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## Through thick and thin: Young people's affective geographies in Brussels' public space

**ABSTRACT:** Young people's interaction with place is not only a cognitive process of identification but also an affective relation. There has been plenty of research on young people and/in public space but few of those studies have taken such an affective layer of analysis into account. In this paper we aim to shed some light on young people's affective geographies through the concept of 'thick places' as it was proposed by Edward Casey (2001), building upon research undertaken between 2013 and 2016 in Brussels. We argue that such a concept is only useful if we consider thickness not only as a reference to 'warm', 'authentic' or 'intimate' places but also as a term that takes the 'normative architecture' of place into account. We embed this claim in a discussion of affects, atmospheres and Peter Sloterdijk's notion of *nomotop*.

Keywords: Young people; public space; affect; atmosphere; thick place; *nomotop*; Brussels

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*It was always the same places in the streets, in the houses or in the parks that set off my spells. Each time I entered these spaces, the same swoon and the same vertigo overtook me. Veritable invisible snares placed here and there in town, not any different from the things that surrounded them—with ferocity they lay in wait for me to fall prey to the special atmosphere they exuded. Were I to take a step, a single step, and enter such a 'cursed space,' the spell became inevitable ... The spells belonged to me and to the places where they occurred in the same measure. It's true that some of these places contained a 'personal' malevolence, but all the others were found in a trance themselves much before my coming ...*  
(Blecher, 2007 [1936]: 2-9)

### 1. Introduction

In the last few decades, quite some literature has focused on young people's feelings of belonging, attachment to place and tactics of place-making in urban public spaces (e.g. Holloway & Valentine, 2004; Malone, 1999; Pickering *et al.*, 2012; Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2000). But, as Noble and Poynting (2008: 130) observe, "belonging, and not belonging, are, of course, not simply cognitive processes of identification, but are highly charged, *affective* relations of attachment to and exclusion from particular places". It is our argument that in youth geographies the affective, non-representational angle has so far been under-researched, an approach that could shed a different light on the deeply affective relations between young people and place. We believe that, to paraphrase Adey *et al.* (2013: 300), many accounts "generally lack a

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thickness, both in description and in the attention to the material–affective relations that constitute the quality, feeling and experience of being” youth in the urban space.

This article aims to put emotional and youth geographies in communication through a simultaneously theoretical and empirical effort. Theoretically, we build on the notion of ‘thick places’ as coined by Edward Casey (2001), which we criticise in two regards. Firstly, we believe the notion can operationalise spatial concepts in an affective manner and make them amenable to empirical observation. However, in Casey’s perspective *thickness* remains limited by an anthropocentric, subjective and phenomenological framework that reduces its potential and risks entrapping it within an unproductive rhetoric of authenticity. Secondly, the notion does not take into account a variety of other thicknesses, relating to, for instance, control, regulations, institutional power, etc.

In short, we aim to stretch Casey’s (2001) original concept further than he originally intended, towards the post-human, relational and ontological significance it harbours, by reframing it through three main concepts: atmosphere, affect, and *nomotop* (Sloterdijk, 2006b). These concepts point to an immanent, non-dichotomous understanding of space, in which heterogeneous human and non-human bodies get together producing social formations, or atmospheres, which are neither over-determined by (supra-) structures nor denied by incontrollable flows, but rather emerge immanently out of the common *spacing* of being-together, in all its turbulent, unpredictable, conflictual and nonetheless *ordered* character.

Empirically, we build upon data from an ethnographic research in Brussels. Here we intend to explore the affective layer of analysis as a meaningful, even essential element in understanding the interrelation of (young) people and place. Joining theoretical elaboration with empirical data, we explore the way young people engage with the different degrees of spatial thickness of the atmospheres in which they live and with what outcomes. This exploration allows us to show the advantage of adding a complex affective and atmospheric framework to the study of youth geographies, whilst at the same time making explicit the advantage that studies on affect and atmosphere may obtain by looking more intensely at youth geographies, as well as the necessity for them to test their philosophical categories empirically, through the thick and thin of space.

### **2. Hanging out in Brussels**

This paper builds on data gathered in ethnographic research undertaken between 2013 and 2016 in Brussels in which young people were formally interviewed about their social, spatial and affective geographies. This life-world research was aimed at finding out more about young people’s activity of hanging out in public space: firstly, about the spatial patterns, architectures and designs of young people’s places and mobilities; secondly, about the social interaction in their public and parochial realms; thirdly, about the emotional and affective relations between young people and place. The latter research interest is going to be explored in this paper.

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48 participants were interviewed individually or in focus groups, between the age of 11 and 25, although many more were met in a non-interview context during the ethnographic fieldwork. These young people were encountered through local partners such as youth clubs (Samarcande, Chicago & D'Broej Peterbos), a cultural organisation (Beeldenstorm) or a secondary school (Sint-Guido Instituut). Fieldwork was done in five cases (Jacht-Jourdan, the Chicago area, Peterbos, Sint-Guido and Kuregem) with some demographic differences. Chicago and Kuregem are deprived neighbourhoods with a bad reputation in the city region and throughout Belgium, with high densities, high levels of (youth) unemployment and dilapidated public spaces. Peterbos is a small area with 19 high-rise social housing apartment buildings in the middle of a lower middle-class residential area. Kuregem is a peculiar neighbourhood in a former industrial area that is host to a very large open-air marketplace and a collection of car dealerships whose mechanics mostly tinker on cars outside, in the busy Heyvaert Street. Sint-Guido and Jacht-Jourdan are lower middle-class residential areas that house both working class migrant families and young white families, less dense in terms of population and public spaces in relatively agreeable conditions. The latter area is located near the European district of Brussels.

The sample was quite variegated when it comes to gender, ethnicity and age, and also between cases the number of participants varied quite a lot. Only one third of the total of participants was female. Especially in the cases of Peterbos and Jacht-Jourdan few girls or young women were interviewed. Nearly all of the participants had a migration background with most of them being second- or third-generation migrants. Of the whole sample around half had roots in North-Africa, particularly in Morocco. Also a handful of sub-Saharan youths were interviewed. In terms of age, the sample consisted of 12 younger teenagers (between 11 and 14 years old), 27 older teenagers (15-18) and 9 young adults (19-25). All participants were lower- or lower middle-class, with most of them living in deprived areas of the city region.

Methodologically, this research was set up as an urban ethnography of hanging out involving verbal (interviews and focus groups), visual (observations, photographs, mental maps, film) and participatory methods. During the process participants were asked if they wanted to do an interview before a video camera, the result of which was collected in a documentary available online. Apart from the interviews and focus groups, around 115 hours of observation were done in the public spaces of those neighbourhoods. Some of the observations were done during group walks with participants showing the researchers around in the neighbourhood, others were part of *dérives* through Brussels, in the psycho-geographical tradition of Guy Debord.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This strategy is exceptionally suitable for our purposes: "from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones" (Coverley, 2006: 62). Given its sensibility to mapping the interaction

### 3. Youth *affective* geographies

By definition in a transitory stage in-between, no longer children, not-yet adult, always in *becoming*, in the public space of the contemporary city youths tend to be out of place. Yet, often lacking privacy at home (Skelton *et al.*, 1997), it is exactly in public space that a significant proportion of young people spend a good deal of their time. It is here, among themselves, in the in-between of streets, parks and squares, that novel social skills are learned, relations and behaviour are negotiated, rules are bent or broken, identities are developed (Aitken, 2001; Cahill, 2000; Horschelmann & van Blerk, 2012). In the daily interaction with the built environment youths evolve as social subjects, self-defining and self-expressing through their daily 'doing nothing' (Toon, 2000: 145), not only developing spatial and navigational skills (Spencer *et al.*, 1989) but also feelings of belonging, ownership, attachment, and identification (Hopkins, 2010).

Recently, much valuable ethnographic work has been done on the (micro-) geographies of hanging out, either in public space (Karsten *et al.*, 2001; Malone, 2002; Skelton and Valentine, 1998; Valentine, 2004) or in malls and shopping areas (Matthews *et al.*, 2000; Vanderbeck, 2000). Despite their decreasing availability and youth's increasing hanging out in virtual spaces, public space remains crucial for them, "especially for fulfilling important social functions such as the construction of identities" (Van Lieshout & Aarts, 2008: 497). On the one hand, the choice for (quasi-) public spaces as terrains for leisure reflects "relatively mainstream desires, such as to be safe, to interact with other young people, and to feel a sense of possibility and choice, which they cannot successfully enact in other spaces" (Matthews *et al.*, 2000: 5). On the other hand, this is often a forced choice, as for a significant proportion of urban youth, public space is the only space they are able to 'claim'.

"In order to claim places", Childress notes,

young people must appropriate and occupy the places of others. This makes territorial markers and behavior the primary mode of spatial claiming among teens, but adults tend not to recognize the legitimacy of territory in a tenured or ownership-based spatial system (2004: 195).

This delicate and complex negotiation is exacerbated by the shortage of space typical of deprived and high-density neighbourhoods, often resulting in conflict with other groups and the building of territories (Pickering *et al.*, 2012: 945; see also Leonard, 2006; Lieberg, 1995). An enhanced sense of place attachment may severely limit

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between bodies, objects and affects, noticing, describing and mapping different unities of atmosphere, "psychogeography could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals" (Debord in Coverley (2006: 87-8); Debord, 1958).

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physical and social mobility and subsequently impose sanctions on access to leisure, education, or employment.

Many of the above-mentioned studies of youth geography talk about 'sense', 'feeling', 'emotion' or even 'atmosphere', perhaps unaware of the analytical toolkit offered by non-representational or affect theory. Simultaneously, in affect theory to date too little empirical work has been undertaken, risking instead to slip "too easily into the ether of philosophical abstraction" (Pain, 2009). It is our argument that there is much to be gained from bringing youth and emotional geographies together. Some insightful studies in this area are Nayak (2010), on young people, graffiti and racism, Noble & Poynting (2008) on migrant belonging, Horton & Kraftl (2006) on the non-representational importance of everyday actions and objects in the growing up of children, Holt *et al.* (2013) on emotional interdependent relations between young people, and Blazek (2015) on the role of emotion among children. However, not many of those specifically zoom in on the interaction between young people and place, while taking affective and atmospheric layers into account. More akin to the object of study in this paper is Duff's (2010) ethnographic study of a *sense* of place and *atmospheres* in the practice of skating, and Jensen *et al.*'s (2015) study on affective ambiances in the everyday mobilities of families. Likewise, Pyry's research on girls and young women in Helsinki and San Francisco provides valuable insights into youth's hanging out, an activity, she notes, that "often goes on without much reflection, but it is deeply affectual. Because hanging out is wonderfully purposeless, space is cleared for the inspiring mood of enchantment" (2016: 9). Before we move on to the empirical analysis, we will present and reconceptualise the notion of thickness, so as to make it functional to our purposes.

### 4. Reconceptualising thickness

In his classic study, Tuan proposes to understand place as created and maintained through the "fields of care" resulting from people's emotional attachment (1977). In a similar way, Entrikin (1991: 16) argues that "[p]laces are significant not because of their inherent value, but rather because we assign value to them in relation to our projects." If space is an all-encompassing void, Casey (2001: 683) argues, then place is "the immediate environment of my lived body," as if *carved out of space* by my being-there, an understanding that resonates with Lefebvre's notion of 'lived space' (1991). In these accounts, a key role in *producing* a place out of the cold abstraction of *space* is played both by the transformative power of the subject and the performative presence of the individual body.

It is against this background that Casey coins the notion of 'thick place', to indicate those places characterised by a greater density of meaning, affect, relations, habits, memories. "[T]hick places invite the individual's 'concernful absorption'—a deepening and broadening of the individual's lived experience of place—while supporting various practices of 'personal enrichment'" (Casey, 2001: 684). Thickness,

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therefore, is an expression of 'habitual density' that relates places with selves. This density, in Sack's (1997) original understanding, is threatening to 'thin out' as result of 'glocalization', a process that merges places with space.

A first theoretical point we want to make in this paper is that in the understanding of Sack (1997) and Casey (2001) 'thickness' risks becoming part of an unproductive binary that opposes the 'cold', 'alienating' and *thin* (non-) places of contemporaneity to thick places of romantic nostalgia and authenticity (e.g. Augé, 1995; Sennett, 1970). In this binary model, space is assumed as an inert and passive matter, *heated up* into place by personal experience, involvement and concern. Such 'thermometric metaphors', Brighenti (2010: 39) notes, used to distinguish between the 'thick' and 'warm' space of the community and an increasingly thinner and colder 'public' space. In other words, space is depicted as a cold and homogeneous surface passively awaiting an anthropocentric, phenomenological and subjective involvement in order to gain complexity. Casey's account of thickness, understood as a density of *personal* feelings, concerns, and emotions, is not able to avoid this binary understanding.

Even if "places are themselves altered by our having been in them" (Casey, 2001: 688) they are not inert, passively waiting for *us* to be created. Space is not a neutral (that is, power-free) and formless matter that is moulded by the individual. Abandoning this implicit *hylomorphism* requires challenging the body/place separation that still remains unquestioned beneath Casey's conceptualisation. Since we are space-creating beings, Sloterdijk (2011) explains, being-in-the-world is to be understood as always entailing a praxis of *world-making*, that is, a co-production of worlds by coming together with humans and non-humans alike: "[o]ur body is not primarily in space, it is of it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1995: 131). Sloterdijk proposes to imagine our being-in-the-world as being-in-a-*sphere*, a spatiality in which the body/place distinction loses its meaning. Thus the social appears as series of bubbles, a foamy formation that is not ordered by any abstract social contract but rather by various 'co-tractions'. Sloterdijk refers here to Buckminster Fuller's 'tensegrity structures', with social formations as common *atmospheres* 'held together' by the immanent, socio-material co-relations between its components (Sloterdijk, 2006a; Borch, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

While the notion of atmospheres has been studied in German works on *atmosphäre* (e.g. Böhme, 1993, 1995; Löw, 2008), and French work on *ambiance* (e.g. Amphoux *et al.*, 2004; Thibaud, 2011, 2012), in the last decade it also became rather popular in the Anglophone world (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Bissel, 2010; McCormack, 2008) where, processed through affect studies and non-representational theory, the concept has been explored in a more explicitly ontological manner.<sup>3</sup> Conradson and Latham (2007: 238) define atmospheres as the "coming together of people, buildings, technologies and various forms of non-human life in particular geographical settings." Bille *et al.* (2015: 35) maintain that the concept of atmosphere is significant exactly since it permits "to investigate the simultaneity of—rather than the difference

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<sup>2</sup> Tensegrity structures (tension integrity structures) are buildings without load-bearing walls, held by the internal co-tractions among the components.

<sup>3</sup> For a recap see Bille *et al.* 2015; Adey *et al.* 2013

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between—emotion and affect,” against the tendency in affect studies to distinguish between the subjective level of feeling and emotion and the dimension of relations, assemblages and structures in the notion of affect. Conversely, we believe keeping distinction is important in order to avoid reducing atmospheres to either subjective feelings or phenomenological objects, and instead assuming them as a strategic tool to address the critical *ontological* question: *how does the social hold together?* (Latour, 2005). To be sure, this does not mean we propose to overlook the significance of personal experience or human agency. Rather, we ought to explore “the affectivity of atmosphere (...) in ways that engage a range of more-than-human processes and relations while also remaining attentive to how these processes and relations are potentially sensed in moving bodies” (McCormack, 2008: 414).

Informed by this understanding, the notion of thickness becomes promisingly operative. As Klocker writes, exhuming the adjective from Clifford Geertz's notion of *thick description*, to explore the ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ agency of child domestic workers in Tanzania, “structures, contexts, and relationships can act as ‘thinners’ or ‘thickeners’ of individuals’ agency, by constraining or expanding their range of viable choices” (2007: 85). In fact, thickness has much to do with the capacity to act, affect or be affected of a body within a given atmosphere. It relates to the way an atmosphere shapes –or “establishes the terms of” (Thibaud, 2011: 203)– the embodied and spatial way in which we perceive and act in the world, as a gaseous and sensorial set of affordances which “may increase or reduce our capacity for action” (*ibid.*, 210).

Thus rescued from subjective bias, thickness, as its etymology suggests, refers to the degree of intensity and the *non-metaphorical* density and viscosity of relations produced by the encounters and interactions between bodies in a given place. In short, this approach substitutes a moralistic and nostalgic dichotomy implicit in Casey (2001) in favour of a pragmatic and strategic analysis of the various effects thickness may produce on bodies. Neither a projection of the individual subject onto space, nor an objective quality of place, thickness is the result of their encounter, thus depending as much on the contingency of a ‘taking-place’ as on the socio-historical layers of meanings, memories, experiences and events that are imprinted on bodies and places alike (Graham, 2009). As again Klocker qualifies, thick/thin are particularly valid terms insofar as they permit “to convey a sense of the ‘layering’ or ‘eroding’ effects of the multiplicity of factors that affect young people’s agency” (2007: 85).

A second theoretical point is that thickness involves a degree of intensity in terms of socio-cultural-legal saturations (structures and institutions, knowledges and practices, rules and regulations) always traversing atmospheres and shaping the way we are immersed in them (e.g. Hannah, 2013). Atmospheres are not determined from above, but immanently tuned by a given normativity. This ‘normative thickness’ can be better explained using Sloterdijk's (2006b) notion of *nomotop*. This concept refers to a ‘normative architecture’ of co-existence, holding together society as a system of immanent tensions in permanent ‘action’ upon bodies (*ibid.*, 420): customs, cultures, rights, laws, rules, relations of production, language games, forms of life, institutions,

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and habituses. Every society rests on such a tensegrity of stabilised expectations, a simultaneously affective and symbolic vibration also encompassing ritual and visual aspects (2006b: 8-9).

Such a 'normative thickness' has many forms and guises: it may be the thickness of socio-cultural relations in the familiarity of a neighbourhood, but also the thickness of techno-legal striation in the increasingly regulated public space of contemporary cities. The intensity of the nomotop's co-traction may be stronger in public or in private, a public square or a local community. Therefore such co-tractions required to be explored empirically rather than being simply presupposed theoretically. Urban ethnographers have unravelled the informal rules that structure behaviour in public space, but these invaluable accounts betray a problematic "sociological reductionism" (Brighenti, 2006: 709), that is, a "deprioritization of physical spatiality in preference to a processual, social, human (but not phenomenological) understanding of space" (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2010). As a result, one could argue, they *fetishise* space as a social-only construct (Lefebvre, 1991: 90). The concept of nomotop instead moves beyond an understanding of rules as a merely 'social' framework superimposed onto an inert space, and points to the way normativity surfaces out of the coming together of different bodies, human and non-human, tangible and intangible: things, people, practices, representations, affects. It is out of this convergence or clash that places assume character, quality, exclusive and inclusive power.

### 5. The thickness of place

In order to properly discuss young people's 'affective relationship with places' as it was originally envisaged in the research project of the first author, it soon seemed clear a notion such as 'thickness' was needed. In fact, a 'degree of intensity' between person and place inherent in the concept emerges spontaneously in any interview with young people about the city, their neighbourhood and public space in it. When young people refer to the material sensation of attachment and belonging *vis-à-vis* their favourite hanging spots, for example, we can discern expressions of affects, qualities that 'stick' to those places in ways that transcends both object and subject. Places populated through the everyday, repetitive coming-together and interaction of bodies may become thick: parks, football pitches, squares or street corners, kebab restaurants, and tram or subway stops. Usually these thick places have a positive connotation for the interviewees, yet this is not always the case, as expressed by Ahmed (18, m) when recounting the death of a child, run over by a motorbike in Ophem Street (Chicago area).

Particular memories and emotions are engraved into a place and may 'thicken' it intersecting its materiality, as for the skaters that Duff describes as preliminary 'screening' the desirability of places according to criteria of light, flatness and privacy (2010: 891). Thick for instance is that spot in the passenger tunnel of the Brussels Central Station, 'thickened' by the presence of same elderly grey-haired homeless woman sitting there everyday. The particular place is shaped by her constant

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presence (also when absent), the configuration of the spot unintentionally providing shelter, and the walking paths of the pedestrian geometrically responding (with hostility, empathy, indifference) to her presence/absence. But included in the dynamic are also the public law on people occupying public soil and the mediated representation of homeless people. All these elements, from representations to objects, from movements to bodies, shape the way in which a specific place becomes inscribed by a use, inhabited by a habit.

Take for instance a much-observed dynamic in urban parks. Often in these places a variety of groups spontaneously divide the available surface: elderly, children, young people, Asians, blacks, Arabs, footballers, basket players, beer drinkers, joint smokers... Interestingly, this division remains inscribed in the pockets of that park even when these groups are not present. When asked if she would prefer more space for herself and her friends, Jihane (16, f) says: "yes, because places are always reserved for this or that group." People leave patterns and traces in places and vice versa, in a recursive interpenetration of elements so that physical and social space are no longer clearly distinguishable.

Thickness of place is not only reported where one would expect it. Tarek (17, m), for instance, talks about the subway as a special place. Feeling like an urban nomad, constantly moving between family members' houses dispersed over the city, for him the subway assumes a far deeper meaning than for the average commuter. Also rather unwelcoming places may be mentioned in this regard. Places that are perceived by some as hostile, due to the presence of formal control, police patrols or CCTV cameras, can be welcomed by others as a vehicle of safety and belonging. Likewise, some places may be directly or indirectly designed to 'deter thickening', to reduce people's capacity of appropriation. They are made unattractive or uncomfortable, as in the case of 'sadistic street furniture' used to exclude undesirable others (Thörn, 2013; Van Melik *et al.*, 2007). Although public space is not always explicitly hostile to young people, often an atmosphere is produced that conveys one message: 'no loitering.' We return to the case of public transport:

"The metro station feels rather cold. The capacity for thickness seems much smaller in a place like this. There are small groups but you see their presence is functional: they're waiting to catch a metro train. What's more: there must be many cameras, there are the entrance gates. It's a place of passage." (Notes, September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

These places, it seems, are not very susceptible to 'thickening'. Yet, if place design certainly shapes its use, it does not determine it. This is the case in Place Jean Rey, a square in the European quarter neighbouring Jacht-Jourdan. The European district has an atmosphere of cleanliness, order and control, made of imposing office towers, security cameras and guards, which seems to affect young people's (or anybody's) use of public space. Despite its benches, the square appears to be used only to pass through; it simply doesn't have the 'right' design to be inviting. The only signs of the benches ever being used are the heavy cuts and bruises they exhibit: signs of skating or vandalism. This suggests that young people *are* present in this inhospitable

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environment, and when they are, they don't mind showing they were. Witness to their presence are the scars in the urban furniture they leave behind, as a sign of an appropriating strategy as well as a perhaps unintentional, materially inscribed resistance to the hostility of the place itself.

As explained above, thick places can be understood as those spaces where peculiar relations take place as result of the coming together of different bodies in a specific place and through time. In Jacht-Jourdan a skate park is mentioned by many young people, not only because it is 'theirs' during the day, but also because elderly, joint-smoking guys occupy the space in the evening. Places have rhythms of their own, attracting multiple publics relative to the hour, day or season (Lefebvre and Regulier, 1999; Tarde, 1903). Whole neighbourhoods too can have a 'place-like' quality and be referred to as tangible and intimate or *parochial*, following Lofland (1998: 10), which refers to their being "characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances." While it is often inaccurate to equate neighbourhoods with communities, Brussels has several neighbourhoods with a strong community feeling. These have a certain inward-looking quality. The case of Peterbos is especially interesting. Here, Alae (18, m), Marouane, (15, m), Illias (15, m) and Souhail (17, m) are positive about the closed-off nature of the area. They spontaneously refer to the fences bordering the estate as infrastructures defending them from outside danger, rather than limiting their freedom to roam more freely. Both these securitising technologies and a set of informal rules contribute to a normative thickness, which results in the neighbourhood being experienced as a safe haven.

Also the benches in the area are not seen as 'inert objects'. These are referred to as place-making agents that, like other spots and objects, participate in constructing the rhythm of their daily routine and contribute to a habitual density: kicking a ball, resting near the pitch, hanging around at the local grocery store, having a drink, maybe meeting friends at the metro station. This routine, as explained by the four boys in Peterbos, is almost etched into the leisurely landscape of their home neighbourhood; they do not to consider doing the same things outside. When asked what would occur if the football pitch were closed, they reply that everybody would be sad and sit inside "eating crisps". The neighbourhood's role in providing them with a comfortable sense of belonging and self-sufficiency is remarkable, also given the far from perfect living conditions it provides.

Several young people describe their neighbourhood as an inward-looking and self-contained place to which they attach strong sentiments. On the one hand, Gentille (19, f) compares her neighbourhood with the one she grew up in Uganda, as both are characterised by a familiar atmosphere of streets "where you know everybody," opposed to the city of Brussels whose people she knows very little. On the other hand, Monifa (18, f) prefers living in a big city, not a village, exactly because "there you would feel alone. When you're in a place where everybody is different then you feel better yourself." For her, clearly, the relational *thinness* of the city appears to be more preferable than the thickness of the neighbourhood relations.

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Ahmed (18, m) turns the traditional correlation between tight-knit communities and personal well-being upside down when asserting the necessity of conflict for a place to feel vibrant, for its thickness not to become too viscous and perhaps oppressive, as it is in 'a village':

Ahmed (18, m): "I think it is a wonderful place, with a lot of cultures."

Bilal (25, m): "I don't agree with my brother. There is always trouble; the police always has to intervene. I don't like it." [Ironically] "I feel unsafe."

Ahmed (18, m): "Yes, but a neighbourhood without trouble becomes a *village*. We need to have trouble everywhere!"

In a similar inversion, some young people discuss the cramped apartments they live in, which leave them with minimal privacy. Their parents exert control over them at home and so do their teachers in school. Public space is a natural alternative where they can cultivate a place for privacy and intimacy, however temporarily. Given the lack of privacy in the private space of their home, many of them actually leave the house to have some intimacy, as well as construct thickness 'socially', by coming together with their peers and interacting with the built environment, thus generating an alternative normativity *vis-à-vis* the rigid domestic nomotop.

Gender, of course, is an important variable. Especially in neighbourhoods with an intense street-life the experience and navigation of public space is heavily gendered. Boys tend to feel at home, experiencing a strong sense of belonging. Quite a few girls, on the other hand, find their neighbourhood's thickness suffocating, and prefer to flee its male-dominated normativity by going to the shops, malls and libraries in the city centre. For girls, behaviour in public is heavily affected by the feelings of in/security, directly related to thickness. Street corners, cafés, and generally places where boys or men hang out may be perceived as unsafe by girls (Chiraz, 21, f), unless the former are friends or relatives (Nisrine, 19, f), in which case they turn into a comfortable zone, a parochial space. But also normativities of familiarity may produce suffocating limitations, especially for girls who may feel annoyed or threatened by an intensity of informal social control.

The complex assemblage of ethnicity, culture, religion and style among young people in Brussels also plays an important role. In the inward-looking communities we already discussed (Peterbos, Kuregem and the Chicago-area), it is not only feelings of insecurity that have a strong impact on young people's movement in public space. Also the production and management of reputational control emerges from the data: girls and women are not expected to hang out in public space and when they do the male network of informal social control is activated. In these areas, which are often dominated by a large group of Moroccan (Islamic) immigrants, a rather intense set of expectations, habits, prescriptions, morals and beliefs, contributes to whole new level of thickness.

In our opinion, some of the above-discussed manifestations of thickness trigger the need to emancipate the concept from the simple binary in which it is located by Sack (1997) and Casey (2001). Young people's search for a space of their own, it seems,

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cannot be seen simply as a search for thickness in an increasingly thinner world. Sometimes the opposite is true.

### **6. A variety of thicknesses**

Some youths may feel curiously protected by the thickness of spaces with high which normativity, control and expectations, or conversely seek to escape them into thinner, fuzzier, under-determined spaces where to build their own normativity. Instead of assuming a binary contraposition, their strategy appears more a matter of negotiating and producing different degrees of thick-/thinness. This is what emerges when we look at young people's interaction with various forms of order and control, or what we could call 'normative thickness', in the public domain.

In contrast with the romantic idea of the liberating power of a public space without rules, not only are many young people aware of unwritten rules organising order, expectations and behaviours in public space, they also tend to accept them, without seeming to mind a degree of limitation of their freedom. They consider control and rules as part of being-in-public, "it's just like at home". In Luca's (13, m) words, for instance, we may see such awareness of the unavoidable nomotopic tensions transversal to different atmospheres: "there are rules, we are not totally free. But that is normal. When you are at home there are rules as well, you don't have a lot of free time. (...) We are young and we don't have a lot of freedom."

Many consider compliance with rules and expectations a virtue, an essential element of being-in-public and a part of growing up. Remarkably similar to dominant discourses, many young people believe squares, parks or vacant lots ought to be well kept, signs need to announce rules, dogs should be on a leash, rubbish belongs in the bin and smoking is not allowed. Also restrictive infrastructures like fences or barbed wire do not spark critical remarks. In fact, they may become an asset for a place:

"A few young men hang around on the Van Meyel square. Curiously, they are sitting on the benches inside a dog toilet that is fenced off and does not look cosy at all. A lost shopping cart, music playing, smoking." (Notes, December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013)

What this understanding of thickness implies is that a degree of normative thickness, of control, order and regulation may actually be necessary for a place to 'hold together' in the minds of young people. At the same time, excessive 'normative thickness' may be conducive to a certain stiffness hindering young people's strategies of appropriation, deterring other varieties of thickness. For them, usually a low degree of structuration is preferable. This appears to be the case for instance of Jacht-Jourdan, a neighbourhood whose public space

"has a soft programming. The Jourdan square is freely accessible for all kinds of mobility *modi* and they cross each other's paths constantly in a chaotic fashion. Cyclists are taking the pavement, pedestrians are walking on the

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street, ... And the square itself serves as a parking lot and place of encounter. And it attracts a lot of people-watchers." (Notes, March 5th, 2014)

This place certainly is not merely chaotic but it has a certain 'looseness' (Franck & Stevens, 2007: 3), which makes it susceptible to appropriation and change; rules of proper conduct are transgressed or subtly modified. In the Jourdan square a variety of artefacts are turned into seating places from which young people yell to one another across the street, sonorously re-tuning the space.

Another variety of thickness emerges in Peterbos where, as the participants explain, an informal system of ordering is in place. 'Minor' conflicts are usually taken care of among themselves, without an intervening outside authority. The boys see the neighbourhood as a self-contained, self-organising unit in which it would be ridiculous, for example, to operate CCTV-cameras (and indeed there are none, except the one above the entrance door of the local grocery shop of which everybody knows it doesn't work). To have such cameras inside the neighbourhood would be like "someone hanging a camera in my bedroom": the normative thickness of Peterbos is perceived as both desirable and sufficient for its atmosphere to hold together.

The opposition of neighbourhood-privacy versus city centre-publicity becomes even more intriguing. Most participants say they feel comfortable in the shopping streets, including its restrictive and exclusionary atmosphere, complete with security guards and CCTV cameras. On the other hand, they do report feeling often urged to 'keep moving' in tune with the rhythm of consumption (Kärrholm, 2009). Yet, the institutional thickness of these places does not seem very problematic for them. Some urban account would probably depict the city's central square (*Grote Markt*), a space dominated by tourists, as 'anonymous', 'alienating', and thus extremely 'thin'. Yet, this "place where there are a lot of people" is mentioned several times as a safe haven, in which the mix of security, formal and informal control as well as the buzz provided by the amount of people hanging out provides young people with unexpected 'thickening agents'. Crowdedness, institutional control and regulations are not *per se* undesirable, it seems.

Also discursive bodies contribute to the normative thickness of a place. Often mentioned are racism, stigma and stereotype perpetuated in local politics and media, and how they affect their lives. As a result, many young people internalise popular discourses and feel compelled to stress their own difference from "those young people causing trouble" (Rayane, 17, m). Dylan (13, m) mimics his parents while he explains there are bad people in the neighbourhood, "people that smoke, or do bad things, like stealing." Karim (14, m) states: "we need to respect adults." The impact of stigma and stereotype is slightly different for youngsters from the *quartiers chauds* (a thermometric metaphor indicating so-called 'problem' neighbourhoods or 'no-go areas'), who appear more sceptical and cynical.

Chiraz (21, f): "I sometimes have the impression that they think we're monkeys. They give us a banana and that's it. We had a football pitch here, they gave us a football pitch and afterwards they said: "now they'll be happy."

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But the pitch is not made safe, there are no fences or anything, they just built a pitch. (...) *C'est juste boucher un trou* [it's like plugging a hole].”

Those youngsters, often second- or third-generation Moroccans, are frequent victims of criminalisation, of daily stop-and-search practices by the police and of the dominant image concerning young people hanging out in public space.

Bilal (25, m): “Hanging out [in French: *traîner*] is bad. In fact the word “hanging out” is bad. If they say ‘hanging out’ they mean something bad. But to have fun, among friends, play football, to sit and drink something instead of sitting in a bar like the majority of the people do, well they go sit in the park, with a drink of perhaps only 1 euro. Everybody with his or her own means. I don't believe that sitting in a park with a group of ten people is something bad (...) I believe the police should stop concentrating on *les petits bougnoules* [French slang for young Moroccans] that have problems”.

Stigma, prejudice and racism may, on the other hand, contribute to forms of territorial identity, which in turn enhances place attachment and belonging. To ‘own’ a space, to perform a show before patrolling police cars, or to strike a cool pose *vis-à-vis* passing-by women, may have a comforting effect, to the extent that these places are thick with repression, exclusion and social control.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper we borrowed the ‘thick places’ notion from Casey and confronted it, theoretically, with the notions of affect, atmosphere and *nomotop*, and empirically, with data gathered in an ethnographic research project in Brussels between 2013 and 2016. Firstly, we argued that Casey's understanding of the concept of thickness refrains from eradicating a series of dichotomies (body/place, authentic/fake, warm/cold) we think are problematic. Secondly, we suggested that thickness is even more valuable when opened up to include a variety of other thicknesses (control, order, regulation), questioning usual urban ‘clichés’ about which places are desirable and comfortable and which are hostile and oppressive.

Certainly, we could see why there is much more thickness in the square of one's home neighbourhood, or in the bar where one spent the first thirty years of his/her life, than in, for instance, a metro station. Yet is this enough to make the latter thinner? Is not this place incredibly thick in terms of density of legal regulations, security procedures, behavioural/normative obligations, communication (advertising, management, security...), as well as literally filled with powerful affects (e.g. fear, anxiety, relief, boredom etc.)? Moreover, is it entirely impossible that intimacy coexist with rules and structuration, as it occurs when young people, by feeling safer, also feel somewhat freer *vis-à-vis* their capability to enjoy public space? In fact, as our data suggested, we may argue that also a shopping mall or a tourist hot spot, with their great amount of codes, norms, customs, control, enticement, may be far thicker than, say, a street in the periphery.

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By conceptualising thickness as the degree of relational density and viscosity emerging between bodies coming together in a given place, we have been able to account for the 'meaningfulness' attributed to a place without reducing it to the subjective points of view of those inhabiting it. Accordingly, it emerges that thick places can be enriching, but also extremely stressful and oppressive. Prejudged assumptions are overcome once we understand codes, norms and customs not as part of a 'contractual' sociality, but a 'co-tractional' holding together, a tensegritous nomotop of which we may empirically prompt 'weakness' and 'strength', i.e. different *degrees* of thinness and thickness.

This theoretical tool allowed us a deeper understanding on how youths negotiate and re-appropriate the spaces of the contemporary city, accounting at the same time for normative and affective qualities of their thickening process of spatial appropriation. Rather than exploring how young people act *in opposition* to a given space, this entailed investigating how atmospheres are produced in interaction with human and nonhuman bodies, how they *take place*, and how this taking place is experienced by young people. No longer a quality only pertaining to authentic, unspoilt or communitarian places, thickness becomes a fluid category that can emerge potentially everywhere, depending on given conditions, actions, bodies, and their taking place.

As a final point, we advocate for a further exploration of thickness (and similar concepts) by means of ethnographic investigation in order to avoid contributing to the Hyperuranion of theoretical abstraction. We believe it is possible to show how a theoretical sensibility to the atmospheric coming together of human and nonhuman bodies can be matched with an ethnographic praxis of urban exploration, constituting a viable methodology to explore the urban.

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