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The social-material performance of cozy interiority

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Abstract. *Based on ethnographic observations and interviews in cafés in Copenhagen, and online descriptions in which users review their experience of cafés, this paper focuses on how materiality and sociality inter-relate to constitute a relaxed, pleasant sense of atmosphere: that which in Denmark is known as “hygge”. Specific attention is given to material structures and social practices that create a sense of interiority.*

Keywords: *atmosphere, coziness, interiority, sociality, materiality*

Hygge: A culturally rooted atmosphere

This paper focuses on how materiality and sociality inter-relate in constituting a particular cultural mode of atmosphere: The Danish form of coziness known as “Hygge”. *Hygge* can roughly be translated into “cozy tranquil togetherness”. It is a central term among native Danish cultural concepts, a term by which Danes refer appreciatively to pleasurable places that offer a relaxed, tranquil state of being, and an informal form of social interaction which unfolds with a shared orientation to the here and now (Hansen, 1980; Borish, 1991; Reddy, 1998; Linnet, 2011). It compares with other cultural forms of homely ambience such as Dutch *gezelligheid* (Pennartz, 1999) or Canadian *homeyness* (McCracken, 1989). But in Danish culture, this ambience receives a specific cultural emphasis due to its rooting in the egalitarian norms of Danish culture. Informants describe this form of atmosphere as unpretentious and informal, personal and authentic, devoid of status-competition or calculated “frontstage” behavior, an unstressful mood that allows one to relax and “be oneself”, “let one’s guard down” as formulated by one informant in this research, and ideally partake in the friendly, conflict-free and easygoing company of family or friends. Most Danes use the term *hygge* when appreciating the general quality of a home, but also in reference to cafés and restaurants that they experience as offering relaxation in providing a respite from public urban space or streamlined office spaces.

The focus here is on how such “3rd places” between work and home (Thompson & Arsel, 2004), exemplified by cafés, provide the sense of a relaxed atmosphere that has elements of the home-like. What constitutes the possibility of this being experienced? According to Böhme (1992), atmosphere comes forth through the network-like interaction of different elements - objects, lights, sounds, spaces. No single item is sufficient or critical for atmosphere to arise. Pennartz notes that how people behave and interact affects atmosphere in a balanced interaction with material facilitators, and under the influence of the latter (Pennartz, 1999). This author aims to contribute a conception of atmosphere that covers both the social, the material and the interaction between these spheres, in considering how the subjective sense of being enveloped by a cozy vibe such as *hygge* comes about.

Methodology

The empirical data for this paper derives from ethnographic research in urban cafés and bars in Copenhagen. The criterion for choosing these sites were that they are unequivocally

referred to as having achieved the right manifestation of *hygge*, both when guests speak of them, in user reviews on the internet, and in professional reviews in Danish newspapers. Interviews have focused on how people perceive the atmosphere of particular venues. Conclusions from an earlier project among Danish families also inform the general understanding of *hygge* atmosphere presented (Linnet, 2011).

Interiority: The sense of being *inside*

The ambience of *hygge* has previously been characterized as “bubbles of interaction” (Hansen, 1980). The author’s research suggests that in *hygge*, people experience a strong sense of *being inside*: Through metaphors like “oasis” and “sanctuary” customers contrast these cafés with stressful conditions outside, such as cold weather, the demands of work life, as well as the anonymity and perceived pressure to present an attractive “façade” to passing strangers that characterize. The atmosphere inside a *hyggelig* café strongly offers a reinvigorating contrast to life in the surrounding urban environment. It is referred to as “warm” both at a sensory level and in the friendliness of the mood one encounters, which creates a metaphoric contrast to the “coldness” of modern life; whether among the urban crowd or performance-oriented professional relations.

The concept of *interiority* lends itself to an analysis of this experience: “*Containment, confinement, enclosure, imprisonment, privacy, protection, security, shelter*: These are words to which understandings of interiority adhere.” (McCarthy, 2005: 112, italics in the original). Interiority fundamentally points to the subjective perception of being “in” or “at”: Being spatially present *somewhere*, which is relationally defined as bounded from its exterior. In line with that understanding, the empirical material presented refers both to material, social and symbolic forms of interiority involved in the constitution of a *hyggelig* (the adjective form of *hygge*) atmosphere. Relevant is also Peter Sloterdijk’s conception of spheres (2011): It is an underlying idea in this paper that the creation of interiors, beyond housing social and commercial activities as in the case of cafés, are never only about people fulfilling their concrete needs, but always also a discrete moment in the ongoing effort of humanity to make the world manageable by carving it up, creating discontinuities within which one can feel emplaced. Or as Sloterdijk says: “wherever human life is found, whether nomadic or settled, inhabited orbs appear” (*ibid*: 11), which express the human effort of “creating the dimension in which humans can be contained” (*ibid*: 28).

Practices that turn inwards

The empirical elements mentioned in the following have a general effect of interiorizing the situation; they all “turn inward” towards a socially shared here and now. While their effects overlap and reinforce each other, the first elements that will be mentioned are generally active in pulling people closer together into a social interior, whereas the next are more active in setting that social space apart from the surroundings; or at least marking it off as separate.

Sensory boundary-setting

Several practices that are involved in creating the atmosphere of *hygge* have the effect of creating material or symbolic boundaries around the situation, and managing distances towards the exterior. 3rd places associated with *hygge* provide people with the sense of being strongly set apart from the surrounding world. So do for example heavy doors, or windows with darkened colored glass, create an abrupt change in the sensory scape of lighting, sounds and smells.

The character of the soundscape matters to people who evaluate the atmosphere of a café. This shows when guests enter the door, look around and say to each other something like “This place is *hyggelig*, the music is not too loud – let’s stay here!”. Usually when one enters such a venue, the soundscape changes to one that is more ambient, characterized by music and the hum of several people conversing. The presence of other people is a core element in the creation of this atmosphere – even if there is no direct contact, the witnessing of other people’s sociality, and the resonance between social groups oriented each to their own circle, plays a role in setting the feel of the scene.

The olfactory aspect is particularly noticeable in the case of places that still allow smoking. These are often small, rather dark places that have conducted business in their location over several years, thus having a well-established position in the neighborhood with a local clientele, as well as being regular destinations for people frequenting the nightlife in the area. As with alcohol and snacks but even stronger in the case of smoke, the substance has both a concrete sensory and a symbolic aspect: it sets the zone apart as distinct, and creates an olfactory space as do activities like cooking. But due to the strong governmental stigmatization and regulation of smoking, it has the symbolic significance of turning one’s back to the discipline of modern society, which also sets the smoky scene apart and provides the air with a certain attitude.

The lighting is the sensory factor that most people readily mention when asked to point out the factors conducive to *hygge*. In places that many people see as *hyggelig*, the lighting is often quite dispersed lighting and comes from many sources of a different kind (in one place all lamps are different), placed low and close to where people sit, it has a warm tone and creates a circle of light that often does not extend beyond the table where people are gathered.

The design of space and furniture also matters for *hygge*. One guest refers to the café as having “old homely furniture that wants you to lie down and forget time”. In general, there is often an abundance of non-linear shapes, niches and corners, which creates a feel of something organic and not strongly controlled.

Social boundary-setting

Hygge thrives on the existence of a series of boundaries between inside and outside that envelope the sociality taking place there. Concerning the form of coziness that is Canadian *homeyness*, Grant McCracken has described “the embracing property” where “the surfaces of the homey environment exhibit a pattern of descending enclosure” (1989: 172). This encompassing engages those who encounter it, and repeats itself, in a fractal-like manner, from street to the snug nooks of the home, as boundedness and privacy increases.

Such boundaries are also created by people’s behavior and style of interaction, such as the circles formed by social groups, which have an enclosing effect on the subject in their middle, derived from being among other bodies. “Every act of solidarity is an act of sphere formation, that is to say the creation of an interior” (Sloterdijk, 2011: 12). A social form of interiority is playing out, which is both bodily and social – consider the apt metaphor “a circle of friends”. Hereby the effects of materiality and sociality reinforce each other, e.g. as lamps make circles that align with the circles formed by social groups.

A social practice that is also central is the informal behavior of staff, their often friendship-like interaction with patrons and relaxed attitude. As one guest states, this is “A perfect place if one is not looking for fancy-smancy cafés with too loud music and stressed-out waiters”. Many places also have photos on the wall that display scenes from the social life that goes on in the place, these and other modes of recognizing stable guest also signals a relation between the place and its clientele. Hereby the social site is set apart from the anonymous crowds on the street, and from other cafés that may merely represent the profane workings of the marketplace. From the way that people describe their experience of

the service in a *hyggelig* place, it is never just a commercial offering that could be purchased anywhere. It is presented with some of the personality of the person providing it, in particular if guests also enter the exchange with a laid-back attitude and relate to the person servicing them in a tone more personal and equal, than if the transaction was purely based on monetary means.

Substances consumed

Hygge is usually accompanied by the shared intake of food and drinks. Tea or coffees often accompany daytime *hygge*, and so does some amount of alcohol after work breaks and at evening get-togethers. From a theoretical point of view, the effects that the physical properties of such substances (e.g. alcohol content or heat) have on social interaction is interesting because, like the effects of the built environment, they play into the subject-object debate: While people's experience of things – how to behave around them and whether they fit the situation – is clearly conditioned by learned cultural perceptions, they are not entirely a matter of culture or of social construction. Their physical properties makes sites and substances lend themselves to certain practices, they have *affordance* e.g. for a certain form of sociality (Ingold, 2000: 166; Miller, 2010: 31), but their symbolic likewise facilitates or determines what takes place. Thus like other objects and substances, beverages can have a symbolic meaning but also a concrete physical effect that rests on the interaction between the physical composition of the object and the human body. Thus some objects have an effect on the interaction that can be traced to their material properties.

Alcohol both communicates that this is a “time out” and physically influences the interaction, when it effects the loss, which people associate with *hygge*, of façades and guardedness. The effect of alcohol suggests a point about the consumption of atmosphere: That consumers can be drawn to substances that influence their interaction with the surrounding world and “open up” the subject for experiencing a particular form of atmosphere.

One might talk of a *material instigation of sociality*, as if due to their material makeup, these objects “want to” assemble people and be shared by them. One example would be a pot of warm tea or coffee. It is rapidly cooling off, and its appeal will last less than an hour. Size wise it is too large for one person to empty. Due to its physical dimensions and the rapid deterioration of the usefulness of its contents, it virtually calls for being shared. There is a temporality built into such object that spurs social interaction.

The progressive deterioration of the substance is a principle shared by other elements that people gather around: A warm dinner getting colder, an open bottle of beer getting warmer and losing its gas. The temporal dynamics built into the substance, are factors that support the communal sharing of eating and drinking by which people easily come to feel enveloped by an encompassing sociality (Belk, 2010).

Down-to-earth appearances and affordability

A common trait to the setting of *hygge*, including the clothes people wear, their topics of conversation and the food and drinks they consume, is that they are affordable and relatively ordinary or even “humble”: They provide pleasure and refreshment but do not take the center of attention e.g. in terms of being particularly refined or expensive. Luxury brands or fine appearances are generally more associated with 3rd places where the individual seeks visibility and a more intense and party-like atmosphere. In the atmosphere of *hygge* however, things that are functional albeit of quality are exactly right. Regarding clothes, the everyday informality that goes with *hygge* means that brands and designs are less relevant in relaxed places primarily associated with *hygge*, than in places where people seek visibility. In homes, *hygge* shies the formality of dressing up for the occasion or laying out the silverware. While people can indeed *hygge* with a glass of champagne, especially if there is no status competition among those interacting in relation to the high class symbolism of the

object, the standard folk characterization of *hygge* centers on everyday functionality, simplicity, affordability and spontaneity.

Setting a site apart from the world

The various settings that users strongly associate with *hygge* all contain a spectrum of intensely interiority-creating mechanisms that effect the home-like ambience of the place. When the attitude of the staff goes beyond the commercial and into the personal, a sense of uniqueness and rooting is created that in principle is reminiscent of how in homes, family dinners with servings of homemade food construct the home as a site, by marking its boundaries towards non-homey environments (McCracken, 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991; Curasi *et al.*, 2004; Moisio *et al.*, 2004). The crucial dynamic is that of *singularization*. The singularity of the personal (in cafés) or the homemade (in families) marks either sphere as “warm”, personal and caring by distancing it from the market system of mass produced goods with impersonal origins.

This sense of sited-ness is also strengthened by the rather down-to-earth means by which *hygge* is created. The affordability and “whatever is at hand”-attitude serve to dislodge the situation from competitive relations of distinction, both among the participants and in their relation to society. Through a normativity oriented towards substance and honest functionality, people strive to relate to an inner essence of things, rather than be influenced by social hierarchies external to the situation.

No master plan: a sense of potentiality

Achieving a sense of balanced interpersonal distance, and a sense of potentiality, is also one way that the spatial conditions afford an atmosphere of *hygge*. Typical for such places, one field site has a lot of natural materials like wood, which are readily associated with *hygge*, and a collection of furniture with a somewhat disjumbled appearance, which suggests that they were collected through personal contacts rather than market. The appearance of the environment seems to express the inner disposition of people and not the result of a manipulatory striving for a commercially viable design. Again the principle is one of facing inward rather than outward.

The lack of a “master plan” in the design or any cross-cutting style concept provides the place with a looseness which resonates with the lack of purpose-orientation, control and hierarchical centering essential to *hygge*. It is a non-directive materiality, an open ended setting that does not declare a ‘plan’ for what is supposed to unfold there in social terms. This allows for a sense of potentiality which has atmospheric effects in that “possible behavior is relevant to the experience and meaning of a pleasant atmosphere” (Pennartz 1999: 99). The stage is not set, but left for people to fill with the mood of their interaction.

Conclusion

The settings and practices that constitute *hygge* have subject-object relations which facilitate the experience of presence and mutual social involvement, and of atmosphere (Böhme, 1992). They interiorize the situation, and establish a here and a now that absorb participants in an experience of social flow. Sociality and spatiality are structured according to the same principles, and co-constitute this atmosphere. Yet it is exactly the absence of an overt intention in the appearance of the material surroundings that provides the sense of loose informality, which mirrors the principles according to which a *hyggelig* sociality unfolds, and sets the stage for a cozy atmosphere to arise.

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