



Huib Ernste, Prof. em. Dr  
Affiliated Researcher

**Prof. em. Dr Huib Ernste** studies the relationship between human activities and their spatial context, and the role spatial differentiation plays in society. His more specific fields of interest include:

### Theoretically:

- Philosophy and Social Theory in the field of Human Geography
- Phenomenological Approaches in Human Geography (Philosophical Anthropology, Affective and Emotional aspects of Places and Place-making)
- Relational Approaches in Human Geography (Actor Network Theory, Assemblage Theory, Practice Theory, Complexity Theory)
- Action Theory, Theory of Communicative Action, Recognition Theory, Participation Theory.

### Methodologically:

Research Methods, both Quantitative (Statistics) as well as Qualitative

### Focus:

Prof. Huib Ernste is a critical geographer, focussing his research on topical societal problems and how we can create a better, more inclusive and sustainable futures, in fields such as mobility, migration, urban development, governance, sustainable action, cultural identity, encounters and exchange, violent conflicts, politics, borders, the role of art and other forms of expression in public space.

### Available for Supervision of Master's Theses:

#### **What is the 'Vibe' of Places?<sup>1</sup>**

Successful urban places are not just functionally well-suited, but often also aesthetically appealing; they radiate a certain energy and stimulate or give direction to a specific use of that place. The affective and emotional 'feeling' of urban places is therefore central to their quality.

This *Vibe* can be explored in creative or innovative places, welcoming places, places of encounter and integration, event locations, places of relaxation or contemplation, sacred places, leisure places, touristic places, places for consumption, for nightlife, for learning, for feeling at home, places of mobility, 'alternative places', powerful places, healthy places, inspiring places, unsafe or criminal places, exciting or threatening places, etc..

They all breathe a certain (positive or negative) *Vibe*, and provide an embodied feeling. The 'feeling' of a place can be very powerful. Its effect can be greater than that of other more functional aspects of urban spaces. Often it is *THE* driving force behind the success or failure of urban places. The scientific concept used in the literature

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<sup>1</sup> In SS24 Prof. em. Huib Ernste also offered a project course on those topics for advanced Ba students.

for what we describe here as the *Vibe* of a place, is *Atmosphere*. A concept central in current neo-phenomenological approaches in human geography.

The affective and emotional *Vibe* of an urban place can be investigated with multi-sensorial qualitative methods and phenomenological interviewing but these methods can also be combined with more behavioural approaches such as mental mapping, or methods based on eye-tracking, automated face-recognition, electrodermal activity sensors, etc.

See also:

- Ahmed, S. (2010) Happy Objects. In: Gregg, M. & Seigworth, G.J (eds.) *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, Durham (pp. 29-51).
- Ahmed, S. (2014 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Bevan, M.T. (2014) A Method of Phenomenological Interviewing. *Qualitative Health Research*. Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 136-144.
- Bille, M. & Schwabe, S. (2023) *The Atmospheric City*. Routledge, Milton Park.
- Böhme, G. (1993) Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics. *Thesis 11*. No. 36, pp. 113-126.
- Elliot, D. & Culhane, D. (eds.) (2017) *A different kind of Ethnography. Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Ernste, H. (2023) How Overtourism Feels. Conceptualisation of atmosphere of overtourism. In: Hospers, G.-J. & Amrhein, S. (eds.) *Coping with Overtourism in Post-Pandemic Europe. Approaches, Experiences and Challenges*. LIT-Verlag, Münster (pp. 31-50).
- Gandy, M. (2017) Urban Atmospheres. *Cultural geographies*. Vol. 24, No. 3, 353-374.
- Pile, S. (2009) Emotions and affect in recent human geography. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*. Vol. 35, pp. 5-20.
- Schmitz, H., Müllan, R.O. & Slaby, J. (2011) Emotions outside the box—the new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*. Vol. 10, pp. 241-259.
- Thibaud, J.-P. (2010) The city through the senses. This article was first published in French as «La ville à l'épreuve des sens» In: Coutard, O. & Lévy, J.-P. (eds.) *Ecologies Urbaines*. Editions Economica, Paris, pp. 198-213.

This raises several suggested topics for Master theses, for example:

- A. **Who 'owns' the city? Who owns the Bahnhofstrasse in Zürich?** For whom is the 'Bahnhofstrasse' in Zürich? The *Vibe* in the Bahnhofstrasse does not suit every kind of audience. Which audience feels at home and well served in the Bahnhofstrasse, and which audience feels rather excluded and not served at the Bahnhofstrasse? An interesting indicator for this might e.g. be the 'security agents' who serve as doorkeepers at the entrance of shops and restaurants in the Bahnhofstrasse radiating a feeling of luxury and exclusiveness, but also street furniture, the physical layout and aesthetic quality of the street, as well as the diversity of different audiences passing through, at different times of the day, week or year contribute to the overall *Vibe* of the Bahnhofstrasse. A systematic analysis of the *Vibe* of the Bahnhofstrasse might reveal much of its affective structures, what role they play in the city as a whole and how it could be made a more inclusive and successful urban place.



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- B. **Integrative Vibes in a multi-cultural Neighbourhood:** As a contrast one might, in a similar way, also investigate the *Vibe* of the Langstrasse in Zürich, as a crucial element in the ethnically much more diverse part of the city, where maybe not the commercial success but rather the integrative quality of that urban place is more important. What kind of *Vibe* is more constitutive of this integrative aspect of the city? Each of these cases can be investigated as stand-alone Master Thesis research projects, but can also be set up in a more comparative way as a collaboration between different master thesis research projects.



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- C. **Contrasting Vibes in Gentrifying Neighbourhoods:** In gentrifying neighbourhoods, it is often suggested that there is a latent conflict or difference of interests between the more affluent newcomers and the 'original' inhabitants. This conflict focuses on economic aspects such as affordable rents, housing

prices, etc., but what do these developments do with the *affective quality* or the *Vibe* of the neighbourhood? What is the *Vibe* the newcomers are attracted by, and what is the *Vibe* the 'original' inhabitants fear to lose? In how far, and how, can the diverse affective qualities of such a gentrifying neighbourhood enhance each other or exclude each other? What 'mix of *Vibes*' would be more sustainable?



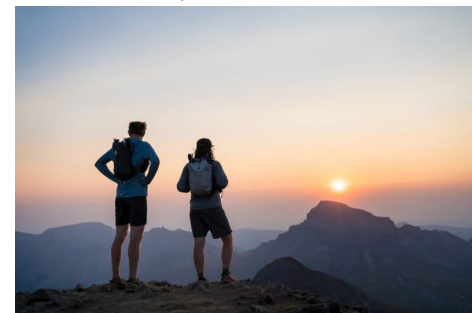
- D. **The making of an academic Vibe:** Zurich is known as a hub for creative and innovative industries and high-end research institutes like the ETH and UZH, as well as its universities of applied sciences. It is supposed that at these institutions there is a real 'academic Vibe' which stimulates research and teaching. But is this really true? What is the current quality of the academic Vibe at some of the different locations of UZH or ETH? How are these affective spaces structured? How are they experienced by Researchers, Lecturers, Post-Docs, PhD candidates and Students? How could the *Atmosphere* at the university stimulate learning and research? And how can this be improved through 'academic placemaking'?

(This topic is also related to the master thesis topics in the field of (geographical) didactics and learning offered in the realm of 'Space Nature and Society')



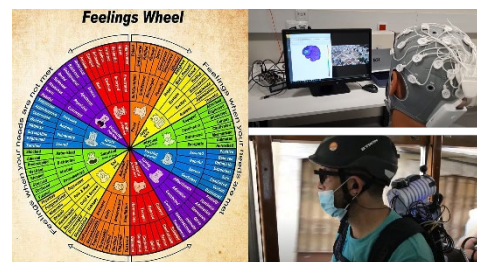
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- E. **Perception Walks to Assess the Value of Landscapes:** Similarly, not only urban places have a specific *Vibe*, but also natural areas and landscapes radiate a certain *Atmosphere* and create a certain *Vibe*. The 'Stiftung Landschaftsschutz' e.g. suggests using neo-phenomenological methods as an alternative way to assess the value of landscape and maybe also to discover conflictual valuations by different groups of users of these landscapes, like tourists, local farmers, hikers or mountain bikers, etc. They even specifically suggest extending the use of perception walks ('*Wahrnehmungsspaziergänge*'), originally developed for the purpose of investigating the *Atmosphere* of buildings, to the case of open landscapes. See also Master Thesis topics offered in the field of 'Space Nature and Society' and 'Parkforschung'.



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- F. **The Behavioural and Phenomenological Approaches Compared:** Behavioural and Phenomenological approaches to the affectiveness of Urban Places each address different aspects, which do not exclude but rather enhance each other. Together they provide a more complete picture of the affectiveness of Urban Places. Geography as an integrative discipline is predestined to combine these approaches. Ideally this can be done by two master students, in the framework of two Master's theses, each focusing on one of these approaches, but in close dialogue together, enabling a more comparative perspective.



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- G. **Free choice** of other cases, places and situations to be investigated from these perspectives.

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Interested? Let us have a coffee and a chat on the topic: [huib.ernste@ru.nl](mailto:huib.ernste@ru.nl) +41 76 70 94 481