relations of protagonists work as a contrastive foil. Especially in films, in which the plot is construed around cooking and eating, such as *Tampopo* (Itami 1985), allusions to rigid table manners or training of etiquette help to underscore the relaxation that is biologically inherent to meals.

Relaxation and feeling warm

To be in a state of relaxation makes a person feel warm – even in a cold environment. Not in a merely psychological or metaphorical sense but in a strictly physiological perspective: a serene state of mind causes (via deactivation of the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nerve system) dilatation of the small blood vessels near the skin (cf. Ziegler 2012); the resulting increased peripheral blood circulation in its turn stimulates thermoreceptors in the skin (the function of which is to monitor changes in the temperature of the surroundings) which eventually produces the sensation of warmth.

This mechanism explains why it is so tempting – and at the same time dangerous – to consume relaxing alcoholic beverages as a means of reducing the sensation of coldness (dangerous because of the loss of body temperature as a consequence of the increased peripheral blood circulation).

This mechanism also explains that the metaphoric characterization of a social encounter as having or emitting a ›warm atmosphere‹ (or ›cold atmosphere‹) is based on the fact that a relaxed or a tensed mood (casualness or ›stress‹) elicits the same bodily sensation as warm or chilly air does.

In any case alcohol can mimic the warm and relaxed sensation of being housed or at home in a situation which is in fact unprotected, or in other words, lacking the comfort of being among intimate companions or at least other relaxed people. Its character as a feeling-at-home-mimetic predetermines alcohol to be a steady companion for the homeless, a comforter for the lonely ones missing the contagious relaxation of being near fellow human beings, and, last but not least, to be a social facilitator or icebreaker in many forms of encounter.

Together-ness of fellow occupants

Flatmates – a couple or members of a two-generation family (cases still typical in our culture) – are present to each other in an informal, casual way. They are familiar with the way those they live with move and carry out their daily routines, they are familiar with each other's moods and habits of expression, with each other's tone of voice, the sound of their steps and other noises they make, with their smell and the feel of their clothes and skin. Fellow occupants are present in the traces they leave, in the history of shared objects, in their favorite items of food in the kitchen shelf and the fridge, and in their personal belongings.

People with whom we are at home do not have to explain themselves (cf. Norris 1990:242). Their identity goes without saying – and with a minimum of reflective image cultivation. As Stephen Shaw in an essay on *Returning home* put it:

»It does not matter what you have or have not done, there is always a place for you at home. This implies the idea of acceptance, an understanding by another that this is also your place of being and that in it you simply are.« (Shaw 1990:232)

I have already mentioned several fundamental aspects of dwelling that contribute to a feeling of warmth. The relaxed relations with our familiar fellow occupants is a further one – and surely not one of minor importance (cf. Bachelard 1960; Seamon 1979). The (literally) warming consciousness of co-presence of those we live with may even be cherished in moments when one sits alone in the kitchen reading a book or newspaper after everybody else went to bed (cf. Pennartz 1986; Salter 2013:130).

On the other hand the background-awareness of a familiar person busy in a lit corner of the home helps not only children to fall asleep.

Of course there are cooling factors in the relations of flatmates. Living together, sharing the space of a home gives rise to several kinds of typical conflicts. And social research reports that *cold families* indeed exist (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1989). But in such cases *home* tends to *brake* (ibid.): »Where social relationships have turned sour, the effect on a home can be devastating.« (Sixsmith 1986:291)

In many other cases, tense moments don't negate the principle that the home is the site of the utmost relaxed social relations and therefore an apt metaphor for – love:

»Not a word was spoke between us, there was little risk involved
Everything up to that point had been left unresolved
Try imagining a place where it's always safe and warm

›Come in,‹ she said,
›I'll give you shelter from the storm.‹« (Dylan 1974)

Human ethologist Eibl-Eibesfeldt explicitly asserts an equivalence between a secure place and a partner: »An animal may seek a home as a place of rest. In a similar way the proximity of a partner can be sought just for proximities sake, the partner being so to speak an individual with home characteristics« (Eibl-Eibesfeldt 2007:167) In *Space and Place* geographer Tuan had pointed out that »one human being can ›nest‹ in another« (2011/1977:139). And he, as Dylan, was convinced that »[i]ntimacy between persons does not require knowing details of each other's life« (ibid.: 141).

Interiors

The wider society at large is projected in several ways into the domestic realm. There are, for example, commonly accepted cultural standards for the division of houses and flats into areas for functions like sleeping or cooking just as there are cultural and subcultural traditions for furnishing rooms.

There are further cultural and subcultural rules concerning the accessibility of visitors to different parts of a home, with other words, the division of houses and flats into *front* (or *frontstage*) and *backstage*, as Erving Goffman (1959) had put it.² Inhabitants explicitly reflect on the impression that the props and the maintenance of *fronts*, e. g. the hall or the living room, make on others. They themselves are conscious of being on display here. Backstage counts primarily the familiar atmosphere we, ourselves, are immersed in; that is why it attracts those who intend to *snoop* for uncontrolled traces of the inhabitants' habits and personal traits (cf. Gosling 2009; Gosling et al. 2005). – Borders between front and backstages are flexible to a certain degree within one and the same home, varying with those who come for a visit (a domestic room that, like the proverbial Dutch living room, is day and night open to the looks of strangers tends to be an exception). Sometimes the casually perceived ambient atmosphere of more intimate corners of homes has to recover from the inhabitants' irritating consciousness (or the chilly feeling) produced when discovering that strangers had the possibility to inspect them. In the case of a home that has been burglarized an uncanny, chilly feeling of having been looked at, may linger in the home for quite a while (Korosec-Serfati 1985).

2 For modifications of the role of privacy in cultural history of dwelling see Rybczynski (1986); for cross-cultural comparisons see Hall (1969); for facts indicating an anthropological kernel of the urge for privacy see Eibl-Eibesfeldt (2007).

3 Besides radio, TV and computers I want to address, in keeping with the everyday usage of the term, also books, photographs, CDs etc. but not furniture as »media« (even if, of course, these objects do furnish rooms and furniture betrays the inhabitants' world as books and displayed photographs do). The quotes concerning production design in this paragraph apply no less to furniture in the narrow sense as to the furnishing media.

Homes and media

Modern homes have always contained media.³ Photographs, e. g., are displayed on walls and on shelves, working as an externalized memory of situ-

ations and persons. Together with other objects, such as books, records, DVDs and CDs, photographs incorporate layers of the inhabitants' life- and family-history. When focused, they work as cues for tales that one can tell or retell many times. In everyday life, inhabitants perceive them just in passing as parts of the familiar milieu. For outsiders a more or less lively atmosphere is visible at first glance in the degree of density of such items. A visitor's closer inspection of one or another may induce further conversation.

The objects work as cues for the array of the inhabitants' physical and mental activities and social relations. An impression of liveliness can be enhanced by arrangement and colourfulness of the displayed items.

A corroboration of such guesses are the ethnographic case studies in Daniel Miller's *Comfort of Things* (2008); especially Miller's arrangement of the two portraits at the beginning of the book – »Empty« and »Full« – builds in its stark dramaturgy on the common intuition which I hint at. Decors created by production designers of films also rely strongly on expected revelations of this kind: »[...] the designer is in a practical sense building somewhere for the action to take place and in a creative sense making that place appropriate for the film world and the characters that will inhabit that world. A technique used by the designer is one of simplification: to achieve the mood or effect desired, key characteristics will be played up while others are toned down.« (Barnwell 2004:21) Barnwell exemplifies this global statement in a discussion of the critique provoked by the set design for *About a boy* (Weitz and Weitz 2002): »This screen rendition of the wealthy bachelor abode is criticised for being entirely unfounded in reality, existing only as a cinematic cliché. The point is that the set is telling us in simple screen language about the Grant character, arguably more effectively than a more realistic design, which would by nature give him a more human quality at the beginning thus giving him less distance to travel in the narrative. We see a huge loft-style apartment, tastefully decorated, empty of clutter or any indications of fluffy edges on his character. It is minimal, expensive and soulless. Thus we are given information that frames the key character – he is wealthy and lives in a place inhabited by his book and music collection more than by himself.« (Barnwell 2004:43)

Other media allow actual connections to the world outside, interactive communication via telephone or computer, reception of news, entertainment and so on via papers, radio and TV, individualized search for information via computer.

These media integrate experiences in homes that formerly have been or still are connected with public life. Home-based media thus partly imply a withdrawal from life outside the home. At the same time they open the walls beyond windows and doors.

Vilém Flusser – in a rather coquettish line of thought – argued in the early 1990ties »that material and immaterial cables have made an Emmental

cheese of it [the house]« (1990:36; cf. Flusser 1997:162; Wilken 2011). Instead of living »in ruins« (Flusser 1990:35) like this we should move to a »new house which must be a knot within the human network« (ibid.: 36) modeled according to the interactive net of telephone-communication.

People have inhabited mediated social networks for some years now. And – even if these people still appreciate the utility of walls and roof – this *new house* works independently of any physical shelter.

Home as a focus of the new media

Instead of making traditional homes obsolete, mobile phones and mobile internet are often used to strengthen the ties of absent household members to those staying at home. Parents provide their children with mobile phones because they wish to gain some control over their strolls after school. Students or workers who leave their hometowns welcome social media as a means of stay in in contact with their families. Anthropologist Daniel Miller (2011) underscores in *Tales from facebook*, a book based on interviews in Trinidad, the importance of social internet media for those who live in the diaspora (but cf. Jansson 2011). In a case study about students in Shanghai, Larissa Hjorth (2012:151) states:

»[...] media such as QQ [a Chinese surrogate for Facebook] allow for the small, informal, micro exchanges, like those experienced when one is in intimate proximity. [...] Sometimes we see that media, such as social media and mobile technologies, help alleviate homesickness, whereas for others, such mediation operates to only further highlight the actual distance and difference.«

There is the assertion, made by Clive Thompson in an often quoted article about *digital intimacy* published in the New York Times in 2008, that »the small, informal, micro exchanges« made possible by social networks sum up to a kind »ambient awareness« for others that is more akin to living together than to traditional forms of communication like letters, phone calls or even email.

»Ambient awareness« is, Thompson writes, »very much like being physically near someone and picking up on his mood through the little things he does – body language, sighs, stray comments – out of the corner of your eye. [...] »It's,« Thompson quotes a scientist working for an internet company, »»an aggregate phenomenon. [...] No message is the single-most-important message. It's sort of like when you're sitting with someone and you look over and they smile at you. You're sitting here reading the paper, and you're doing your side-by-side thing, and you just sort of let people know you're aware of them.« Thompson continues: »Yet it is also why it can be

extremely hard to understand the phenomenon until you've experienced it. Merely looking at a stranger's Twitter or Facebook feed isn't interesting, because it seems like blather. Follow it for a day, though, and it begins to feel like a short story; follow it for a month, and it's a novel.«

The fact that homesickness sometimes is aggravated rather than relieved by communication via social networks raises some doubts concerning the claim that these communities produce an »ambient awareness « that is »very much like being physical near someone.« (ibid.)

Identity vs. Ambience

Obviously a stream of trivial bits of information about a familiar person may help create the feeling of keeping in touch. And even contact with somebody, whom one knows only from afar, can produce a feeling of familiarity this way. – What exactly makes the difference between this mediated kind of awareness of someone and the feeling for people who are co-present in physical space? Let us have a closer look.

In the case of living at home or in public urban spaces, one's identity and the persona of others does not necessarily appear on the surface. At home – backstage – you not even have to take care for your appearance (cloth, hair), in public you present your habitual public outfit but stay, beyond your immediate neighbourhood, anonymous as a rule.

At home, the sensed or imaginary presence of familiar people tends to relax the body, that is to say, literally make it feel warm. The relaxed presence of others is an essential ingredient to the atmosphere of a home.

In a busy street or in a café, the activity of anonymous strangers, conveys an impression of a more or less tense or relaxed liveliness. According to a well-established line of analysis, the typical situation in the public life of big cities tends to be rather fast paced, stressful, and isolating, but at the same time interesting, stimulating, and liberal, whereas public life in small towns (or villages) is rather slow paced, peaceful, and close-knit and, at the same time, both restricting and narrow minded (excluding outsiders, prejudiced, prone to gossip).⁴ This is of course a rather global assessment reflecting the different ambivalences towards the lifestyle within larger and smaller settlements. The encountered situations vary with (macro and micro) climatic conditions, with built structures, modes and amount of local traffic as well as social and cultural circumstances.

⁴ For empirical corroboration of this assessment, see for example Krupat (1985).

Architects, town planners and researchers like Camillo Sitte (1909), Jane Jacobs, (1961), Gordon Cullen (1971), Christopher Alexander (Alexander, Ishikaw, Silverstein and Jacobson 1977), William White (1988) or Jan Gehl (2010) discuss conditions which possibly result in the co-presence of a crit-

ical mass (neither overcrowded nor ›undermanned‹) of adequately tuned people that allows for a comfortable feeling in public even in big cities.

The topics mentioned by planners and observers include the need for spaciousness, enclosedness/openness, opportunities for walking and sitting, the availability of sun and shade, shelter from wind (a theme already highlighted by Vitruvius), the establishment of institutions for everyday needs such as food-shops or markets, opportunities for relaxation, such as restaurants, cafés and bars that can attract and comfort people day and night.

In an attempt to relate private mobile consumption of music by earphones to characteristics of city life, Bull (2007; he labels the phenomenon *pars pro toto* iPod culture) assumes that such devices are successful because they allow creating ››warm‹‹ bubbles in the ››chilly‹‹ atmosphere of (big) cities (ibid.: 9). Bull postulates that this auditory sheltering produces – in a vicious circle – an even ››chillier urban environment‹‹ (ibid.). This author's generalizations about urban atmosphere, as well as his views on the motivation to use devices such as the Walkman and its successors strike one as stark simplifications. Even though according to earlier research, such devices can indeed induce a ››feeling to be ›spaced out,‹‹ and (thus) produce a more ››calm‹‹ mood towards the environment that can be viewed as an automatic or forced aesthetic attitude resulting from the partial sensorial distancing or alienation, combined with a musically tuned, or framed, new way of looking that often seems surreal or cinematic⁵ (Schönhammer 1989:134 and 141; cf. 1988, chapter 3). For quite a few (especially young) users their tiny musical machines indeed sometimes work as a kind of security blanket helping them to relax⁶ both in familiar and in unfamiliar places (Schönhammer 1989).⁷ – Bull's observation that cities become chillier due to aural isolation of passersby seems to express an irritation elicited through a violation of an intuitive certainty given with the inherited functioning of the senses: the use of earphones denaturalizes the involuntary sensual community in the auditory sphere of a shared place (in contrast to the typically rather individualized visual impressions); this irritation has arguably been rationalized by many cultural critics as an exceptional unwillingness to communicate (Schönhammer 1988, 1989). In everyday life, this irritation has faded in the decades since the introduction of the Walkman while the users' relaxed mood that resounds in their bodily and facial expression (i. e. the enhancement of relaxed moves in the choreography of the public place ballet⁸) may on the contrary have a rather warming effect for observers. Obviously, it is misleading to draw, as Bull (2007) does, a parallel between the impacts of earphone use and the explosive antisocial effects of car traffic⁹ on the social climate of cities or urban atmosphere.

The vital flow of public life in great cities in many instances is appreciated.¹⁰ Social scientists who confine their observations of the phenomenon mainly to the obligatory quotes of Georg Simmel's (1903) *aperçus* concerning the cold blooded reserve of metropolis' inhabitants hardly can explain why *urban atmosphere* is often praised and searched for by many, and not just by tourists. A certain loneliness of the participants of urban scenes does not preclude aesthetic delight thereof. Some distance to daily routines

5 Sometimes users relate their experience to (musically accompanied) silent movies, sometimes they allude to music videos; for a discussion on the various cinematographic metaphors in this context see Schönhammer (1988:48–55).

6 Providing warmth not only in a metaphorical sense (see paragraph *Relaxation and feeling warm*).

7 *Wings of desire* (Wenders 1987), a film depicting a kaleidoscope of dreary Berlin scenery in a bleak winter light, stages the Walkman (in the suicide episode in the middle of the film and a minute later [within a cascade of chilly metropolitan impressions] showing a man crouching or run aground on an inhospitable public stairway who puts the earphones on as if using it as a kind of surrogate-blanket [cf. Wenders and Handke 1987:91–93 and 95]) as a futile or pitiable effort to feel safe and warm in a harsh urban world.

8 To borrow a label introduced by David Seamon (1979).

9 See Hall (1969:174–177); Marsh and Collett (1986); Schönhammer (1991:155–165); Featherstone, Thrift and Urry (2005).

10 Ittelson, Proshansky, Rivlin and Winkel (1974); Lewicka (2011).

– perhaps just the fact that one happens not to be in a hurry on a way – is a favourable precondition for this pleasure. – Time and again this sense of distance manifests itself when attending to the movies; Siegfried Kracauer (1997/1960) even posited street life as the prototype for the kernel of cinema aesthetics (i. e. depiction of »the flow of life« [ibid.: 71]).

Urban street life allows one to dwell in an anonymous stream of existence without any shortcut to familiarization (be it the exchange of information or opinions¹¹). Even if, of course, passing moments of familiarity are welcome (see below). Obviously openness for distanced participation in the flow of life with strangers depends on the stage of life; adolescents being more inclined to socialize in their familiar peer group and to gain new friends.

It's not necessary to attend to any of the individuals present in a situation to become aware of this atmosphere.¹² It is more felt than attentively perceived. The condition producing an atmosphere is unfocused attention, i. e. background awareness, rather than figural perception (in the same sense that we do not catch the gentle breeze moving through the leaves of a tree when we focus on the structure of any single leaf).

In social media, on the contrary, individual identity is the hinge: here, all time identities and personae are constructed, displayed, probed and checked: *On facebook*, Daniel Miller (2011:179) plainly states, »you find out who you are« – Quite a task. »Writing oneself into being«, as Boyd puts it (Boyd 2008:119–169; cf. Schmidt 2009). Why do so many willingly work on what could be labeled, paraphrasing Richard Sennett (1977), as the *terror of identity*?

The terms of the identity-display-game seem to be understood by its players as a ticket to warmer social relations, somewhere between the intimacies of a shared home (or close friendship) and anonymous public life. Thompson (2008) and Miller (2011) claim that social networks are a kind of revival of the life in small communities like villages.

In villages most people know each other. In small towns, a relative high degree of neighbours are still acquaintances. Most people that meet in villages or small towns are familiar appearances for each other, even if they are not informed about their respective identity. In the case of big cities, one recognizes some inhabitants from the neighbourhood, as well as a number of shopkeepers, waiters and so on in different spots of the town without knowing their names. All these forms of familiarity allow one to feel secure a certain measure and provide transitory moments of warmth. At the same time life in small settlements for many is unattractive or repelling for its lack of diversity and freedom. The latter, especially, goes hand in hand with strangeness and anonymity. Even ethologists, who (in keeping with Simmel's observations) underscore the overstraining of evolved human capacities for social interaction in big cities, plead for a strengthening of village like structures

11 The latter playing a major role where the image of a desirable public life follows the ideal of (political) discourse (cf. Sennett 2011); this view seems to be involved in the condemnation of public earphone use mentioned above.

12 »The street in the extended sense of the word is not only the arena of fleeting impressions and chance encounters, but a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the onlooker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appears to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story, yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears.« (Kracauer 1997:72).

13 Cf. Lewicka (2011).

14 For an account of the probable biological roots of the conflicting strivings, see Panksepp (2000).

15 For a trenchant reflection on the tourist situation, see Bruckner and Finkelkraut (1979); cf. Urry and Larsen (2011); for a case study concerning European youth tourism (Interrail) see Schönhammer (1992); see also the next paragraph.

within big cities (to compartment or subdivide large settlements) rather than for a renaissance of vernacular village life (Eibl-Eibesfeldt and Hass 1985). The respective ambivalences of life in small settlements and big cities seem to reflect a fundamental or existential antinomy: the urge to be (in a) secure (place), on the one hand, and the urge to explore (a strange environment) on the other. This antinomy is present in many psychological observations (from developmental to environmental psychology¹³ and psychological aesthetics) and the phenomenology of place and space across the disciplines (including geography, sociology, and philosophy).¹⁴ By definition, the struggle with the antonymic strivings is obvious – often with the sharpness of a caricature – in the practices of tourism.¹⁵ Even for inhabitants of big cities, moving amidst strangers is mitigated through movement and rest in habitual paths and places, i. e. thanks to the familiarity of these selected stages of urban life. – Bollnow (1984) at the end of *Mensch und Raum* [Man and Space] envisions a kind of rhythmical balance and dialectical reconciliation (instead of shortcutting compromises) between the striving to be secure and the drive to explore.

If not in respect to its slow tempo and serene contemplativeness life within social networks such as Facebook at least resembles life in a village with respect to the presence of continual mutual surveillance. The *Privacy concerns* that are so often discussed in the context of social media (cf. Wilken and Goggin 2012) are thus not just a matter of the large internet companies' or national secret services' hunger for information about users and citizens. As Miller reports, in Trinidad, e. g., the traditional Carnival excesses of sexual life seem to be tamed by Facebook: »Trinidadians now worry they will be recognized, photographed and exposed« (2011:193).

Saying this is not to deny the relaxed moments and warm feelings that sometimes provide a payoff for the continual display and reception of personal information, even if this kind *ambient awareness* is not quite the same as – and surely more absorbing than – breathing atmospheres at home, in the neighbourhood, or in anonymous street live.

Projections of the global village

We should not forget that members of social media inhabit a *global village*, quite literally, as Marshall McLuhan once anticipated. Besides family members or close friends living actually in the diaspora (or vice versa as an emigrant with members of the circles they left behind) one is linked electronically with other more remote people met perhaps once on a trip.¹⁶ At the same time, holiday trips to distant geographical spaces can be undertaken without leaving the bonds of the digital community.

Some of people to whom one is related via the exchange information bits would otherwise, beyond the digital community, be rather distanced due to their social position. The promise, then, seems to be: You are secure amongst others (even important people) and can conquer the world by dis-

16 In times without social media (internet) the ritual of exchanging addresses with other travelers – common use amongst backpack tourists experiencing a friendly encounter – was sufficient for a feeling of thus being connected with people all over the world: only rarely were the swapped addresses used to keep in contact (Schönhammer 1992).

playing yourself and following the self-exhibitions of others.

As for the possibility of participating digitally in trips taken by other people on social media, the German Journalist Andrea Diener (2013) recently summarized the situation in the feuilleton of FAZ: »Begeisterung aus zweiter Hand ist langweilig [Second hand fascination is dull]«. She feels captured by the flood of stereotyped images as if she were in a never ending holiday slide show (without snacks).

Diener misses the flavour of life in this kind of cosmopolitanism. At the sight of the shared views of her friends, she looks forward to a walk on her sunny street to the new coffee-shop at the next corner as an invigorating dive into the world and life.

Thus, even if travel-reports of acquaintances today, as in times before the advent of social media, sometimes enrich both our imagination and our later travel experiences, the growing amount of iconic and textual bits of information about actually visited places – of »live postcards,« as Urry and Larsen (2011:181) put it – sometimes seems to be a burden put up with for the sake of social-network-care.

Taking photographs may have various functions for travelers. One could be, as Susan Sontag (1977) observed, to ease the fear of being exposed to a strange situation. Contrary to the inward shield of music applied by earphones the photographic attempt to get some hold or gain control in unfamiliar surroundings regularly incommodes those who come across accidentally or are targeted.

Beyond the often tiresome obligation to take notice of the documented travel notes of acquaintances, consumer-generated information (recommendations of hotels etc.) available in the internet also plays an important role in travel planning today (cf. Gretzel et al. 2011; Urry and Larsen 2011; Sigala, Christou and Gretzel 2012; Munar, Gyimóthy, and Cai 2013).

Augmented reality

Mobile computing provides users with some potentially useful information about where they are and what the vicinity affords. The social-media-theme and digital augmentation of places concur at this point and are hard to disentangle.

Members of social media can use their smartphones to inform the digital circle of their acquaintances immediately through verbal and photographic notes about their whereabouts, activities, or evaluations of whatever. In addition, they may also tag such documents – a kind of scent mark – to places they have visited. Those, who are allowed and willing to access such virtual enrichment of locations, may enjoy the appropriation marks of

members of their group as a comforting opportunity to inhale a familiar smell. Whether such tagging and uptake of individual traces will become common use remains to be seen.

Does the augmentation of physical places with individually distributed significations, displayed on mobile computers (like smart phones), accomplish more than an increased familiarization with certain places? Does it contribute to their spirit? Add a mysterious layer? Evoke an atmospheric presence as defined by the concept of *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz 1980; Valena 1994)? Should we assume that the human mind's inclination to interweave stories and places¹⁷ will lend fascination even to rather trivial bits of localized personal information?

17 Cf. Brewer and Dourish (2008).

The spread of every user's virtual scent marks may seem excessive. As in the case of photographic documentations mentioned in the last paragraph, some might feel reluctant to attend to the collected communicative redundancies of personal judgments and other ego-laden snippets of information. More meaningful or playful use of digital tagging of places is conceivable or has already been staged.¹⁸ Both in stories of some substance and in forms of location play (as a digital adaption of the Boy Scout tradition¹⁹) the presentation of selfhood tends to recede, whereas the mystery of search or imaginary presence of life beyond the personal concerns of the everyday (lived history, fates, locations of written or filmed fiction) can be felt.

18 Cf. Büscher, Coulton, Hemment and Morgensen (2011); Verhoeff (2012).

19 E.g. Geocaching.

Presumably feeling or sensing a place's mystery or its undercurrents of life (an ambient perception of the *genius loci* kind) is, in any case, in conflict with a high actual degree of absorption in the information-device. Similarly a reception of the surroundings that is immediately instructed by a guidebook seems not be of great help in the attempt to catch the spirit of a place. Identification has to recede where atmosphere is at stake.

One kind of information available by some social media is that of actual physical presence of related members. Mapping the whereabouts of nearby acquaintances may introduce a feeling of familiarity into an anonymous public situation. But at the same time disclosing our own position in space, exposes us not only to possible surveillance by gloomy institutions, such mapping may also add a further dimension to continual mutual surveillance mentioned above (see paragraph *Identity vs. Ambience*). The wish to feel safe and warm anytime and everywhere thus might create a situation which gives further occasion to the feeling more exposed.²⁰

20 Cf. Bauman and Lyon (2013).

Such mapping may be useful if a group intends to coordinate actions.²¹ The paranoid atmosphere that may be caused by the targeting of individuals on their strolls suggests a special playful use: this virtual augmentation of spatial experience seems to be especially apt for games of chase and pursuit.²²

21 Which, like flash mobs, in most cases will be irritating for outsiders.

22 Cf. Büscher, Coulton, Hemment and Morgensen (2011); Gebelein (2012); Richardson (2012).

Nintendo, by the way, enabled the mobile gaming device DS to an automatic local data-exchange when its owners come near in physical space. As I can observe with my boys this adds indeed a kind of playful mystery to the visit of those places that, as previous experience has shown, are potentially pregnant with the avatars of other gamers.²³ In a formal study of such use Licoppe and Inada (2012) document the agglomerations of gamers in such hybrid public places in Japan and France; for outsiders such adhesions remain enigmatic.

Mediated scanning of the environment for the presence of linked people, in principle, is in conflict with broad awareness for the physical ambient (including other people around).

On the pavement

It is a common experience these days that pedestrians absorbed by their mobile devices come close to bumping into someone standing on the pavement. This is telling with respect to an obstructed functioning of what has been labeled *basic attention* (Seamon 1979) or *ambient vision* (Ohno 2000) – a preattentive awareness of the surroundings – that can be viewed as precondition for secure routine locomotion.

As this behaviour violates the tacit agreement of reciprocal circumspection in pedestrian traffic²⁴ it incommodes others.²⁵ The nastily straight moving vehicles on two legs²⁶ only sometimes compensate those they come across with the beauty of a pensive smile.²⁷ The hope (e. g. Gebelein 2012) that this awkward situation in (pedestrian) traffic will be attenuated when information is displayed on glasses instead of hand held objects confuses the mere technical possibility of looking through the glasses with the factual allocation of attention and may well be disappointed.²⁸

Unfocussed, diffuse awareness of our immediate environment is arguably at the same time the gate for sensing whether a milieu is beneficial for the organism – whether the atmosphere is agreeable or not.²⁹

It seems that social media tend to absorb perception to a degree that closes this gate for periods of time. In *Ambient commons – attention in the age of embodied information*, Malcolm McCullough (2013)³⁰ raises this suspicion as rhetorical question: »[...] do increasingly situated information technologies illuminate the world, or do they just eclipse it?« (ibid.: 21) As for the scarcely researched changes in the economy of attention caused by ubiquitous computing, McCullough refers to Linda Stones' reflections on *continuous partial attention* (ibid., 52 f.).

The craving to be securely connected probably numbs the prereflective detection – and potential delight – of the environmental quality, i. e. is at odds with the readiness to sense whether a place – built or not – is safe and warm.

23 Even if anonymously, the national identity of the gamers is registered; players may visualize the origin of previously encountered gamers on a map of the world.

24 As described with amusing meticulousness by Erving Goffman (2010 [1971]); for an application of Goffman's observations in the context of mobile phone use see Burkart (2007).

25 Cf. Horowitz (2013); cf. Sacks (2013). Listening with earphones to music may sometimes be dangerous for the user but does not violate the reciprocity of regard in pedestrian traffic.

26 Not to speak about the reckless smartphone use when riding a bike or driving a car.

27 As I have to admit, I observed these pensive smiles only in female faces.

28 The advent of Google glasses will probably burden public life with the potential abolition of anonymity of even those one is not linked with via social media; a precondition for the impending everyday use of face recognition software is the inflation of identifiable photography on social networking sites.

29 In this respect, of course, the application of music with earphones also restricts one's sense for the milieu.

30 This book is written from a background and interest akin to mine (namely the attempt to understand the perception of atmosphere or milieu not in the least as a question of attention; cf. Schönhammer 1998; 1999; 2013, chapter 10; 2014).

Biographical Notes

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Recommended Quotation

Schönhammer, Rainer: ... where it's always safe and warm. Places and Social Media as Stages of Social Life – Atmosphere vs. Identity. In: *Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, International Journal of Architectural Theory*. Vol. 19, Issue 32, 2014. cloud-cuckoo.net/fileadmin/hefte_de/heft_32/article_schoenhammer.pdf [1.10.2014]. p. 127–152.