

## The social weaving of a reading atmosphere

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**Abstract** – Discusses how public library readers in Almeida Garrett, Porto, create a reading atmosphere, focusing on meanings associated with aural conditions. Through a qualitative, single case study, ethnographic and interview techniques were applied. Readers' actual practices and discourses, through a theoretical sample, and those of managers, staff and architect were analysed; a spatial analysis was undertaken within the framework of social inequalities and power relations. Proposes the concept of *reading atmosphere* and suggests that its social production was based on a tacit, informal code of conduct in which some regular readers played an influential role. Makes some recommendations on service provision.

**Keywords:** behaviour, public library, space, regulations, noise, social classes

### ***Introduction***

Social space is the product of economic, social and political life. Concrete in its physical dimension, social relations that produce and reproduce it are though less legible and must be unveiled through social analysis (Lefèbvre, 2000 [1974]). Space allows for, suggests or inhibits actions, in an intricate game of power relations. Diverse social spaces may then superpose, interpose or contend. In every-day life users appropriate space and practice it while making places, occasionally circumventing constraints and strategic measures through tactical tricks (Certeau, 1990).

Departing from this theoretical framework I sought to understand how a library's architectural design may shape reading practices, allowing for or inhibiting the appropriation of space and the creation of particular reading atmospheres and how

readers interact with it.

Methodologically, an integrated, qualitative approach was used to analyze and interpret those practices (Blumer, 1969; Geertz, 1973) and also their wider context of relations and processes, as well as the socially constructed meanings attached to them by subjects, to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the whole social reality (Donmoyer, 2000).

An interesting, rich case was picked – Almeida Garrett public library in Porto – and a theoretical sample was constructed according to the perceived diversity in that library – gender, age, social class, ethnic origin, disabilities: 28 users, two library managers, one assistant librarian, the maintenance supervisor, and the architect were interviewed. Michael Burowoy's extended case method (1998) was applied.

The empirical research design focused on readers' actual practices and discourses, as well as on those of librarians, staff and architects, along side with the building analysis all in a framework of social inequalities and power relations. With a strong ethnographic support, observation (Seale, 2004) and interview (Kvale, 1996) techniques were applied.

Some early results from a wider ongoing research are now available and a special topic was selected to be accounted for: how readers create and integrate or modify a particular public reading atmosphere, and how they evaluate it, considering the physical, sensorial, emotional and social dimensions of the issue.

I assume a compromise with the intentionality of the constructed object and with the purposes of the research (Haraway, 1991) and favour the provision of democratic spaces for public reading as a relevant public service, to be enjoyed for conviviality, culture, leisure, information or learning.

### ***The Almeida Garrett Public Library***

Inaugurated in 2001, by the time Porto was a European Capital of Culture, the library was projected to reside inside Porto's then largest public park. Its 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic design made space for rose gardens, lakes, gigantic trees, and a magnificent

view over the river Douro's estuary. The park is a common destination for visitors going to the sports pavilion, the restaurant, and the children's park all built in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The area is well served by public transportation, and stands in equidistance from both city centres, the historical and a more modern one. The library revealed its power of attraction in the fact that only a half of the interviewed resided in the city area.

José Manuel Soares, its architect, stated that his wish was to bring the garden into the library, while not imposing a building on it. He also wished to control the incoming light without blocking a relation with the surrounding area or effacing the particularities of the place. From his point of view, the most important concepts in the architectural programme were free access to stacks, and the demand for a library for *«those who are about to have a first contact with books»*, for students in a moment when school libraries were still scarce, where everyone might come in or out freely, *«in continuity with the public space»*. His concerns were directed at designing a space flexible enough to be *«ready to be used in different ways»*, allowing for particular small spaces appropriations while discouraging dispersion, *«according to each time period»*, *«that could still be adapted along the times»*, a space that might be *«clearly put under questioning»*. He stressed the importance of being able to find a full cooperation from all departments, from the Culture councillor and the support of the National Book Institute. European Union financing had allowed resources for high quality materials use and innovative solutions research.

Pure white imported marble had been used in the lobbies and the staircase, as an example of the first case; rows of half pine tree logs, in a brutalist manner, treated according to research done at the local public university, were used as a curtain in front of the main façade made of special UV filtering glass, as an example of the second. Light coloured wood was selected for the remaining floors, to cover most of surface of the interior walls and for furniture; the upper parts of the walls were painted in white. Simple, pure lines, well defined surfaces dominate. The ceiling has a wave-like design to improve aural conditions.

The library occupies two of the four levels of the building, an art gallery and an auditorium occupy the other two. The entrance lobby is divided by two floors, a marble staircase leading to the reception desk. The continuum effect along the whole building still allows for separate although not isolated areas, designed for general reading, for children, for press reading, for multimedia and Internet workstations. A cafeteria, the toilets, and the children's area are placed in a slightly inferior level. An exterior patio mediates the space between the cafeteria and the children's area, so relatives may seat and have a coffee and still be able to watch over their children. Visibility of the whole surface in each floor is allowed. All alongside the children's section runs a corridor leading to the adults reading areas, occupying that same floor and an inferior one. A glass wind-screen, not reaching the ceiling, separates the first third of that floor's surface, to sound-out the noise from children's activities. At the end of the corridor you can find the press corner with sofas, tables in sets of two or four by the front and back façades; in the far end, double lines of facing tables are to be found as well as an area with computers and Internet; in the middle, a mezanine delimits a large hole on the floor, showing an inferior level for multimedia and more Internet access stations.

The hierarchy of spaces was strategically used in creating decreasing noise levels, as one progresses in the building, still allowing for a global reading of the whole space. The architect wanted, above all, to dissociate the distribution of spaces between the library and the gallery, by the different floors, from any hierarchical connotation.

### ***General evaluation of the library space***

*«Though they may not have much light, both the library and the gallery. That was the difficulty, achieving a relation with what is going on around and the specificity of the place. It's the kind of thing that people don't notice but that is what imprints character in it» - José Manuel Soares, the architect.*

As a matter of fact, the difficulty in referring to and in evaluating space, a reality simultaneously abstract and concrete (idem, p. 134-5), was a constant all through the interviews to users.

As were the references to the quality of the experiences propitiated by space frequently transmuted into meaningful hypallages. Alongside with qualifying the building as of a «*well achieved architecture*», «*wide*», «*you can walk through at ease with [...] no obstacles*», «*all very pleasant*», «*cosy*», «*one of the best things Porto has*», very frequent references were made to being «*full of light*» and «*transparent*» which I believe have more to do with the *reading social atmosphere*, than to the building or the lighting themselves. Luminosity and transparency are really here to be taken as synonymous to feelings of openness and tranquillity. According to Lefèbvre, being so abstract, space is frequently figured in speeches through rhetorical devices that reflect «*the predominance of vision, of the visible, the legible*», obscuring social relations and the way space and power intertwine (2000 [1974], p. 152). Luminosity and transparency are also the best translation into an architectural expression of the concept of free and unhindered access commissioned for in the architectural program.

Silence in the library is a frequently addressed theme (Bertrand, 1994; Finlayson, 2008; Mattern, 2007; Miribel, 2007), the big library's *cliché* taboo is the object of several anecdotal narratives or common sense remarks although empirically based research seems to be almost inexistent.

Cell phones ringing are clearly what disturb some readers the most in this particular case of Almeida Garrett, the staff is frequently requested to intervene so that silence may be regained. The noise of high-heel footsteps also has a negative effect and disapproval looks would be direct to those making it. Noise produced by children tends to be more devaluated than other kinds of noise: several young and adult readers made a point of referring how they felt the presence of infants to be important.

Surely not by chance, readers without or with a deficient home showed to be much less demanding as far as comfort levels were concerned, their class reference pattern framed their comments. «*This is the best ambiance there is, though sometimes there are some people here who don't know how to be [in such a place], well, we know that it's the same everywhere, but then you forgive them, you accept them, they also have the right to be here...*». Questioned whether he had ever admonished anyone, he

answered: «*I did, but it was settled then and so one forgets*». And then he was questioned about staff intervention: «*They do, they intervene and are polite, they have manners, yeah... they also make demands, one can see they are «en su sitio» like the Spaniards say...*» (male retired reader, former bank clerk, 72, a resident).

Curiously, the most bitter complaints about noise are clearly associated with practices judged to be out of place and to people labelled as those who «*don't know how to be*» in libraries. Complaints are really directed to the uniformization of attitudes around the standard of the learned reader, the *habitué*, the one who knows and abides to tacit rules shaped according to *estimated legitimate practices* (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1966) and expects others to abide too. Which relates to notions of what is the adequate thing to do in such a place, with all the correlated social class cues. This library, as well as others in Portugal (Fortuna *et al.*, 1999; Freitas *et al.*, 1997), is predominantly used by students and intellectual or skilled professionals, manual workers are not even listed in the classification of jobs used in new reader's applications, the upper class is absent too.

This is how noise making should then be understood, rather than simply associated to physical, aural dimensions, but deeply associated to behaviour labelled as inadequate, as to being out of one's place or *milieu*.

Karin Bijsterveld (apud Mattern, 2007), insightfully comments that «'unwanted sound' ... has often been associated with a terrifying disruption of a specific social order, whereas rhythmic and/or loud, positively evaluated sounds have been associated with strength, power, significance, masculinity, progress, prosperity and, last but not least, control». As Shannon Mattern herself puts it «both enforced silence and freedom from noise represent forms of power» which she intimately associates with Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* in what it helps understand how socially learned, embodied predispositions rather than automatic, instinctive reflexes condition responses to architecture and media, still allowing for individual variation and personal choice.

### **Involving space – location and access**

«*Very well located, it's wonderful*», «*integrated in Nature*» - most interviewees spoke very favourably of the insertion in a garden, in spite of adult readers admitting that they use it rarely. Just the children usually grab the chance to take a stroll. Knowing it's there, nevertheless, allows for a calming, pleasant sensation, although reading may be such an absorbing task that even big peacocks walking along the window sills may not be noticed by anyone, as it was the case during one of the interviews.

Almost all users get to the library using public transportation, some residing or working nearby do it on foot.

### **Emotions – «*finding the words for things*»**

If reading is a form of *ubiquity*, an *impertinent absence* (Guy Rosolato, *Essais sur le symbolique*, 1969, apud Certeau, 1990) this atmosphere is collectively woven of appreciated raw materials: tranquillity, organization, concentration, an integrative collective intellectual labour, were all mentioned by readers as most valued aspects of a library. And these you don't get by staying alone at home.

A female reader, living in a therapeutic community and looking for a place with more privacy, makes a very expressive statement: reading «*is inexhaustive, is being totally absorbed, finding the words for things, to rest and reflect. [...] If I stopped leading the life I'm used to in public spaces I was certainly going to loose a true pleasure and a real harmony I'm looking for*».

To some reading is associated with the pride of an accomplishment, especially to those who lived in a time when studying was a class privilege. This was the case of a female reader, and twice so, for having the necessary educational capital, in spite of being a manual workers daughter and for, in spite of being presently blind, still being able to read in Braille in a dedicated workstation. And it was also the case of an elder reader, retired and a student in a Senior's University, compensating for the chance he couldn't get when young. Seeing young people and children in the library rejoices him,

as well as some young adults, who did not have that opportunity in their own time either.

### **Conviviality**

Co-presence is a valued dimension of public reading, even if you don't address those familiar faces around you, their activities are carefully followed, this may be an opportunity to break the isolation of lonely lives. And there are a lot of lonely people coming frequently to this library.

The urge to mingle is differently felt, though. Proximity without propinquity seems important to many, adding the reservedness of reading to the one characteristic of urban living. Going to the library is not necessarily an individual act, children are almost always accompanied by relatives in school groups, some couples come in, adolescents frequently integrate classmate groups.

Usual readers chat with one another or with the staff, they may occasionally exchange opinions on the news headlines.

A homeless reader, a former typographer for a local newspaper, said: *«above all, I like coming here a lot when I'm feeling down, I come in and it seems I reinvigorate again! Crossing that door it seems like home to me, as if it was a family of my own, I feel superbly well!»*.

A particular form of conviviality was mostly appreciated by students and informal scholars who value the togetherness propitiated by a collective atmosphere of order and enticement to concentration and work: *«I myself enjoy being able to look around and say 'look, all the other people are also doing the same as I do, so [it is useful] to soften things a little [laughing] if it's something I don't like to do, that's what I try to be thinking»* (male student, 34 years-old); *«there are some behaviours that are more or less predictable and there is a certain intrinsic order, intrinsic to behaviours of the public, and that works...»* in helping her own study (female student, 40).

### **Personalization, privacy, surveillance**

Reading is an introspective activity that creates a private bubble, soft but protecting. You don't expect to be disturbed, along with reading skills you also learn the rules of co-reading.

Mobile audio is a technological resource that many use in order to reinforce those bubbles, in order to privatize space and to control undesired interactions with others: if you're wearing earplugs you're also signalling that you don't want to be disturbed (Bull, 2006). Portable music also answers, certainly, to aesthetic and affective needs, allowing for the shaping of moods and intellectual energy into *soundscape*s (idem) which overrun the traditional limits of private and public space, inserting breaches of isolation, privacy and personalization into shared and even crowded places.

Students may be thought of as the kind of user most particularly entitled to have silence in order to concentrate on their tasks. Some may occasionally frown at people chatting, signalling out that their labour is being disturbed, but no complaints could be specifically associated with that status. On the other hand, some expressed their contentment for an environment that has no complete silence, which would indeed bother them, and also expressed their preference for a light murmur as a comfortable background.

The need for privacy and the meanings attached to it varied according to domestic and work life habits and, ultimately, according to social conditions and gender: the homeless reader does not mind that other people peep into his screen while he's using the Internet; a young female reader resents being observed by some men in an *«unpleasant»* way; the sole question about a possible lack of privacy addressed to a young couple, living in a single apartment with their two children and eight other relatives, gave way for laughter: the library was the only place they could get some privacy, they said.

Almost everyone referred to co-presence as a sort of tacit agreement: being in such a public place presupposes a certain concession over the reservation of personal

space, compensated for with all its advantages.

Readers also signalled that they knew that moving chairs to a different location was not a problem. And a particular case of users modifying space was narrated by the chief librarian: «*we conceived that space [the mezanine] for shelving, but right then we found that it was not very reasonable because shelves were very low [waist-height] books could not be seen*». «*Soon enough readers solved the problem because as stacks were movable, they withdrew the shelves and leaned there [against the top surfaces] and we had to put a turned edge so that books wouldn't fall*» into the inferior level. «*It's one of the most coveted places in the library [...]*».

Lockers in the lobby are not very used. The staff advises the use of security lock chain cables for portable PCs, thefts were registered some years ago, nowadays the situation is under control.

Children are allowed to bring in toys and drawing materials, their table surfaces are prepared for those uses.

Different strategies to appropriate space could be traced and connected to different user profiles. Students, informal scholars and occupational users – those actively occupying their time in a useful way in the library, whether working for a salary or not – use mostly tables, grouped in twos or in rows and Internet workstations. They sometimes resort to tricks (Certeau, 1990) to create additional, reserve space, scattering personal belongings and books over neighbouring places, signalling they are not willing to share it. This silent competition for space may be based on assumptions on what are adequate uses, and users. Students seem to have their presence legitimated by their activity, envisaged as a «natural» and sufficient enough credential by staff and other users.

A special group in this library is formed by *residents*, an epithet created by local staff for *habitués* readers who visit it, sometimes daily, staying for several hours, frequently privileged with a special attention from some librarians, especially if they are elderly people. They tend to concentrate in the tables surrounding the mezzanine, a

spot that allows for optimal visual control over the whole space. An anecdotal case may, in spite of its singularity, depict how they feel entitled to this special attention as frequent users: an elderly male reader once asked the staff to have his own sofa, which he had already brought, placed in front of his usual table because he felt it to be more comfortable than the library's.

The library is acknowledged as a safe place, surveillance activities and the presence of cameras, which none of the interviewees had spontaneously noticed, is felt as protective measures. The number of cameras was intentionally low because the library wanted to «*respect the privacy of users*» (building maintenance officer). The homeless reader said: «*I like closed premises best where tranquillity is to be found*». The socially frail are also the ones appreciating safety the most.

A story, often told, of fight between readers involving a gun was not confirmed by the building maintenance officer, it's just another urban legend among many others in the city, which may be explained by subjective feelings of unsafety, associated to the belief in the dangerousness of urban space (Fernandes, 2003).

Crossing the garden, even after sunset, did not seem to arouse fear. The only exceptions were a blind reader, who occasionally needs assistance to reach the door through its winding paths, and an elder reader with locomotion disabilities.

The building security and maintenance officer summed up ordinary problems and solutions adopted this way: «*Right now there were only a few interventions there... We have guys from Eastern Europe who go to the multimedia area and use couches to watch films and go there to sleep... These are the most annoying situations we have... We had four TV sets and cut them down to two trying to diminish the entry of users... we cannot deny them entrance because we are a public service but we must avoid them... it only creates some problems with other people who want to use the same equipment which makes some sense.*

*There were also some problems with kids who stole the entire mouse balls in*

*the children's section from us, it was a prank, it was more to draw attention. Apart from Eastern individuals and some with alcoholism issues who came around ...and keep on coming... We cannot intervene [in alcohol abuse situations], we cannot throw people out for that reason. We signal our presence through a security agent, they wake up, complain, sometimes we have written complaints from users, we can't do anything else. One of the characteristics of this space is to be public, to be open to all kinds of public, we cannot discriminate, we have to live with it, we must be very cautious...».*

He finally added that, in general, the amount of incoming people reflects the fact that readers are allowed to move freely, to manipulate works, *«if there is an excess it's because the offer is good. This equipment, when projected, was never thought to be this much crowded and to be so well accepted».*

The building itself presents no accessibility issues, according to a blind reader and to an elder man with mobility issues, wearing crutches.

### ***Social regulation of conduct – «to do what this was meant for»***

A formal regulation for the use of reading areas is waiting for superior approval, its absence might lead to believe that an informal use was thus being favoured. Some specific rules are in force only for domestic borrowing and for the use of Internet stations.

According to field observation, however, a different reality is to be found, some readers behave, expect or even make others to comply to behaviours according to estimated legitimate practices.

By their usual access to staff, by the places they choose, residents along with other frequent readers seem to have a decisive role in the production of an implicit conduct regulation code.

A resident reader explained why she preferred this to another library near her home: *«here people [...] are civilized, not there! [...] This a high category library, the other is a fishwives thing, I don't get involved in those conflicts because I'm a well-*

*bread person*». [...] «*Over there, it's typical, it's a small community, they make telephone calls, they go there to flirt, flirt at the end of the room, they go there and do everything except what it was meant to, I've already written to the Mayor on this*».

She also states that she likes to find this multicultural environment, similar to the one she found in United Kingdom libraries, «*because here you find any kind of person, Easterners and all*», however she dislikes the presence of these «*exceptions*», «*these people, these junkies, these homeless who go there [multimedia floor] and make a fuss when it ends [the time available for each reader], because they come to sleep and they even mess with people there*».

I could whiteness that other readers sleep in the couches too, the staff just used some tricks to wake them up, while the remaining readers didn't look disturbed by the fact.

Front office staff mentioned they had problems with homeless who used to go to the restrooms to bath, who were sometimes drunk, as with Eastern immigrants, all of which required security intervention. Or with the over-relaxed attitudes of some who took off their shoes while watching films which required them to intervene.

But what really seems to be disturbing some readers and staff members the most are the incoming people from social groups unusual in public reading spaces, «*these exceptions*» as referred to, and who seemed to be thought of as an illegitimate presence according to social class prejudices. Deprived of the necessary credentials of cultural and educational capital they are assumed to «*do everything except what [the library] was meant for*».

The decision to suppress some TV sets formerly used to watch DVDs at will, eventually led to reinforce the social stigma associated with supports and means that require less educational capital than the traditional yet consecrated support, the book, stigma that extended to the whole multimedia space. An international truck driver preferred this floor for being «*more for leisure*» while «*up there is more for reading*». Attitudes, bodily postures, manners, demarcate different areas through more or less

patent embodied cues of a dominant *corporal hexis* (Bourdieu, 1977), leading readers to choose their place according to social class perspectives of expected practices.

These signs of domestic-like relaxation should not be understood as oblivion of being in a public place. Readers refrain from some activities, supposedly inadequate in this context, like visiting erotic Sites, which they indulge in when at home. Here we are being confronted with different notions of what is acceptable behaviour, with diverse *corporeal hexeis*, with the limits between public and private becoming blurred and so occasionally generating conflicts.

When resources are scarce, as is the case of newspapers and Internet stations, readers compete for them, making way for tactics of favourable positioning and even races. Staff intervention is directed to instil patience and order in these periods of wait time.

### ***Building a reading atmosphere – to be «en su sitio»***

It was very interesting to notice that sensorial, comfort issues were not raised by readers nor did they complain about any aspect, be it light, sound, temperature or furniture. Although, as the architect remarked «*it's the kind of things that people don't notice but it's what imprints character*» to the building.

In my interpretation, people may not be aware of these details but still sense them, though tending to express their impact by incorporating them in a combined evaluation of the whole ambiance, in a blend of physical/sensorial and psychological/affective dimensions. It must, nevertheless, be stated that this library was finely conceived and that the architect's attention to «*that kind of things*» appears to be well reflected in the resulting very pleasant ambiance, with the admitted exception of deficient ventilation in some areas.

And simultaneously many readers seemed so pleased to be able to use such quality services for free that these *things* might be seen as negligible, in some sort of trade with the very positive evaluation assigned to the provision of these services and their acknowledged scarcity and recency, services sometimes not even taken for

granted, a fact which older readers were particularly sensitive to.

*Reading atmosphere* is therefore the term I propose to describe these issues, of blurred boundaries, a product of an amalgamation of lived spatiality, senses and social rules made through the collective weaving of a public reading context. The acquired ability of knowing how to be «*en su sitio*» was clearly a fundamental dimension in its own. The term intends to name this multidimensional reality, difficult to put into words, but felt and transmitted by interviewees in different and sometimes unexpected ways, including through the use of hypallages.

## **Conclusions**

The social production of a reading atmosphere in Almeida Garrett is based on a tacit code of conduct, within a social class framework, finding in some readers, particularly the *residents* an influent defence.

Although sound conditions were especially appreciated, the social weaving of a good reading atmosphere, namely as an opposite of a noisy one, goes much beyond aural conditions. Readers' evaluations included behavioural cues tied to cultural *habitus* and social class, revealing that, at least for some, an adequate atmosphere was equated to one where imagined legitimate practices were embodied.

Regulations were apparently more sustained by their pressure than by institutional rules which, as mentioned, are still minimal.

On the other hand, what is now tacit is certainly what was institutionally sought and eventually became a common practice under a convergence of interests. So the fact that the library does not have a regulation does not mean that social control is absent, it is really just being conveyed and staged under other forms.

The design of separate reading zones by support type and the fact that multimedia public is less qualified ended up in a spatial segregation which, though not sharp is still visible to readers themselves. The segregation that the architect stated to avoid is eventually exerting its effects by processes not spatial but of a cultural capital

nature, associated to documents physical supports, the multimedia area, actually located in an inferior level, being associated with inferior forms of reading.

The very positive evaluation made by users of the building and its atmosphere has certainly to do with several aspects, from the clarity and social sensitivity of the building program's main concepts to the widely recognized high quality of the architecture, the excellent environment propitiated by the garden but also to the care and welcoming friendliness transmitted by staff, as readers made a point to stress.

Freedom of movements and a relaxed atmosphere inside the building, free-access to documents and users modifications of projected space all contributed positively to the popularity of this library.

However some changes ought to be made in the multimedia area, namely reinstalling the removed TV set and having it play films according to a programmed schedule which might incorporate users' suggestions. This way all the equipment could be in use, more films could be viewed and conflicts over the individual appropriation of TV's could be diminished.

A special personal attention should be given to most socially deprived readers so that all are accepted and all may feel welcome.

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