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Describing urban ambiances: The CRESSON research laboratory

David Paquette

ABSTRACT:

This article presents a critical overview of the research produced at Grenoble's CRESSON research center. It highlights some of the laboratory's research perspectives and describes the work of its researchers.

The rapid growth and diversification of urban studies over the last few decades has coincided with the foundation of specialized research laboratories, each relying on particular sets of approaches and methodologies designed to describe, quantify, and qualify the built environment. In 1979, philosopher Jean-François Augoyard and acoustician Jean-Jacques Delétré founded CRESSON (the research center on the sound environment and urban space), a small research team dedicated to the qualitative study of the role of sound in urban design. Over the next 30 years, the center, which was established at the École Nationale Supérieure de Grenoble, expanded in size and research interests. The current team is comprised of sociologists, musicologists, architects, and urban planners, and its research topics range from the study of ambiances and the design of innovative qualitative methodologies to discussions of accessibility, disability, perception, and architectural innovation.

The main research paradigm of CRESSON may be traced back to the early work of Jean-François Augoyard during the 70s. Augoyard was interested in pedestrian movements and the ways in which these walking routes may be interpreted as creative, transgressive, or simply representative traces of urban design and everyday experience. His research involved numerous long-term observations of pedestrians in the Arlequin neighbourhood in Grenoble, France, as well as a large number of interviews with inhabitants. In *Step by Step* (originally published in 1979 as *Pas à Pas*), Augoyard synthesizes his findings through “figures of walking” that produce a rhetoric of daily strolls, momentary subjective combinations of the built environment, and the social context and individual history of the walker (2007, p. 23).

Over the next 15 years, these figures of walking began to extend to other kinds of urban interactions through the work of CRESSON researchers. Sound became the central object of study at the centre, transforming the walking figures first proposed by Augoyard into “sonic effects.” Contrasting earlier sonic models of analysis, such as R. Murray Schafer’s soundscape or Pierre Schaeffer’s *objets sonores*, which dealt respectively with large sound environments and very small sonic utterances, sonic effects describe a set of experiential features that make possible “a new class of phenomena by giving some indications of their nature and their status” (Augoyard & Torgue, 2005, p. 9). Sonic effects may be psychomotor, compositional, electroacoustic, or even semantic. For every important effect listed, CRESSON has employed and mapped key theoretical and methodological research in domains such as sociology, musical aesthetics, psychology, physiology of perception, architecture, and urban studies. These references constitute a kind of toolkit, allowing the reader to creatively

use effects as synthesizing concepts in his or her own research, while contributing to a multidisciplinary approach to urban sounds.

This study of perceptual and physical sonic configurations has subsequently been extended to other senses and stimulations under the thematic of ambiance. By including the entirety of the sensory experience both in their analysis of urban spaces and in their undergraduate and graduate curricula, CRESSON members have opened the way to a truly immersive, affective, and aesthetic representation of the built environment, what Jean-Paul Thibaud has called “a sensory ethnography of the urban world” (2010, n.p.). The notion of ambiance goes beyond traditional approaches to place and space by pointing to the “sensory network” that gives an environment its core identities and affective features (Amphoux, Thibaud & Chelkoff, 2004, p. 57, my translation). The creation of the International Ambiances Network in 2008 has strengthened the research significance of the concept of ambiance, a fact evidenced by the 20 team members and around 300 individual members of the network.

The CRESSON lab has thus been active in the theoretical description and analysis of urban spaces and ambiances, as well as in the practical design of research methodologies. The work of geographer Pascal Amphoux (1993) on the sonic identities of European cities, for instance, has led to the creation of a methodological guide to help researchers and urban planners in evaluating and preserving the meaningful and symbolic sounds of specific communities. The document includes detailed descriptions of sound recording and editing techniques, interview practices, and analytical processes, offering valuable insights and methodological examples. Rachel Thomas’s (2005) sociological study of urban accessibility and disabilities uses the notion of ambiance to

qualify urban spaces based on the limitations they create, and investigates the various definitions of disability as well as their social origin and architectural consequences. The work of architect Nicolas Tixier and sociologist Jean-Paul Thibaud on commented walks, a practice that can be summarised as “walking, listening and describing” (Tixier, 2002, p. 85), has proved very valuable as an alternative to silent soundwalks. Their work displaces interviews as the primary method of accessing sensory experience by combining both the immersive experience of the place investigated with the reflexive and archival possibilities of amplified listening, which employs a microphone, recorded sound, and headphones to provide participants with an enhanced version of their sound environment.

The large number of multidisciplinary research projects and reports completed at CRESSON over the last 30 years represents a significant contribution to social sciences, architecture, and urban planning. The diversity of team members, the sizable integration of graduate students in projects, and the active participation of the laboratory in its community has, over time, created a productive and dynamic process of research, innovation, education, and publication. The recent translation of a number of these publications and the creation of the Ambiances network will allow for a larger diffusion of their work, spurring on further international collaborations.

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