



*Modest Attachments. An Inquiry into the Potentialities of Material Spaces in a
Psychiatric Day Care Centre*

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Summary

Institutional care buildings have been largely transformed as the psychiatric field has undergone significant changes over the last fifty years. Instead of the disciplining spaces of hospitals, teams of caregivers now work in smaller centres located in the community. This thesis brings the reader into one of these places, a psychiatric day care centre for teenagers in Brussels. It dives into the details of its everyday material arrangements, and asks, *How do material spaces work in the everyday practice of a psychiatric centre? How do they contribute to institutional care? What are their potentialities, with their tensions, successes, and failures?* Presented over seven chapters, the dissertation describes how these spaces help make *modest attachments* emerge. ‘Modest attachments’ proliferate as caregivers attempt to spark even the smallest appreciations by mediation of the material environment. Material spaces play active roles in enacting various ways of becoming attached, from small affinities in the everyday flow, towards appreciations that become of great concern. The thesis witnesses the potentialities of these material spaces for such modest attachments and shows how these significantly contribute to the care work.

A preamble anchors the study in the history of psychiatric care work, by connecting the arrangements of the day care centre today to past experiments. The notion of ‘milieu’, which came to hold a prominent role in the contestation movements of the psychiatric field in the 1960s, indicates a shift in the understanding of material spaces. In older, disciplinary asylums, spaces were conceptualised as determinative and causal of behaviour. Milieu-focused care, in contrast, conceived of spaces as experimental, undetermined environments, made up of humans and things. The relationships emerging in a place could then also shaped their environment. These experiments invite a study of material spaces in terms of the potentialities for certain affinities to emerge, and for making a place specific according to those attachments.

The first chapter situates the inquiry by describing the fieldwork on which the thesis is based and the theoretical affiliations involved. The thesis focuses on a particular day care centre for teenagers that relocated from an old townhouse to a new building, a process in which I was immersed before, during, and after the move. This transition required caregivers to articulate matters of space and to relay them to architects and directors. While I became involved in a relational exploration of that specific place, the transition, due to its move, enabled me to learn about the contribution of these spaces to the caregivers’ practice. I learned about what those spaces facilitate or hinder, attending to caregivers’ reflections about the place with which they work. The shared experience of that transition animates the analysis along three closely interwoven conceptual threads.

The first thread of the thesis is an ethnography of institutional care within the changing psychiatric landscape. Much of the care work described in this thesis is shaped by the notion of therapeutic communities, in which each person in the centre is invited to take part in its

everyday organisation and social life. Such community work with patients is given less importance in today's psychiatric field: public reforms favour the establishment of mobile outreach teams, without reflecting on institutional places that offer an alternative to hospitalisation. Yet, community work creates possibilities for patients – especially for those most reluctant to being cared for – to position themselves or to be positioned as a relational person in what I call a 'dispositif of care'. They can respond with their specific affinities and disinterests, rather than being understood through the deficiencies of a disease. The ethnography dissects the crucial roles of material spaces for this particular kind of institutional, community work, one that enables the flourishing of what a person may become through the making of attachments. Therefore, it adds to the changing psychiatric landscape where these places seem forgotten when envisioning mental health care facilities.

The second thread of the thesis develops an approach to analysing material spaces in terms of potentialities. This approach pays ethnographic attention to the possibilities that material spaces unleash in interactions with those giving and receiving care. What do these spaces enable caregivers and teenagers to do? And what do they do to those spaces? Such an approach traces a path between architectural studies that show design projects and geographical studies that report on people's ideas about these places. This path aligns with recent work in science and technology studies (STS) and the material-semiotic tradition. These studies are relevant for looking at the potentialities of material spaces because they focus on local dynamics through which things and ideas come into being, maintain their existence, and change relationally in practices. The thesis develops a material-semiotic sensibility regarding the materiality of a place, looking at how ideas take shape *in* and *with* the material arrangements of the space involved in the ongoing care practice.

The third thread elaborates the concept of 'attachments', a term that designates the co-creation of affinities, things, bodily engagements, and collectives that develop when a person or a group comes to strongly like something. This thread builds upon studies of attachment in the cultivation of taste, which describe how amateurs come to appreciate certain objects, like music or wine. These studies show how sensations become refined in practice, as people are in touch with the objects deploying them and hence become better able to distinguish them. The emergence of such sensibilities involves material elements, moments of attention, gestures, bodies, things, situations, and collectives of people. In such a view, spatial arrangements mediate how an attachment may take form, just as, for example, a concert hall orients how those present pay attention and listen. In the day centre, attachments are often modest appreciations, of quiet intensity, more diffuse and dilute in informal moments and daily activities: a seat that becomes familiar, a displayed drawing that draws a lingering gaze, or a videogame that sparks a momentary shared interest. These appreciations differ from the intensity of amateurs' passions in that they rest on the proliferation of many low, *modest attachments*. Yet, modest attachments are sensitive differences that matter. Caregivers attempt to spark even the slightest of attachments by mediation of the material environment. They notice, compare, and discuss those attachments amongst the other caregivers, creating an informal knowledge base that enables them to respond to each youth accordingly. The thesis shows how these tangible arrangements contribute to awaken and strengthen mundane,

everyday attachments as part of the care work itself. The following chapters unfold different ways that the spaces of the day centre make modest attachments emerge, and narrate them in the style of a journey through a field journal.

The second chapter begins with the first few weeks of fieldwork. I explore the materiality of the living spaces that seem to foster familiarity in everyday interactions with them. Familiarity is central for the caregivers' work, as it provides them with an informal knowledge of the teenagers. It enables the team to notice minor changes with this or that teenager, or to open zones of negotiation when a youth threatens familiar relationships. I then reflect on the notions of opportunities (that can be seized for doing something) and affordances (that depend on the material properties of a thing) to describe potentialities for enacting familiar bonds. I find five different ways that the care centre's living spaces foster or hinder the creation of familiarity: (1) objects attract others to join in and incite the improvisation of clusters of youths in what I call 'hotspots'; (2) objects invite engagement because they are displayed within a situated permissiveness (in which all objects are available to anyone to engage with) and the articulation of the rooms creates sightlines that invite discreet glances, facilitating contact; (3) anchoring or leaning elements afford the body a chance to relax, therefore calling for a casual togetherness and informal postures; (4) the presence of several rooms and of corners creates opportunities for withdrawing, both of which help youths modulate their distance to others; and (5) a semi-open kitchen stirs encounters since it suggests people to hang around the cook and smell a dinner in the making. The chapter concludes that the living spaces, with their opportunities and affordances, encourage familiarization through *suggestions* that appeal to teenagers and caregivers in open, indirect, and ambiguous ways. The unclear character of these suggestions is crucial to creating relational ease, since the contacts with youths should not be confrontational.

The third chapter travels to different places inside and outside the centre, where caregivers and youths engage in workshops. It describes the conditions under which material spaces do incite or not the youths to involve themselves in different activities. The term 'involvement' delineates certain forms of immersion in interactions with things and others, showing that one may become more or less captivated by an activity. Caregivers notice and discuss these unpredictable engagements, such as gestures, ways to pay attention, expressions of ideas, of hesitation or avoidances. By comparing the various ways that teenagers enact their sensibilities, the team nourishes their informal knowledge: they better see what a youth is more inclined to do and how, as well as the accompanying forces and difficulties. In doing so, they become better able to respond to a youth accordingly. I then explore different activities with regard to their material spaces. The setting of a pedagogical workshop allows caregivers to adjust to teenagers' unsteady involvement in learning tasks. For instance, walking together to the workshop rooms gives caregivers an opportunity to feel the participants' dynamic before starting a session, and to adapt in response. Two other workshops show sharp differences in their settings, in their respective way to lead the youths to focus on a task (writing a text or watching a movie), and then to shift to group exchanges. Finally, when activities take place outside, conditions are more open to youths' possible disengagement, yet it also makes them more prone to easier exchanges. Across these activities and venues, it

appears that the *contrasts* among their specific settings play a key role in attempting to re-involve participants as they pass from one to another. In this way, the places of activities entail potentialities for ‘passing involvements’: the brief responses of youths to the dispositif of one activity, when an attachment begins to form but remains on the verge of fading. These passing involvements in activities are relevant for the care work since they trigger many facets of the youths’ sensibilities and enrich the team’s informal knowledge.

The fourth chapter explores the problem of ‘*interessement*’, of sustaining interest among teenagers and caregivers in activities. Occurring week after week, workshops risk leaving room for boredom and thus require variations over time. Caregivers and teenagers interact with their environment by rearranging it, following their interests that decline and rekindle. They redistribute objects and rooms, and become involved with new places when they partially redefine activities or establish new ones. While I look at the ways the spaces varied, I first encounter the notion of ‘waves’, which evokes how participants’ interests slightly deviate with a temporary group cohesion as its composition reshapes. Waves occur informally, since they start with very small interpersonal encounters in workshops or in other mundane moments. They build upon existing appreciations already circulating among the group members. When these coalesce in a wave, it drives a variation of their interests and of activities with their material settings. The enrolment of participants and things in successive waves appears to me as ‘tactical dwelling’: they are ways of inhabiting the place by seizing occasions in propitious moments and, this way, of combining heterogeneous elements. I then look at several institutional tools to see how caregivers generate and sustain *interessement* in workshops. With a flexible chart for activities, staff meetings, or community meetings that include teens, the variations of workshops and spaces emphasise how caregivers cultivate their awareness of possibilities. They remain attentive to mundane occurrences throughout the day as much as to propositions in meetings, and they understand what they have noticed as emerging possibilities, even if most of these ideas are not realised. The conclusion comes back to the potentialities of material spaces for these processes of *interessement*: waves and institutional tools both encompass tactics of enrolment that make the place specific to the group members, and to their attachments that re-emerge in the course of the care practice.

The fifth chapter turns to another issue that became explicit with the transition to the new building: the aesthetic style of the house, conveyed by the artworks that permeate the place. The caregivers want these things to impart the new building with ‘something lively’. Stories about drawings, paintings, sculptures, frames, posters, mosaic tiles, and a chalkboard that slowly permeate the white walls of the new building bring out how these things entail potentialities for liveliness. These artworks show that that liveliness rests on the temporalities such things carry, such as when these things enfold moments from workshops, with the nuances of participants’ involvement. Other artworks can also evoke a temporary interest, causing group members to tell stories about them, hence expanding the present time to other moments, places, and paces. Or when a chalkboard appeals to brief, casual involvements in writing inscriptions, its liveliness is so unpredictable and ephemeral that it remains a source of tension among caregivers. These descriptions train attention to the different temporalities

enacted with these artworks, the unpredictable paces at which certain attachments come into being, and how the care work rests on these unpredictable temporalities.

The main protagonists of the sixth chapter are doors. In the daily practice of the centre, their prescriptions (of the actions supposed to be accomplished with them) go beyond the issue of access, and its binary logic of entering or not. Instead, the doors that I observe held different normative potentialities. These doors provoke disturbances and hence put under debate the everyday morality of the care work, as well as that of youths' attachments, through different modes of reflexivity. These modes of reflexivity are central in the care work, because the hierarchy and authority embedded in doors are not given but debated; they confront caregivers' moral and political concerns. After specifying how I approach the everyday morality of doors, and their complex roles in psychiatry, this chapter unfolds three modes of reflexivity in relation to the role of doors in the centre. First, when doors spark tensions about circulation, caregivers resort to several strategies, like installing signs, using technological devices, or developing a 'collective reflexivity' about the role of a door, by discussing it in community meetings. The last strategy comes with different consequences: whereas tensions remain with the use of signs or devices, discussing the rule then stabilises the rule as a habit that one might breach again later, opening new negotiations. Second, interactions with doors offer youths' opportunities to call for others' attention, such as by slamming doors or playing with them. Such troubling interactions with doors raise ambiguities: they provide occasions for caregivers to notice that something might be wrong and to investigate it with the concerned teenager. The third mode of reflexivity experiments with the 'collective reflexivity' in relation to debates about a door's visual appearance. Hence the morality of this door recalls the issue of the aesthetic style of material spaces, and related matters of involvement, interest, and liveliness. Here, too, the door necessitates and forges reflexivity: some youths created a 'door committee' to defend their interest in it. By doing so, they enlarge the possible ingredients that come into the negotiation in an unforeseen way. This chapter ends by linking these reflexive modes around doors to the notion of attachment. Although doors are not purposed to mediate appreciations, their role in facilitating disturbances may augment attachments. Indeed, those disturbances with doors open reflexive parentheses about the moral considerations to which the caregivers and youths hold.

The seventh chapter concludes the thesis by furthering the inquiry towards its ethical implications. Far from formulating prescriptions, these implications are 'ethical' in empirical and relational senses. They are empirical, since they first learn from and with the normativity at stake in a care practice. And they are relational, since these implications are situated in an encounter: in the ways stories call us to witness and to respond. Three ethical implications open the conclusion by revisiting the three conceptual threads of the thesis: 'attachment', the potentialities of spaces, and the psychiatric care work.

The first implication elaborates the notion of 'modest attachments', of quiet intensity and enacted in various forms. These attachments are not limited to one particular sort of taste but open to many possible appreciations from different members of the group. The dispositif of care entails a play of personal and relational responses that make those appreciations vary

unpredictably over time, some growing stronger and other fading away. These modest attachments are particular in that their accomplishment is highly unpredictable. They call for a radically empirical attention to very small and unexpected occurrences, and to the conditions of their emergence.

The second implication concerns the potentialities of material spaces in a particular practice, such as in community care work. These potentialities are subtle, in several ways. First, suggestions like those of the living spaces are subtle because they are ambiguous: they don't work with straightforward propositions but remain contingent to different possible responses. Second, material spaces may combine such ambiguous potentialities with clearer clues about what to do in a place, as with different settings of activities. Third, as certain doors have shown, arrangements may also be subtle since they enable the noticing of very small occurrences in the flow of everyday events. With the transition to the new building, these subtleties were difficult to convey to deciders external to the everyday practice. This difficulty interrogates the assumption, in planning or design practices, that material spaces are passive, 'empty containers' to be filled with a new organisation by designers and users. The potentialities for modest attachments complicate and caution us about conceiving of spaces as re-fillable because, far from being inert, what these spaces *do* in the care practice is very subtle and contingent.

The third implication concerns the crafting modest attachments for institutional care. Caregivers take advantage of material spaces and the social environment while being attentive to a youth's personal responses to the care dispositif, with their affinities and disinterests. These unexpected responses shape caregivers' informal knowledge and enable them to adjust the care work accordingly. The thesis defends this 'handling of contingencies' as caregivers' attempt to spark teenagers' personal and relational responses by mediations of material spaces. This intuitive technique is vulnerable in the current psychiatric field because community work requires time, availability, and money, and hence is less favoured than mobile teams. Also, the therapeutic efficacy of modest attachments is hard to prove when facing scientific discourses in psychiatry. Caregivers' ability to handle contingencies requires watching over these dispositifs of care for the emergence of modest attachments, in a place whose materiality is not mute – not external, passive, and inert – but entails subtle potentialities.