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► **To cite this version:**

Sara Cameron, H el ene B elanger. Home territories and the atmosphere of spectacle: the experience of residents living in and around Montreal's Quartier des spectacles - A phenomenological inquiry. *Ambiances in action / Ambiances en acte(s) - International Congress on Ambiances, Montreal 2012, Sep 2012, Montreal, Canada. pp.359-364. halshs-00745941*

HAL Id: halshs-00745941

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00745941>

Submitted on 26 Oct 2012

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Home territories and the atmosphere of spectacle: the experience of residents living in and around Montreal's *Quartier des spectacles*

A phenomenological inquiry

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Abstract. *As cities are investing in urban (re)development projects, local residents are affected by the changes directly. It is difficult, however, to qualify these experiences. The objective of this paper is to explore the importance of a study that considers the potential impact on residents living in and around a (re)developed cultural district that has a distinct and identifiable atmosphere of spectacle. We propose a phenomenological inquiry to explore the case of a recent urban (re)development project, Montreal's Quartier des spectacles, with regard to the impact of the spectacularization of space on residents' home territories.*

Keywords: *atmosphere, territory of spectacle, home territories, phenomenology*

Introduction

The goal of this paper is to lay a foundation to examine the potential impact of an atmosphere (or ambiance) of spectacle – by means of the spectacularization of space – on urban residents, specifically the home territories of residents living in and around Montreal's *Quartier des spectacles*. We argue for the need to consider the experience of residents thus necessitating (we claim) a phenomenological inquiry. This paper is grounded in an understanding of the city as a sensorial experience, the *Quartier des spectacles* as an example of a territory of spectacle, and the possibility of territorial dominance (Kärholm, 2007) in the district¹ under study.

Selling the city

Public administrations and economic actors have much to gain in marketing their city to attract or maintain populations or economic activities (Evans, 2009; Kavatzis, 2007), and an important part of marketing cities is branding. Often mistaken as simply slogans and logos, branding serves to focus all aspects of communication related to marketing (Kavatzis, 2007). In addition to focusing communication initiatives, branding can also take the form of "hard-branding", where the act of branding the city is more than just a symbolic representation – it is an act of altering the symbolic and physical attributes of a place to create a unique tourist experience (Zukin, 1995). Hard-branding can manifest as a wide-spread "engineered image" of a city – known as *imagineering*, a conscious manipulation and promotion of cities to promote them as vibrant, hospitable and attractive places (Dole & Hubbard,

1. Quartier is translated as district. District will be used unless quartier is part of a proper name.

2002). This type of branding can also be seen as a “political act” and an act of power, whereby a particular social group advocates a political theory in pursuit of an ideal (Paul, 2004).

“Hard branding” measures such as the creation, rehabilitation or revitalization of urban spaces are often implemented by public authorities. These actions take the spectators’ preferences and sensibilities regarding the built and the social environment into consideration, and the sites public administrators create are used to sell how they want the city to be perceived by tourists, investors, residents and workers (Lofland, 1998; Vlez, 2004). Of course, the reality is that many cities are attempting to brand themselves as creative cities (promoting arts and/or cultural consumption), and thus run the risk of over-saturation. Although cities may have distinct identities in reality, similar types of marketing approaches, coupled with branding of the same message, run the risk of diminishing the very qualities that make a city unique, leading to the “pasteurization” of public spaces through design, programmed uses, activities and even exclusion of non-official uses and/or more marginal populations (Germain *et al.*, 2006).

Montreal’s *Quartier des spectacles* as spectacle

Montreal has recently branded itself as the “City of Festivals”, bringing grandiose monument together with consumable spectacle in the *Quartier des spectacles* (Paul, 2004). The (re)development of the *Quartier des spectacles* began in 2002 (overseen by the *Quartier des spectacles* Partnership, founded in 2003 to serve as a board of directors), comprising 1 km² of the Ville-Marie district. Certain sections of the district have long been areas of activity and vitality, encompassing the historic red-light district (the intersection of Saint-Laurent Boulevard and Sainte-Catherine Street), the Quartier Latin (long the site of the Just for Laughs Festival until its relocation further west in 2010 to the Place des festivals, following an earlier migration of the International Jazz Festival) and the Place des Arts. This district also houses many vacant lots and large-scale developments (Musée d’art contemporain, Complexe Desjardins) and is home to 6,000 residents².

The concept of visually and territorially branding the *Quartier des spectacles* was introduced in 2005. This initiative aimed to highlight the concentration of cultural activities by demarcating the district with a visual landmark – a red, double dotted line running along Sainte-Catherine Street – and to provide visual consistency in communication and the development of the landscape, as well as to standardize urban furniture and urban signage design. The colour red references Sainte-Catherine Street’s long history as the main axes of the city’s Red Light District. In 2006, the Luminous Pathway appeared, identifying performance venues, highlighting architectural features and lighting intersections (thus orienting pedestrians). The marketing, branding and (re)development of Montreal’s *Quartier des spectacles* has resulted in a tourism, consumption and leisure site consisting of multiple redevelopment projects, created to produce and present spectacle (Bélanger, 2000). As part of the imagining initiative however, the *Quartier des spectacles* has become a territory of spectacle where it is both the site *for* spectacle – encompassing spaces to present spectacle – as well as the site *of* spectacle – where the district is visited for spectacle in its own right, an example of the spectacularization of space.

There is a clear attempt to implicate certain aspects of the local culture and history – notably, as mentioned above, the use of the colour red – in the development of the district where, for example, the size of the district was established to encompass pre-existing cultural and artistic venues. However, aspects of the district not fitting with the branded image are under pressure due to rising rents, demand for space, and the destruction of buildings (Lambert, 2012).

2. www.quartierdesspectacles.com

Making sense of residents' experiences

For the purposes of this project, we consider residents as active participants (Guy, 2007) who have an impact on (and are impacted by) the spectacle (and the environment at large); Visitors and residents alike can participate, re-appropriate and resist the spectacle (Bélangier, 2000), using, appropriating, shaping, building, modifying, rejecting or destroying the urban fabric which is at the core of the urban experience (Vale & Warner, 2001). The city is understood as “a dynamic blend of the built, the demolished, the evolving, the remembered, the sensorial, responding to and changing according to the observer” (Adams *et al.*, 2007, p. 203). Thus, the city is a place of sensual encounters, a multisensorial experience, and these encounters are part of the everyday experience of urban residents. Being in the city is a personal bodily experience and there is no line between the material and sensual components of the environment (Adams *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, this idea is also extended to residents and visitors, where “living organisms and their milieu form a continuum” (Thibaud, 2011, p. 209). Ambiance (as the quality of the situation, motor solicitation and sensory background) reminds us of this continuum, providing a way to explore the everyday experiences of residents in their environment(s) (Thibaud, 2011).

Residents experience the city actively (seeking out activities or experiences) and passively (such as hearing music through windows), and can have both an abundance of choice and/or the possibility of avoiding participation (Adams *et al.*, 2007). For residents living in or around a territory of spectacle, “each of these activities will have a different sensory impact and will shape how they feel about residing in their home” (p. 213).

Home territories, territory of spectacle and territorial complexity

Territoriality, a fundamental human activity that attempts to regulate space (Lyman & Scott, 1967, among others), is “an important element of how human associations [...] and institutions organize themselves. It is an aspect of how individual humans as embodied beings organize themselves with respect to the social and material world” (Delaney, 2005, p. 10). In fact, Di Méo (2000) has argued that territoriality is a social and human reinterpretation of geographical space. Far from being a simple concept, territoriality can also be understood as a paradigm that expresses the complex relationship between humans (as individuals or in groups) and their environment, challenging the standard departure point of geographic space to that of the role of humans in creating territory (Raffestin, 2012, also Di Méo, 2011). One type of territory, home territory, is (at its most basic) understood as a space or place that extends beyond and/or around the dwelling. Home territories can be symbolic, cultural, physical, emotional, cognitive, political, historical, individual, collective, etc. (Altman, 1975; De Certeau *et al.*, 1994, Lyman & Scott, 1967; Wise, 2009, and others). Addressing the question of how home territories are created, however, is complex. For Wise (2009), meaningful space (what he calls milieu) can be created by habitual activities therefore a home territory can be created by individuals or groups by means of daily practice in and around the dwelling (De Certeau *et al.*, 1994; Wise, 2009). The way of inhabiting (in and around) the home, creating a collection of milieus, creates home territory.

The flexible nature of territories is such that the boundaries of certain territories can often be confused or overlap (Lyman & Scott, 1967), or they can exist in the same place and time (or in succession in the same location), what Kärholm (2007) calls territorial complexity. In the case of the *Quartier des spectacles*, the newly created territory of spectacle could lead to increased territorial complexity (co-occurrence of territories resulting in multiple territorial layers). The overlap of a territory of spectacle with home territories, supported by a power distribution weighted in favour of the territory of spectacle, may result in conflict or even a dominant territorial production, causing territorial stability (thereby reducing territorial complexity and the co-occurrence of territorial productions). Put simply, the territory of

spectacle may be a dominant form of territorial production that leads to limiting (or preventing) other forms of territorial production (Kärholm, 2007) such as home territories.

Approach

Social science research “is often oddly abstracted and distanced from the sensory, embodied and lived conditions of existence that it seeks to explain”, and addressing this requires open and creative approaches (Mason & Davies, 2009, p. 600). For this reason, we propose a phenomenological inquiry (which is typically broad since the researcher must be open to *what is* and not simply *what is expected* (Cresswell, 2009)) – specifically van Manen’s (1990) method of *hermeneutical phenomenological writing* – in an attempt to better understand the experience of residents living in and around Montreal’s *Quartier des spectacles*. This approach is necessary since it has the potential to explore the everyday experience of residents, including their own sensorial experiences. Fieldwork for this project will begin during the summer of 2012.

Conclusion

The potential for the (re)development of the *Quartier des spectacles* to impact residents by means of the creation of a sensorial territory – specifically an atmosphere (or ambiance) of spectacle – is central to this project. By means of lighting, signage and street furniture, we argue that the *Quartier des spectacles* is a sensorial territory, and possibly serves to enforce a kind of sensorial censorship (Adams *et al.*, 2007), by means of visual consistency and the standardization of street furniture and signage. If, as Adams *et al.* (2007) assert, individuals and groups “establish their own sensory landscapes, which shape and reinforce their position within that city and culture and contribute towards broadening the identity of the city itself” (p. 206), a sensorial territory that is created, maintained and defended as a territory of spectacle has the potential to become a dominant form of territorial production. By exploring residents’ experiences of living in and around the *Quartier des spectacles*, we hope to explore the (changed/changing) territorial complexity of the district and the impact this has had on residents’ home territories.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for funding provided by Le Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC).

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