Using Mobility and Urban Planning to Implement Atmosphere: The Example of ‘Encounter Zones’ in Western Switzerland

Patrick Naef

Abstract This contribution aims to explore how ‘atmosphere’ can be disseminated in urban settings in Switzerland, through the development of what is referred to as ‘encounter zones’ (‘zones de rencontre’ in French and ‘Begegnungszonen’ in German). This urban planning tool dedicated to regulating traffic and allowing different users (pedestrians, cars, bicycles, etc.) to cohabit in a non-segregated space has been introduced all over the country since its official integration into the national legislation in 2002. The main objective is to determine how these areas can become appropriate settings for the development of a desirable atmosphere, conceived here as a quality of place where social encounters and space sharing can happen. In other words, the purpose is to determine if these areas can become more than just a traffic regulation tool, and contribute to social cohesion and the development of lively neighbourhoods. This paper is based on anthropological empirical findings collected in a larger study on encounter zones in Western Switzerland.

Keywords Encounter zone, pedestrian, mobility, shared space, urban development, planning, Switzerland

DOI 10.25364/08.3:2017.1.8
The main objective of this article is to determine if a traffic regulation tool can also help create a specific atmosphere in a place. Building on this polysemous notion of ‘atmosphere’, I will observe its professional conception and diffusion in a built environment. Although the concept of ‘atmosphere’ is increasingly present in urban development planner narratives – especially when associated with other notions like ‘quality of place’ or ‘wellbeing’ – its cultural dimension is still largely ignored. The development of ‘encounter zones’ in Switzerland will thus serve as an appropriate case study for analysing the implementation of a model of territorial development whose main aim is to manage traffic, but which also seeks to produce an atmosphere based on conviviality and a lively environment; a setting suitable for ‘encounters’ according to its designation.

A broader objective is to demonstrate the challenges involved in the planning and management of public spaces. If the improvement of security is certainly one of the main goals of planners in this context, there is no consensus on how to achieve it. Between the will on one hand to segregate users of public space (e.g. pedestrians and vehicles) and the desire on the other to promote ‘shared space’ (Baillie-Hamilton 2008); between dynamics associated with the planning of specific street furniture and design versus the will to promote ‘naked streets’, the streetscape can contain significant contrasts and can thus have an important influence on the various atmospheres associated with it. In this contribution, it is stated that ‘atmosphere engineering’ (Trigg 2016, Adey 2014, McCormack 2008) implies a reflexive process, allowing corrections, flexibility, modifications, criticisms and participation; a step by step, continuously reinvented development leading to what Trigg (2016, 770) conceives as a ‘perfectly engineered atmosphere, one that appears spontaneous’.

Finally, while academia has taken an extensive interest since the seventies in topics related to ‘shared space’ (Baillie-Hamilton 2008, Moody & Melia 2014, Karndacharuk & al. 2014) and ‘traffic calming’ (Pharaoh & Ruseel 1989, 1991, Elvik 2001, Kjemtrup 1992), including specific studies on ‘residential areas’ (Tolley 1990) and ‘woonerfs’ (Ben-Joseph 2007, Groenhuis 1979), case studies focusing on the development of ‘encounter zones’ are still lacking in the fields of mobility and urban planning research. This analysis aims to fill the gap through an anthropological approach to the practices of stakeholders involved in the planning and management of such places in Switzerland. In this context, the notion of ‘atmosphere’ will help to explore the role of affect in the development of sites associated with ideas such as walkability, security and conviviality. Building on the seminal work of Rachel Thomas (2004, 2008, 2012, 2012a) and Jean-Paul Thibaud (1992, 2013) on atmosphere and urban public space, the main question underlining this reflection is to determine how atmospheres can be introduced and diffused in contemporary public spaces and everyday life.

This contribution is based on the results of a wider ongoing research project being conducted for the Transport and Environment Association, the chief organisation involved in soft mo-

---

1 In Switzerland, the label ‘zone de rencontre’ is used in French and ‘Begegnungszone’ in German, both translated here as: ‘encounter zone’.
2 ‘street furniture’ is used here to describe equipment installed along streets and roads, such as benches, bollards, streetlamps, fountains, waste receptacles, flower pots, etc.
3 Literally translated as ‘living yard’, a woonerf is an area in the Netherlands, where motorized traffic is limited to walking pace.
bility promotion in Switzerland. The objective of this study is to evaluate the social acceptance of encounter zones and the appropriation of new codes of mobility by inhabitants and users in western Switzerland, the French-speaking part of the country. In the present article, I will focus on two medium-size towns, Fribourg and Versoix, and will explore the ways encounter zones can provide appropriate settings for a desirable atmosphere for pedestrians, one that will contribute to place sharing and social encounters. Two case studies have been selected in each town because they both constitute new encounter zones, making it possible to observe the evolution of these places since their transformation. One of the sites under study was inaugurated in 2016 in Versoix, in the canton of Geneva, and the other – in Fribourg – was created in 2014. The two cases represent relatively large and central encounter zones, and both are now significantly used by pedestrians.

As we examine the notion of ‘atmosphere’ in these two spots, one important difference should be mentioned. In Fribourg, the encounter zone was set up in the neighborhood of ‘Alt’, described by its inhabitants as a lively area, even before it was transformed into an encounter zone, due to the presence of several schools and the dynamism of its neighborhood association, ‘Quartier d’Alt’. In Versoix, on the other hand, the encounter zone was part of a larger urban transformation undertaking aiming at creating a new city-centre in a space that was mainly a wasteland before the project began. These contrasted settings, one previously inhabited, the other deserted, influence the atmosphere associated with these new encounter zones. These two case studies thus provide good opportunities for observing how urban planners and public authorities can create, or restore, an atmosphere, helping to attract pedestrians and above all to make them want to linger.

The results highlighted below have been collected primarily using anthropological methods. First, the areas in focus were thoroughly observed for several days and micro-interviews were conducted with passer-by. Special attention was given to the practices and behaviours of users, mainly pedestrians. The purpose was to examine their itineraries and their occupation of these newly designed spaces (e.g. whether pedestrians would spread across the whole roadway or on the contrary stick to the sides), as well as their interactions with other users (e.g. motorized vehicles). Semi-directive interviews were then conducted with different users and stakeholders. So far, twenty-five interviews have been realized with architects, urban planners, town magistrates and staff, as well as shopkeepers, restaurant managers and inhabitants. Focus groups are now being organized with inhabitants and users of these specific encounter zones; the next step will be to conduct a similar process, but one that will include stakeholders. Finally, a detailed content analysis has been undertaken, essentially based on administrative and legal documentation, as well as on the media and architectural or urban planning project reports.

Atmospheres and the built environment

The notion of ‘atmosphere’ is used in many fields, such as climate, music, plastic art, poetry or advertising. It has also permeated the social sciences, cultural geography and anthropology, and the term frequently appears in the domains of architecture, urban planning or interior design. ‘Atmosphere’ is often conceived as a liminal and fuzzy concept (Trigg 2016). For Gernot Böhme (1993, 113) its vague use derives from its multiple usages in everyday speech, ‘it is applied to persons, spaces and to nature.’ He states that ‘atmospheres’ are the basis for a theory
of perception, stressing that they are primary ‘objects’ of perception: ‘What is first and immediately perceived is neither sensations, nor shapes or objects or their constellations.’ (1993, 125). In addition to these elements of definition, atmosphere is considered here as a confluence between senses, emotions and symbolic meaning (Philippopoulos-Miahalopoulos, as cited in Trigg 2016). Moreover, it is also fundamental to mention, as does Adey (2014) relying on Böhme’s theories, that atmospheres are created by things, persons or their constellations. Taking this idea further and considering it as a security mechanism, Adey suggests that atmospheres can be engineered. This reflection will focus precisely on these processes of atmosphere making or engineering. Atmospheres will also generally be considered in plural form; diverse atmospheres can be associated with a place, depending on the contexts and people’s various perceptions. Furthermore, different people, whether stakeholders, inhabitants or users, contribute to ‘model’ different atmospheres, considered by Michels (2015, 259) as the ‘affective capacities of material components’: ‘These processes comprise the professional work of designers and artists as much as everyday practices.’

Jean-Paul Thibaud (2013), using the French word ‘ambiance’, which captures the notion of ‘atmosphere’ (Duarte, 2013), presents it as an increasingly important issue in urban transformations. He also acknowledges the importance of the inhabitants and everyday practices in what he qualifies as ‘mise en ambiance’ (literally ‘atmosphere setting’): ‘One should not underestimate the continuous and ordinary production of urban atmosphere by city-dwellers. Indeed, one of the lessons that ‘atmosphere’ can teach us, is that a lived-in space is by no means the simple result of the reception of conceived spaces.’ (Thibaud 2013, 15). For Thibaud, the progressive integration of atmospheres in architecture and urban planning goes beyond a mere effect of postmodern sentimentalism; focusing on the processes, conditions and modalities of its production could prefigure a ‘political ecology of atmosphere’, thus deconstructing the role of aesthetics in public spaces. Following this approach, Thomas (2012, 47) proposes a sensitive criticism of urban space that brings into question what she refers to as an ‘ideology of sharing’ institutionalized by what she considers as the ‘pacified city’ or the ‘sanitized city’: ‘well-ordered, monitored, securitized, the pacified city would then insure the tranquillity of city-dwellers and the protection of the common good. More than objectives in terms of “environmental health” or conviviality, it would tend to put “under protection” contemporary urban society.’ Soulier (2012) talks about the ‘sterilization’ of the streets when he reviews the excess of signage and protection in the public space in France. He shares in part Thomas’s vision of urban sanitization, both scholars seeing new forms of hygienism in urban development in recent decades.

In this context, an approach that includes atmospheres in the consideration of public space promotes a critical perspective, ‘an apprehension of the urban world as always perfectible, a constant way of questioning “what exists” and “what should happen”’. (Thomas 2012, 50) Therefore, the notion of ‘atmosphere’ used in this analysis enables us to empirically evaluate how urban planners and public authorities may challenge what is conceived of as the ‘sterilization’ or the ‘sanitization’ of public space. Viewing place-making through the lens of ‘atmosphere’ can bring new insights into these dynamics. The process of ‘atmosphere making’ can indeed offer novel perspectives on the use and the appropriation of public space by city dwellers. First, it is important to bear in mind that ‘atmosphere making’ proceeds from the interactions between users and planners and, secondly, that diverse atmospheres may be uncovered, depending
on how public space is experienced, and by whom. Furthermore, building on the concept of ‘shared space’, ‘atmosphere making’ can clearly contribute to creating new elements of reflection on the idea of ‘walkable places’.

Mobility and atmospheres in public space

As demonstrated by Middleton (2009) in the case of pedestrians’ behaviours in London, speed and efficiency are not always the main priorities that transport policy suggests. Mobility cannot be reduced to its strict physical dimension; it implies displacement, but also encounters and co-presence (Thomas 2013). In his celebrated book, ‘Cities for people’, the Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl (2010, 30) confirms this statement, adding that walking favours a direct contact with the collectively: ‘It is a particular form of communication between people sharing a public space like a forum and a living environment.’ From Thomas’s (2014) viewpoint on atmospheres, it is a way of engaging the passer-by with public space. Mobility is indeed rarely experienced alone and Duarte (2003, 25) considers atmosphere in the public space as a link between the diverse sensations of the users of this space: ‘It is a subjective interpretation of the collective experience, of the awareness of belonging to an urban place, where sensations carry significations shared by users.’ The French notion put forward by Thibaud (2013), ‘l’être-ensemble’ (the ‘being together’), seems thus indispensable when considering atmosphere and mobility in public space. For people to occupy, walk, stay, linger or stroll in a specific place, they need to adequately share this environment.

The promotion of pedestrian mobility is hence generally seen as a means to achieve a shared use of public space and initiatives such as pedestrian and encounter zones are often presented as efficient tools to reach this goal. Thomas (2011) postulates that there exists an operational link between walking and atmosphere. Yet she observes a ‘fading of pedestrian atmospheres’, due to the development of antiseptic environments where the pedestrian feels alienated. Paradoxically for Thomas, conditions seen as ideal for walking – smooth surfaces, agreeable lighting and adequate signposting – can also negatively affect the pedestrian and make him feel out of place. With the establishment of stricter public space regulations and the production of public spaces aiming to promote walkability, new codes of urbanity are being shaped. In this context, the sensitive dimension of a public space – its atmosphere – can also contribute to regulate circulation flows and to organize co-presences (Thibaud 1992, Thomas 2011). The challenge for urban planners thus relies on their ability to develop walkable places, while bearing in mind these dynamics of ‘sterilization’ (Soulier 2012) and ‘pedestrian atmosphere fading’ (Thomas 2011). Architectural and design elements, signage and street marking, authorizations and prohibitions, are all components that need to be carefully studied in order to achieve such an objective. The notion of ‘atmosphere’ therefore offers an innovative way to approach urban planning, especially when this practice aims to promote what Thibaud designates as ‘vivre ensemble’.

Traffic calming and shared space

Hans Monderman’s concept of ‘shared space’ is often referred to when the development of encounter zones or pedestrian areas is under discussion (Karndacharuk et al. 2013). If Monderman did not produce any noteworthy scientific work on the concept, some scholars (Bail-
Karndacharuk et al. (2014, 215) define shared space as 'a public local street or intersection that is intended and designed to be used by pedestrians and vehicles in a consistently low-speed environment with no obvious physical segregation between the various road users in order to create a sense of place, and facilitate multi-functions.' If it did not define how to achieve this on a practical level, the so-called ‘Buchanan Report’ in the UK laid the base for the development of ‘environmental areas’ to face the hegemony of motorized traffic in the sixties, and proposed how a street could be adapted for mixed use by vehicles and other users (Karndacharuk et al. 2014). As mentioned in the definition above, if traffic signs and regulations are to be replaced by social rules, a ‘sense of place’ has to be created to encourage cooperative and sharing behaviour between users. For Soulier (2012), shared space philosophy can teach us the differences between ‘road’ and ‘street’ management. The modal use of the street is different from that of the road; we are moving from the idea of ‘dividing’ to one of ‘sharing’ (both translated in French by the same verb ‘partager’): ‘As much the modal logic of the road (to divide) is easy to grasp and to apply, the modal logic of the street (to share) is delicate and subtle.’ Atmosphere has thus an active role to play in the management of the street. With its capacity to ‘bring people together’ (Bissel 2010, 278), it can enhance place sharing and contribute to organizing flows and co-presence, without reverting to an over-signalization process that leads to what Soulier maintains is a ‘sterilized’ streetscape.

While the use of vehicles is still increasing, several initiatives have contributed to what is often defined as ‘traffic calming’. As stated by Thomas, after the industrial development, the 21st century, ‘largely embedded in environmental preoccupations and in a search for generalized accessibility – gets pacified.’ (2013, 2) After years of car hegemony, one can observe in Europe a multiplication of concrete actions in favour of soft mobility: the general resurgence of the tramway, the development of bicycle-sharing systems and the creation of ‘encounter zones’ (Thomas, 2012). For Thomas (2012, 47), encounter zones respond to a ‘philosophy of slowness’, contributing to a transit toward new models of urbanity. Encounter zones seem even more important in this process, if we consider Gehl’s observations which show that a specific site can influence the whole city life: ‘Just as cities can invite city life, there are many examples of how the renovation of a single space or even change in furniture and details can invite people to a totally new pattern of use.’ (2010, 16)

Since the seventies, traffic calming has been materialised in contrasted, but somehow similar ways, and some cities throughout Europe have acquired a status of model. Delft in The Netherlands was one of the first cities to consider giving priority to pedestrians in some areas of town, after reclaiming the concept of ‘woonerf’ initially developed in the locality of Emmenhout. In France, the city of Chambery also became a pioneer in the eighties in terms of traffic calming, after implementing a priority for pedestrians in many streets, including sections with heavy traffic. These areas then constituted the basis for the realisation of what will be officially labelled as ‘encounter zones’ in 2008 in French legislation. In Switzerland, the concept of the ‘encounter zone’ was officially incorporated into legislation in 2002, after the principle was tested in the municipalities of Burgdorf and Saint-Blaise. In the Swiss case, as in the French and Dutch examples, these areas are characterized by a priority for pedestrians and a low speed limit for motorised vehicles (20 km/h in Switzerland). Regarding the notion of shared space defined
above, a significant difference can already be noticed. The principle of the encounter zone in Switzerland clearly designates a priority for pedestrians; in contrast, the philosophy of shared space does not imply a clear priority for a single user.

A case study of ‘encounter zones’ in Switzerland

In December 2016, a celebratory gathering brought together local authorities and soft mobility supporters in Burgdorf, a small locality in central Switzerland, to mark the 20th anniversary of a process that led to the creation of the first encounter zone in Switzerland. Under the designation of ‘flanierzone’, this initiative, launched in 1996 by the municipality, the Federal Office of Energy and national activist groups such as the Transport and Environment Association, aimed to promote the city of Burgdorf as a pedestrian model. Beyond the objective of securing the town-centre, there was a determination to introduce a specific atmosphere, illustrated by the German term ‘flanieren’ – ‘strolling’ or ‘wandering’. These designations already demonstrate that walking is considered here as much more than a mere means of moving from one place to another. As the slogan of the campaign – ‘slowly, amiably and securely’ – indicates, the aim was to create an environment – a public space – which city-dwellers could appropriate and that would produce a desire to linger there. Andreas Wirth, who was at the time the head of the city department for construction, states that a new indicator was defined: ‘The speed of pace! The slower the pedestrian walks, the more time he spends in the encounter zone, which can attest to the success of this development.’ (Personal communication from Lanci-Montant, March 2017)

From 1996 to the end of the millennium, the project remained at an experimental stage. It was only in 2002 that the Swiss Parliament introduced the concept of ‘encounter zone’ into the legislation. During this period, workshops were organized to generate original ideas on how to implement what would be the first encounter zone in the country. Some workshops were specifically planned for women to allow them to formulate their wishes freely and generally to enhance participation. Moreover, a philosopher – Hans Saner – was involved in the process of formulating a ‘city philosophy’: ‘a holistic living space, imagined for people of all ages, all cultures, without omitting animals and plants.’ (Personal communication from Lanci-Montant, March 2017) In this context, an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together urban planners, public bodies, a philosopher and specific groups of the local population encouraged the implementation of a particular atmosphere associated with notions like ‘slowness’, ‘conviviality’ and ‘sharing’.

Exploring the development of ‘encounter zones’ in Switzerland these last two decades, plus the process in which some stakeholders promote and attempt to engineer desirable atmospheres for these places, can bring new insights into the opportunities and perspectives of shared space theories and traffic calming. The following analysis of new encounter zones in Switzerland takes a close look at the process leading to their implementation in two different Swiss towns. How is the notion of ‘atmosphere’ mobilized in the narratives of stakeholders involved in their development? In what ways does street furniture contribute to or restrain the diffusion of atmospheres suited for the development of walkable areas and the enhancement of place sharing? Are there sites more favourable to such atmospheres? What are the role of pedestrians and motorists in this process?

For Claude Morzier, a Swiss traffic engineer specialised in the planning of encounter zones, these developments represent much more than road projects, they are urban planning projects:
‘It does not limit itself to speed limit regulation, it aims to improve the quality of life, the social quality of the place. An encounter zone should be planned where there are encounters, not in mere transit areas. For instance, in squares, historical centres, residential areas. It is also important to consider the surroundings.’ (Personal communication, 8 May 2017) Indeed, the first Swiss encounter zones were realised in places such as historical areas, residential and school surroundings, and are now spreading to other types of places like railway stations and commercial areas. This holistic view on the role of encounter zones can also be found in France. The CEREMA, a public body gathering expertise in the fields of environment, mobility and territorial planning states that ‘considering and prioritising the pedestrian is not only an improvement of a transit mode, but an improvement of living conditions. By liberating the space previously monopolised by cars, reducing speed, offering sites for rest and security, bringing vegetation into towns, the encounter zone conceives and designs a different street, enjoyable for all.’ (Cerema, 2014) ‘Rest’, ‘vegetation’, ‘security’ and ‘enjoyment’, all represent elements which can be associated with specific atmospheres, and help enhance the appropriation of public space by users and dwellers.

In an unpublished review of the situation of encounter zones in the city of Geneva, the municipality defined some recommendations for future planning. Streets are no longer considered as ‘car pipes’ and public spaces need to be upgraded. The ‘Leschot’ street is held up as a model of success, based on its lively atmosphere: ‘[the street] is particularly frequented due to the numerous cafés-restaurants and boutiques in its buildings. […] The revalorisation of this public space gave renewed life to this street.’ This specific encounter zone is compared to the ‘Flèche-Marroniers-Chapelle’ area, another encounter zone considered as less successful: ‘There are fewer cafés and shop keepers. Furthermore, a bank occupies a building without any window onto the street. A real dynamic of public space use is thus lacking’. For the Municipality of Geneva, this raises the question of whether ‘encounter zones’ should only be introduced in lively and busy streets. As these observations and the previous ones demonstrate, encounter zones are often proposed because of their ability to revitalise places by contributing to their lively atmosphere. The functions of these developments can thus be considered beyond their primary role of traffic regulation; encounter zones are often seen as tools that also help improve the conviviality of streets.

Versoix: from a wasteland to an ‘encounter zone’

To examine whether or not future encounter zones should only be developed in streets already defined as places with ‘atmosphere’, the example of the new encounter zone in Versoix, a town by Lake Geneva, is enlightening. The area adjoining the railway station has been a wasteland for years. As part of larger urban transformations of more than 20'000 square meters, an encounter zone and a pedestrian zone were inaugurated in 2016 after four years of construction. This development aims to create a new centre in a town increasingly considered as a bedroom community, many of whose inhabitants commute to work in the nearby cities of Geneva and Nyon. In the light of the efforts to bring new life to a previously neglected site, this encounter zone can reveal its potential to help build a desirable atmosphere in a place imagined as a new town-centre. The multitude of activities linked to the site – commercial, residential, religious

4 Ville de Genève. (unknown date). ‘Zones de rencontre : Synthèse générale, pistes et recommandations.’
– led the public authorities to name this area ‘Versoix-centre’ and to encourage the population
to appropriate this rehabilitated public space. As Cédric Lambert, the mayor of Versoix, points
out: ‘We wanted to create a lively centre where people could gather around commercial activities, the
plaza, restaurants, cafés.’ (personal communication, 15 September 2016).

In addition to the diversity of its activities, the area is also multiform, composed of a variety
of subspaces, as described by Marcellin Barthassat, the chief architect of the project: ‘What
would connect all these subspaces? […] And there was also this small sentence in the specification of
the architectural design competition about “shadow”. But we know that today it’s a problem. How
to create atmosphere?’ (Personal communication, 8 March 2017) From the start, the architects
recognised the importance of adapting the project to the various types of space that characte-
rized the site, and also to the different ‘atmospheres’. In the description of their methodology,
conceptualized as ‘vegetal urban development’, they present a vine intended to bring shade and
a sense of centrality to this heterogeneous place: ‘It’s an alley connecting the different atmos-
pheres, the different spaces, the different points of view. Under the vine we can meet, exchange,
contemplate, play, discuss, read or walk as we wish.’ In the words of Barthassat, architects are
seen as ‘atmosphere scenographers’ and public space is considered as a ‘vector connecting diver-
se spaces, while preserving their individual identity’.

Furthermore, contrary to the German-speaking part of the country, where encounter zones
are often the result of popular demand, we are looking here at a process managed by the public
authorities. As the municipality’s chief of urban planning states: ‘We are not in the heart of a vil-
lage where habitants ask for traffic moderation. Here it is the result of an urban plan. We want a new
city-centre and we think an encounter zone is useful.’ (personal communication, 15 September
2016). The process that leads to this kind of urban development, either a top-down procedure
initiated by the public authorities or a bottom-up dynamic involving the local population, will
without any doubt influence its future use and the various atmospheres associated with it. Local
knowledge is primordial to producing adequate atmospheres, raising the question of the inclu-
sion of the inhabitants in the decision process. The architects were aware of this problematic,
relying on the authorities to get a feeling of the local population’s expectations. Describing the
development of the central plaza in the encounter zone, Barthassat insists on the importance of
grasping the inhabitants’ needs: ‘The municipality told us that they did not want a luxurious plaza.
[…] They added that there was a need for water. […] It was the first time that we discussed the status
of this plaza. We needed to be very attentive to what the public authorities perceived as the views of
the local population, whom they know. They were pointing to a problem that we perhaps could not
see.’ (Personal communication, 8 March 2017)

Such communication between planners and architects meant the project could be re-
oriented towards a more appropriate atmosphere, in a place known to be very hot in summer.
The main idea was to feature the aquatic characteristics of Versoix, nestled on the Lake Geneva
shore. Some fountains were planned and artificial giant pebbles were brought from Germany
to recall the lake’s ecosystem. This plaza and its vine now form the central zone of this urban
development. A farmer’s market is organized every Saturday, children play around the fountains
in summer and cafes are starting to put their tables outside. (fig. 1) Moreover, a set of steps was
installed instead of simple stairs, contributing to the presence of pedestrians, who sit there in

5 Extract from the presentation of the project to the public authorities. (6 October 2009)
summer. In the context of this traffic regulation, the development of an encounter zone, small
details *a priori* disconnected from mobility – fountains, steps, pebbles, etc. – help create a spe-
cific atmosphere leading to pedestrian installation and conviviality.

Fribourg: tensions and pedestrian appropriation in an encounter zone

In Fribourg, an encounter zone was developed in 2014 on the Joseph-Piller street in the ‘Alt’
neighbourhood, a lively area already well frequented by pedestrians, including many school-
children from local schools and students using the university library. As in the case of Versoix,
this new development was related to another, larger project. The objective was to anticipate
and adequately manage the transfer of traffic produced by the construction of the Poya bridge
in October 2014. This encounter zone is characterized by two specific types of urban layout:
a large, straight boulevard (fig. 2) and a plaza connected to side streets. On the plaza, a new
brown floor-covering and the installation of street furniture such as benches, tables and bike
racks are intended to encourage motor vehicles to slow down. On the boulevard, the sidewalk
has been made level with the roadway – in order to limit the segregation between the street
users – and some street furniture has also been added.

The president of the ‘Association Quartier Alt insists that if a development like this one is to
succeed the appropriation of the area by pedestrians is a key factor: ‘It is important that we talk
about an “encounter” zone and not just a “20 km/h” zone. This gives the impression that pedestrians
are “at home”.’ (personal communication, 10 May 2017) Of course other street users, especially
motorists, need to understand this process and this can lead to tensions. When I first started
my fieldwork in the area, I exercised my right as a pedestrian to stand in the middle of the bou-
levard included in the encounter zone to take a picture. I was quickly honked at by a motorist
in a hurry. Nevertheless, Julien Thirion, engineer in the Mobility Department of the City of Fribourg, insists that priority be given to pedestrians: ‘That the aim is for pedestrians to appropriate this space for themselves, provided they do not unnecessarily interfere with the traffic.’ (Personal communication, 18 August 2017) We face here an interpretive and relative appreciation of what is considered as ‘pedestrians unnecessarily interfering’ with other users, such as motorists. These ambiguities in the management of traffic moderation, illustrated here by the occupation of this straight main road, are a central concern for the inhabitants and pedestrian users of the area: ‘There is no space to walk on the side if we are more than two. If we walk in the middle, we’ll be either insulted or honked at. […] Even youngsters, when they are in large groups and should have priority, gather on the sides.’ (personal communication, 10 May 2017)

Installing street furniture mainly along the sides of this straight axis, and not in the middle, recreated the effect of a road, where pedestrians are pushed to the edges and vehicles wander freely in the centre. As stated by another habitant: ‘The problem is that it is a boulevard! Cars in the centre and pedestrians cornered on the sides.’ The straight configuration of the road section is also seen as a cause for the non-respect of the 20 km/h speed limit; some point out that in such a context it is hard to respect this rule even when riding a bicycle. The non-respect of the speed limit thus impacts on the atmosphere of the place, as an inhabitant confirmed: ‘Because it is a transit road, it is not here that one will find a “neighbourhood life” [“vie de quartier” in French]. The problem, if you want to get a sense of “living together”, is that you have motorists who are commuting and do not have social links with the neighbourhood.’ (Personal communication, 9 May 2017) The fact that many users are disconnected from the neighbourhood is thus considered a reason for their lack of respect toward the inhabitants, and an increase in tensions.

The success of the Joseph-Piller Encounter zone is called into question by city stakeholders themselves, like this official of the Fribourg road construction office: ‘It does not work in an optimal way. I think the process was kind of politically driven. We would have been more in favor of
designating the right side [the rectilinear zone] of the encounter zone as a 30 Km/h area and keeping only the plaza as an encounter zone. It would have been easier for us to appreciate this area as an encounter zone’ (Personal communication, 18 September 2017) On the political level, Thierry Steiert, communal counsellor for the city of Fribourg, states that there are different types of encounter zones; he compares the Joseph-Piller encounter zone to more residential ones where a ‘neighbourhood life’ could more adequately take place: ‘In a neighbourhood street, you have children playing on the street: it is totally natural. The fact that children consider this area as a playground is also a driving force for speed regulation. It is not the idea here.’ However, in a similar vein to certain officials in Fribourg urban planning sections, some inhabitants of the area consider that developing an encounter zone in a transit area is nonsense: ‘We are using pedestrians to slow down cars! There is a transit section and there are cul-de-sacs. That is where they should have realized the encounter zone.’ (Personal communication, 9 May 2017) For another former inhabitant of the neighbourhood, there is a paradox resulting from contradictory viewpoints between the city and the canton: ‘On one side you have the city which is aiming at developing a pleasant town for the inhabitants and on the other side you have the canton which is trying to promote smooth transit in the city.’ (Personal communication, 9 May 2017)

Further, in the encounter zone the plaza is conceived as a place where social gathering can happen. Another inhabitant living on the plaza praises for instance the installation of three high tables that she now uses to organize public suppers for the neighbours:

This place became my centre… A lot more than other central places in Fribourg. This is clearly due to this new development; now people are more eager to stay. We started to organize collective suppers for the inhabitants, even though this implied a little concertation with the police. These tables were initially set up for decoration more than anything else, but we decided to use them. (Personal communication, 9 May 2017)

Around the plaza, following the development of the encounter zone, inhabitants started to organize participative events and to propose street furniture, such as chairs and tables for the passers-by. The plaza thus demonstrates a process of appropriation by the inhabitants, enhancing pedestrian installation, in contrast to the other part of the encounter zone, where pedestrians are excluded and experience tensions with motorist users.

This case study constitutes a good example of the appropriation or rejection of different aspects of an encounter zone. While the plaza certainly contributes to building an atmosphere of place-sharing, the adjacent boulevard, also part of the encounter zone, is seen by many users as a failure. It demonstrates that the success of an encounter zone, considered through the lens of atmosphere and place sharing, is highly contextual. First, the layout – between square plazas and rectilinear boulevards – significantly influences the behaviour of users motivated by conflicting dynamics. Secondly, as stated by many interviewees in Fribourg, for such a public space to be appropriated by pedestrians, it has to be an area they previously used. As pointed out by the collaborator of the Fribourg road construction office quoted above: ‘It is hard to change the DNA of these places. As for pedestrian crossings, we need to develop encounter zones in places already used by pedestrians. A radical change of function can be counterproductive.’ (Personal communication, 18 September 2017) Moreover, as a study conducted by the city of Fribourg demonstrated, the speed limit is respected in the plaza area, but not in the rectilinear area. Thus, beyond
matters related to atmosphere and place sharing, it is the overall functioning of the encounter zone which is determined by factors like the ones listed above. Complementary measures are now being introduced, essentially in the rectilinear zone, where round benches will be installed on the road, to reduce speed and favour pedestrian appropriation. (fig. 3)

Fig. 3: Source: Ville de Fribourg

Shared space and atmosphere in encounter zones

There are different approaches in the world, and also within Switzerland, to the relevance of installing street furniture and developing specific street design in encounter zones. Of course, these diverse position statements have an influence on the atmosphere of the place. The Touring Club Suisse (TCS), the main car lobby in Switzerland, agrees that no signage should be set up in an encounter zone, but the organization insists on the importance of developing a specific layout for such places: ‘An [encounter] zone is nothing more than an alibi when it is reduced to a sign at its entry without any of the necessary developments preventing high-speed traffic.’ (Touring Club Suisse, 2008) Different actions are proposed: levelling the pavement and the road, developing street furniture favouring pedestrian use, introducing vegetal elements and installing bollards, provided they do not recreate segregation between users.6

In the case of Versoix, the authorities and the architects had a shared vision of the necessary minimum when it came to street design and furniture. For the chief of urban planning in the municipality, ‘if we can do without it, we would rather aim to develop a sober aesthetic. We did not add much; it is pretty simple. There is a vine, there is a canal, but these elements aside, we are not seeking to add overwrought effects... We are not in a baroque language’ (personal communication, 15 September 2016) Nevertheless, some adaptations had to be made to this minimalist conception

6  Idem
in the place layout. The suppression of pedestrian crossings, as well as the levelling of the pavement and the road, made some of the population uneasy. The municipality had to install a different type of street furniture, not initially foreseen, as a remedy. Some bollards were set up near residential front doors to create a demarcation between the buildings and the road. Other types of street furniture, like flower pots or bike racks, were also installed on straight streets to force motorized vehicles to slow down. Moreover, after the suppression of a pavement in front of its main storefront, a bank asked for a solution to prevent potential ram raid attacks. A concrete bench was installed to ward off such an eventuality. (fig. 4) In Versoix again, urban planners and the authorities faced other, more unexpected, situations. A Thai restaurant owner noticed that a tree planted as part of this new development formed an angle with the layout of her restaurant. The owner complained that this sharp angle was preventing an optimal circulation of the Chi, thus negatively impacting the Feng Shui of the place. Although the tree was not removed, the authorities changed the installation of the stakes, increasing their number from three to four, in order to remove the shape of a triangle and obtain a square. As we can see, the appreciation of appropriate place atmospheres also depends on cultural contexts. A new urban development can highlight cultural differences related to what is considered as a desirable atmosphere.

A city is composed of micro-cultures, creating zones of contact and friction between people and spaces. (Duarte, 2013) Like urban planners and public authorities, city-dwellers also participate to configure the diverse atmospheres of a place; they demonstrate specific know-how and express micro-resistances to restrictive and inhospitable space-times. (Thibaud, 2013). As in the case of Versoix, the suppression of pedestrian crossings and signage in the ‘Alt’ neighbourhood in Fribourg also created a feeling of unease among inhabitants and users. The local authorities

---

7 To be Feng Shui, an installation is supposed to avoid sharp angles and obscure corners.

Fig. 4: Photo by Patrick Naef
are now planning the installation of new street furniture to address this situation. Here is a paradox which is doubtless not specific to Versoix and Fribourg. Signage, pavements and pedestrian crossings are removed to reduce the segregation between users – mainly pedestrians and motorized vehicles – but new elements must be set up that recreate this segregation. An important tool in this context is to provide appropriate information to the population, so that they accept these new mobility codes. Moreover, the adoption of new practices cannot be achieved in a day. Public authorities must remain flexible with regard to the development of encounter zones if they are to respond adequately to the diverse and sometimes rival expectations of users. It is, in the end, a clear understanding of these new mobility codes that will bring about a serene appropriation of this public space, and transform an encounter zone into a place of conviviality.

In the French context, Thomas (2003) notes that pedestrian areas are often subjected to a process of ‘over-signalization’ that neutralizes urban life. For her, the main regulatory texts in force promote development principles of the pedestrian city that contribute to its levelling and homogenization, impacting on what she sees as the ‘anchorage of the body’: ‘The flattening and levelling of the city surfaces, like the primacy given to flows over the anchorage of bodies, favours another implication of the haptic and proprioceptive perception. […] Compartmentalized in atmospheres where no asperities retain the foot – but where no “grip” offers a stability point – the pedestrian slides more than he walks.’ (Thomas, 2003 4) The example of Versoix partly confirms this interpretation, according to a statement of its mayor in 2016: ‘There is a lot more street furniture in the pedestrian zone than in the encounter zone. The encounter zone is an area where cars can still circulate at moderate speed, along with pedestrians who have priority, but it is not a space for walking… It is more a liaison space’ (personal communication, 15 September 2016) His colleague, the chief of urban planning, has a more nuanced view: ‘There is now a water play area and steps on the plaza; it is not rare to see people using the steps to sit down. It is starting to function and it can only function if people accept to reduce their speed towards 20 km/h.’ (personal communication, 15 September 2016) The installation of a weekly farmer’s market, giant pebbles and water games has also been unanimously welcomed by the local population. It needs to become bigger, but it certainly contributes to the ‘anchorage of the bodies’ and to the conviviality of the area. Additionally, more informal initiatives can also strongly participate to the anchorage of pedestrians. The collective suppers organized in the Alt’ neighbourhood in Fribourg constitutes without doubts a concrete illustration. The organizer also proposed other informal events: offering chairs to passers-by to invite them to linger in the plaza (fig. 5) or disseminating radio devices during the last soccer World Cup. She is now victim of the success of these collective happenings: ‘I have now people knocking at my door to ask if I can assist them with the organization of similar events. Lately it was a teacher who wanted to propose literary café.’ (Personal communication, 9 May 2017)

As Gehl (2010) emphasizes, the vitality of a place is not determined by the number of people who use it, but by the time they spend in it. He adds that urban life is a process that feeds on itself: ‘People go where there are people.” (2010, 93) Furthermore, one needs to allow time to pass, in order for a place to attract people and favour pedestrian ‘anchorage’, as Thomas describes it. Criticisms of an over-signalization of the public space, like the ones addressed by Thomas, naturally bring us back to the concept of ‘shared space’ presented above. As Karndacharuk et al. (2016, 206) note, ‘what is evident about the shared space concept is the shift towards
recognizing a street as a destination’. Concurring with Thomas’s reflection on the primacy of flows of movement over the anchorage of bodies, Karndacharuk et al. underline the ambiguity of recognizing a street as a destination:

While the term “place making” within a public space, including streets, is widely used in the fields of architecture and urban design, appropriately recognising and operating a street as a place is not a straightforward process. […] If one compares a street to a corridor in a building, it is certainly difficult for an interior designer to justify creating a place of gathering along and within the corridor. (2016, 206)

This remark seems pertinent in the context of encounter zones development, where the aim is often to promote a gathering place. Encounter zones are precise illustrations of a process of ‘place making’ applied to a street. The examples of Versoix and Fribourg showed however that the suppression of street signage and pedestrian crossings increased a feeling of insecurity among certain users, forcing the authorities to add unplanned elements like street furniture. It seems thus important to find a middle path between a bare street and over-signalization, in order to manage an appropriate process of place making, turning a street into a ‘destination’ without jeopardizing the feeling of security of users, especially the most vulnerable. In this context, focusing more on the idea of ‘atmosphere’ in urban planning seems to offer interesting insights into the way to achieve such a balance.

For the supporters of shared space, the behaviour of a driver should be influenced more by the environment than by prohibitions: ‘the sight of a school with children playing will have a
far stronger impact on the behaviour and the speed of a motorist than a sign indicating a passage for children.’ (Keuning Institute, as cited in Gerlach et al., 2008) The assumption here is that when road users do not feel safe they will act more carefully: ‘risk reduction in shared spaces is thus achieved through the creation of anxiety or ‘unease’ among drivers and pedestrians.’ (Moody and Melia, 2014, 7) In other words, creating an atmosphere of insecurity could favour more cautious behaviour. To explain this dynamic, Clarke highlights an interesting analogy, proposed by the geographer John Adams, between shared space and car brakes: ‘You fit a car with better brakes, people don’t drive the same way as before and enjoy an extra feeling of safety, they drive faster and start braking later. The potential safety benefit of better brakes in fact becomes a performance benefit.’ (Clarke, 2006 291) Beyond traffic calming, Nicolas Soulier adopts a similar perspective towards urban planning in general. His approach is based on the British operational guidelines ‘Living-with-risk-briefing’ (CABE 2007), which proposes to use risks in a creative way. For Soulier (2012, 112), processes of ‘over-protecting’ or ‘over-designing’ help to sterilize public space: ‘Step by step, they secure traffic, secure housing, even if it means blocking the vital process it was intended to protect.’

In Versoix, the architect Marcellin Barthassat and his colleagues are also in favour of a minimalist conception of street furniture: ‘We think that chicanes and road humps are definitely effective, but it is a coercive effectiveness, to the detriment of public space.’ (Personal communication, 8 March 2017) The architect goes even further by illustrating how some street furniture in an encounter zone developed a few years ago in Geneva was seen as a potential source of insecurity by some parents. They were afraid that when children played at hide-and-seek behind these elements, which were mainly flower pots, there was a danger they might rush out into the street. Ensuring security without sterilizing urban life, enabling ‘place making’ and the development of a lively atmosphere to happen, is a challenging process, highly dependent on the perceptions of the various users: parents, children, seniors, motorists, cyclists and others. The inclusion of these different and sometimes competing perceptions should be integrated into the decision-making process as early as possible. Furthermore, planners and magistrates should be ready to react and be prepared to reorient their choices after experiencing them in situ.

Whereas an overuse of street furniture and signage is often criticized, the integration of natural elements into the streetscape is usually viewed positively, especially when they help create an attractive atmosphere. Indeed, the promotion of slowness in the city changes urban practices; it takes shape in a particular designed atmosphere that favours the inclusion of natural elements (Thomas, 2012). This was particularly the case in Versoix, where the architects, through what they called ‘vegetal urbanism’, sought to emphasize elements such as water and vegetation. However, the potential to plant trees was limited by a large underground parking lot and it is the vine mentioned earlier that now constitutes the main vegetal ornament. Some trees were finally planted, but the objective was more related to regulating the traffic than to encouraging pedestrian anchorage. A line of trees now reduces the width of the road, forcing motorized vehicles to reduce their speed. Nevertheless, vegetal elements can certainly play a role in the place appropriation by the local population. Some localities, like Neuchâtel or Bern, propose specific sites in encounter zones where the population can engage in gardening tasks and so take part in the development of the place. In Geneva and Fribourg, several inhabitants wanted to collaborate with the city in the planting and maintenance of flowerbeds in some
encounter zones. In order to maintain a uniform approach to the landscape, the authorities generally refuse cooperation or personal inputs from inhabitants. Yet, the unpublished report mentioned above highlights the example of Bern, where the authorities provide empty planting trays for the population, who take care of planting and maintenance. As stated in this document: ‘In neighbourhood encounter zones it is a pity to reject habitants’ proposals and to refuse their help. Their active collaboration would allow a better appropriation of public space and would stimulate natural respect, as well as social control, within the neighbourhood.’ The municipality of Bern also encourages local participation by proposing blank signage posts where the inhabitants themselves can choose the colours and designs. In Basel, public authorities went even further, with the publication in 2014 of a handbook for the development of children games to be developed specifically in encounter zones. (Kinderbüro Basel, 2014) Once again this illustrates the diversity of cultures and practices when it comes to urban planning in a multi-lingual country like Switzerland, where different levels of participation take place.

Developing Encounter Zones: A continuously reinvented process

If the main purpose of encounter zones is to regulate flows and improve security, they nevertheless constitute ideal opportunities to develop public space with atmospheres, enhancing walkability and pedestrian anchorage. By contributing to the appropriation of space by pedestrians, they can bring life to places and become, as stated in their label, ‘sites of encounter’. A tool intended to regulate traffic can thus also participate to the lively attributes of a place. To manage such a process, urban planners and public authorities should handle it within a holistic conception, based mainly on security, fluidity and conviviality. This is even more the case, now that ‘encounter zones’ are being developed in increasingly central and heavily frequented areas, revealing the difficulties of designing public space. In effect, developing public space cannot be confined to a project managed by technical engineers alone. As the architect Barthassat makes clear, when he describes the challenges of including both aesthetical and technical components in a project, stakeholders are like musicians: ‘After the functional elements are settled, you face the technical domain. You must listen without getting caught up in their logic. Finally, you need to function like an orchestra, where musicians play differently, but at the end it must form an opera or a symphony.’ (Personal communication, 16 March 2017) Moreover, public action also involves the subject – the inhabitants and users of a place – influencing projects to different degrees. In other words, the music sheet is co-created by the audience, adding a level of complexity to its making.

For Thibaud (2013 19), atmosphere impacts on the role of inhabitants in the composition of territories, and places them at the heart of urban debates: ‘it also helps to demonstrate that city-dwellers contribute to shaping their living environment through their everyday actions. It contributes both to embodiment and empowerment, making the “sensitive” a place of expression of dwelling and the inhabitant an ordinary expert of his living environment.’ Buser (2014) states that affective atmosphere can provide a framework which might lead research to adopt a greater sensitivity to place experience. He calls for a planning practice that take risks, based on experimentation and creativity: ‘This includes a wider consideration of the way bodies (human and non-human) interact and the ways these interactions produce and transform space and

8 Ville de Genève. (unknown date). ‘Zones de rencontres : Synthèse générale, pistes et recommandations.’
social worlds.’ (Buser 2014, 239) A sensitive approach to public space, including inhabitant perspectives, cannot be entirely planned in an engineer’s office. Ground-level experience is thus fundamental to identifying successes and failures, and making the necessary corrections. When he presents the two concurrent approaches mentioned above, ‘to divide’ or, in opposition, ‘to share’, Soulier (2010, 252) underlines the complexity of the second one: ‘the first one is functionalist, normative and simplistic. It coincides with the division of power and funding, with the private grounds and flower beds of one and the other; the second one implies experiments, confusions, compromises, taking risks.’

The examples presented in this analysis confirm the importance of this reflexive process, drawing on evaluations and corrections, which will help the population to appropriate these new urban developments. Based on the results collected so far, a bridge period ranging from six months to one year seems necessary for the population to grasp these new mobility codes. Even after this transitory period, encounter zones should not be frozen in time, but open to future changes in parallel with the evolution of urban societies. As the mayor of Versoix states: ‘In general we need at least six months of adaptation. I had a colleague who wanted to regulate everything once and for all. But it is important to wait for things to happen… For people to learn to share this space.’ (personal communication, 15 September 2016). His colleague, the chief of urbanism supports this statement: ‘We need to stop, to look at what is going on, and if corrections are needed we intervene.’ (personal communication, 15 September 2016). In Versoix and Fribourg, a period of inertia, as some of the stakeholders describe it, lead for instance some shop keepers to take these changes on board or the planners to add street furniture to a specific site. Finding a solution that suits everyone – inhabitants and users, business owners of all types, architects, designers, magistrates – is challenging and complaints will often arise. Thus, a process that leaves room for participation, criticisms and corrections, can certainly contribute to a more optimal development. The mobilization of atmospheres in urban planning can pave the way to a more integrative conception of public space.

Conclusion

This analysis sought to examine whether encounter zones in Switzerland could contribute to disseminating atmospheres favouring the appropriation of the street by pedestrians. Case studies featured in this study were two medium-sized urban localities providing interesting insights into possible ways of revitalizing a public place. It has been demonstrated that encounter zones could indeed act as a tool that has a greater effect than that of simply regulating the traffic. Indeed, if well managed, such developments could represent opportunities for implementing atmospheres associated with conviviality and contributing to what Rachel Thomas conceptualizes as the ‘anchorage’ of pedestrians.

To achieve this result, stakeholders should reflect on their practice and be ready to make modifications and corrections if necessary. This can already be illustrated by an institutional protocol in the whole country based on the evaluation of encounter zones one year after their inauguration. In both cases – Versoix and Fribourg – new measures had to be put in place. It has also been shown that the success of encounter zones – in terms of atmosphere as well as speed regulation – is contextual. Encounter zones should be installed in places already used by pedestrians and a thorough reflection should be conducted on the layout of areas seen as
potential encounter zones. Finally, it is stated here that in contrast to the very technical issues of urban planning, a debate on atmospheres – considered as intrinsically dynamic and ever-changing – can help to integrate the inhabitants and users into the decision-making process.

References

Adey, Peter. 2014. ‘Security atmospheres or the crystallisation of worlds’, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 32, 834-851


Buser, Michael. 2014. ‘Thinking through nonrepresentational and affective atmospheres in planning theory and practice’, Planning Theory, 13(3) 227-243


Clark Emma. 2006. ‘The evolution of shared space’, Traffic Engineering and Control, 290-292


Kjemtrup, Kenneth. 1992. ‘Speed management and traffic calming in urban areas in Europe: a historical view’, *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 24(1), 57-65


Michels, Christoph. 2015. ‘Researching affective atmospheres’, *Geographica Helvetica*, 70, 255-263.


Mutter, Christa. 2014. ‘Sion et le Valais : un dynamisme exemplaire’, *Rue de l’Avenir*, 26(4)

Patrimoine Suisse. 2013. ‘Prix Wakker à Sion. [http://www.heimatschutz.ch/index.php?id=964&L=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1311&cHash=fa0e11281f1b51ae0853a693453057] [Accessed 2017-05-01]


Author’s affiliation

Patrick Naef, University of Geneva / Transport and Environment Association (ATE) patrick.naef@unige.ch