

The Subjective Meaning of Milieu through the Example of Arne Maasik's Atmospheric City Photography

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The focus of this paper is the re-discovery of the subjective meaning of milieu through the example of the architectural photographer Arne Maasik's city photography. In the article, the meaning of the phenomenological embodied terms 'milieu' and 'atmosphere' are studied, offering the opportunity to unite, in a useful way, interdisciplinary human geography and pictorial theories into landscape representation. The purpose is to point out embodied self-realisation in the milieu of the landscapes, highlighting the value of the subjective milieu approach for the planning practice of the heritage preservation-oriented milieu.

In this paper, the subjective embodied meaning of urban milieu through the example of Arne Maasik's atmospheric photography is proposed as an alternative interpretation to the institutional, top-down, cultural economy-oriented milieu planning strategy. Maasik's city photography is offered as a representation of the urban milieu landscape, as it points out alternative experiences in landscape milieu without the aim of creating a specific district's narrative through its revelation. Arne Maasik (born in 1971) is a photographer with a strong sense of urban space. He grew up in Tallinn, studied architecture and has worked as an architect. Maasik has photographed Tallinn in several works, which have been published in a panoply of publications.¹ This article concentrates on his atmospheric photography of Tallinn between 1994 and 2005. The analysis includes the photo series *The Seekers* (2009), from his collaboration with the writer Armin Kõomägi. The opportunity to interpret his urban milieu expressions in multiple ways is socially valuable because it offers an alternative communication for the viewer.

Milieu

The embodied man–milieu idea was re-introduced in French geography after the spatial turn at the end of the 1990s, which confronted the cultural economy-oriented milieu theory with subjective expressions of spatial identities.² The French geographer Augustin Berque used

¹ E.g. A. Maasik, *Fotod/Photos 1994–2007*. Tallinn: A. Maasik, 2007.

² P. Claval, *The Cultural Approach in Human Geography. A perspective on Eight Years. The cultural approach in geography / L'approche culturelle en géographie*. – IGU Commission n° 30 / Commission n° 30 de l'UGI, Editorial N° 9, 2004, pp. 1–10.

the eco-symbolic meaning of milieu in defining the term *mediance*, a sense of milieu that sees the relationship between society and the life-world or nature, caused by human activities and conditioning it at the same time.³ A milieu is a continual network that actively reshapes the social and material landscape. The meaning of milieu as *mediance* is not the reducing of landscapes; it is better understood as a social process with continuous creation, grasping, feeling, reading and expressing. Milieu as a dynamic personal sense of the environment is connected to the personal living perspective.⁴

Atmosphere

The term 'atmosphere' has been developed by the German philosopher Hermann Schmitz in the discourse of neo-phenomenology. Hermann Schmitz defines atmospheres as sensed and mediated, but still indefinable as spatial qualities, which means situated as 'being affectively concerned' (*affektive Betroffensein*). The premise of atmosphere is the bodily affective sensing of the environment. Atmospheric spaces can be separated from graspable social environments, but they come into reality or are recognisable only when people participate in the landscape in different situations. This body sensing takes place through a specific situation and its impression. Positional space (*Ortsraum*) is the term that reflects personal self-revealing in a place.⁵

The condition for the creation of atmosphere is the subjective human body, which allows for a discussion of the creation of the current top-down

planning-based scenic neighbourhood milieu. The theory of atmosphere has moral significance, with the emphasis on the fact that one must sort out how he/she is connected with a place and how he/she can be self-asserted in that place,⁶ which is a missing point of view in the current image-oriented neighbourhood's milieu planning practice. To put the neo-phenomenological theory of atmospheres into the resident's self-realisation, which in geographical terms means into the man-milieu relationship, first the body's ability to discover and to consider the landscapes around him/her as specific atmospheres is required; accumulating the situated atmospheres through subjective self-realisation creates the characteristic milieu. Everyday environmental atmospheres can be seen as a condition for the evolving of collective memory, where atmospheres are stored in localised life-worlds and in individual autobiographical memories. One possibility of reflecting this subjectively situated 'self-concernedness' lies in emotional photography.

The atmospheric photo language of Arne Maasik

Arne Maasik's atmospheric photos of Tallinn are analysed as milieu revelation in the Tallinn landscape presentation. Most of the analysed pictures seem not to be made for the purpose of reflecting the specific district's narrative, but rather to express the specific emotional self-location of his different life periods. It is evident that behind his atmospheric photography lies a strong emotional empathy, careful discovery and honesty. The photos are typically black and white, with an unusual perspective. Specific

3 A. Berque, *Japan: Cities and Social Bonds*. Yelvertoft Manor: Pilkington, 1997, p. 214.

4 A. Berque, *Japan*, p. 231.

5 H. Schmitz, *Jenseits des Naturalismus*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Alber, 2010, pp. 11, 83–86, 134–135, 142.

6 H. Schmitz, *Jenseits des Naturalismus*, pp. 42–47.

structural patterns, built environments, nature, bushes, houses and time traces are seen. Time is accumulated through showing material traces from different time layers. The process of change is seen where destruction and creation take place in parallel, where life and the lack of it are simultaneously expressed. The extremes of the district's milieus are contrasted, opening up characteristic shifts and new ways of seeing in the landscape. It is not surprising that his pictures are sometimes described as uneasy for the viewer, but this uncomfortable feeling might come from the indefinable emotional shifting element in the pictures, forcing the viewer to reflect further on his/her own attachment to the landscape.

For the viewer, the value of the collective interpretation of Maasik's photos lies in the opportunity for a subjective re-opening to the landscape. The photographer's pictorial form performs as language. His photos do not define, but describe their own world, giving the viewer the opportunity to move between the photographer's subjective atmospheric interpretations and the viewer's inner way of seeing. In Maasik's pictures, the atmospheric and indefinable imagination becomes a reality and has a coherent value for the presentation of innate urban landscape. Maasik's district photos express a hidden social aspect, as the viewer of the photo also belongs to the mediated environment. A socially complex and coherent, but subjective, sensual view of the city-landscape provides the opportunity for discovering something new in that articulated landscape.

Discussion

From the social point of view, analysed emotional photographic landscape presentation clearly shows that the condition of the urban milieu is also a subjective expression. This discussion might have wider implications for the socio-cultural debate in landscape studies in human geography, where it is asked whether the landscape is a form for distanced viewing of the object or if it evolves in people's perceptions, expressed in the material and social milieu.⁷ In site-specific art practices, it is asked simultaneously whether art should support or shift the views of self-reflections in accordance with identifying with nostalgic places?⁸

The pre-condition for different self-revelations lies in being self-conscious in a place, which is highlighted by Hermann Schmitz in the moral meaning of the subjective sensing of atmospheres. The supplementing of the man-milieu relationship for institutional milieu planning practice by including residents in the neighbourhood's regeneration is useful, as the moral meaning of the atmospheric milieu relationship lies in thinking of its personal value in the sense of how he/she is involved with the place and can involve himself/herself in further self-realisation. Even if these reflected environments are more uncomfortable to present publicly than generally acknowledged city presentations, they are genuine and evolve from the local base.

By pointing out the self-realisation of man-milieu relationships for institutional milieu planning practice, multiple plans

7 J. Wylie, *Landscape*. London, New York: Routledge, 2007, pp. 1–2.

8 M. Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2004, p. 53.

can be proposed for encouraging district milieu development. The architectural photographer Arne Maasik's pictures emphasise, besides their aesthetic value, a supportive component for finding new meanings in the district's landscape. The communicational value of his atmospheric photographic language is that the district is not defined in the pictures. The viewers of the pictures have the opportunity to shape their subjective meanings within the photographer's highlighted and proposed alternative way of seeing.

Although phenomenological city-presentation is subjective, atmospheric photography communicates meaningfully with the resident's coherent urban landscape. If the district's residents can express their located emotions by the phenomenological milieu relationship, then the essence of the milieu design will not be based on the institutional naming of milieu areas, but on the residents' collective subjective perceptions of the district's atmospheres, while simultaneously being consciously involved in the landscape.