

The Sensitive Body and the Urban Green Space: An Ethnography of the Habib Thameur Garden in Tunis

AYARI Chaima

ABSTRACT: Based on doctoral research questioning the relationship between green spaces and users in Tunis, this article proposes to explore the body as a sensitive interface in the experience of green public space. Far from being neutral or secondary, the urban body engages in a multiplicity of perceptions, emotions, and memories, which participate in the appropriation or rejection of spaces. Through the case study of the Habib Thameur Garden, this article will analyze how sensory dimensions (sounds, smells, textures, rhythms) influence the quality of the relationship between users and their urban environment. Based on qualitative research through seasonal ethnographic observation. The aim will be to show how the constantly evolving body, in its interactions with the living and its needs, can be a lever for reconciliation between the user and nature in the middle of the city. This reflection is part of a sensitive approach to urban design, attentive to the plurality of bodies and their right to a green space lived, felt and inhabited.

KEYWORDS: *Green Space, City, Sensitive Body, Appropriation*

I. INTRODUCTION

In a metropolis like Tunis, characterized by high densification and a precarious balance between urbanization, restricted mobility and the demands for nature, public green spaces occupy an ambivalent and paradoxical place. They represent spaces for breathing, memory and shelter, both neglected in urban policies and essential in the daily lives of Tunisians. The Habib Thameur Garden, which is in the center of the city, is an emblematic example among them. This former cemetery, transformed into a public park in 1957, bears witness to the layers of an urban, political and social history, while remaining today a living, sometimes conflictual space, marked by varied and irregular practices.

But what impact does this place have on the body that occupies it? How can the same space give rise to different perceptions according to the seasons, atmospheres and temporalities? And more specifically, how does the body – with its unique sensitivity – act as a detector, revealer, and potentially modulator of urban green space?

In urban planning policies, the importance of the body is frequently set aside. The user is considered as a functional, rational subject, disconnected from any situated bodily presence. In contrast to this depersonalized perspective, this article is based on a phenomenological and sensory interpretation of space. He calls on the contributions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945), David Le Breton (2015), Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) and Tim Ingold (1993), all of whom affirm that the body is the primary vector of all spatial experience. It is not at all passive; he perceives, responds, adapts, resists and remembers.

The case of the Habib Thameur Garden is not only as an urban space, but rather as a space of perception, in the sense of Jean-Paul Thibaud (2015). This means that it is considered as a place of atmosphere, intensity, convergence between matter, climate, sound, uses and subjectivities. This work aims to understand the way in which the body perceives, experiences and modifies the garden over the seasons, by revealing sensitive variations inherent in the same place, through a seasonal ethnographic observation carried out over four times of the year. It is assumed here that the garden, considered as a green space, offers an evolving and unstable bodily experience, shaped by seasonal atmospheres and the relationships between body, climate and uses. As a result, the Habib Thameur Garden is transformed into a space for observing the sensitive body in an urban environment, highlighting the tensions between presence, withdrawal, adjustment and sensory memory.

This article seeks to combine the tools of urban study, body phenomenology, and ethnographic inquiry, to offer an embodied and contextual interpretation of green public space in Tunis. The final objective is to participate in a reflection on the conditions for a reconciliation of the city, nature and the lived body.

1. The body as a sensitive interface of the urban green space

In the field of urban planning and the design of public spaces, the body is frequently considered a functional, mobile and quantifiable user. However, this simplistic approach neglects an essential aspect: that of the sensitive, embodied, affected body, which is as much traversed by space as it shapes it. The body is not limited

to occupying the urban space; he perceives it, feels it and inhabits it with an intensity of his own. It is a point of contact: between the person and the space, between oneself and others, between the past and the present.

In his book "Phenomenology of Perception", Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945) argues that consciousness is constantly linked to bodily experience, anchored in an embodied spatiality and temporality. Perception is not limited to being a simple passive capture of the external world: it represents an active engagement of the body in an environment, a way of existing in the world. It is through the body that space takes shape, value and direction. In this context, the public garden is not a neutral element, but rather a space of sensory experiences where light, materials, sounds, temperature and greenery contribute to creating a sensory relationship with the place.

David Le Breton (2015) emphasizes the importance of the relationship between perception and affect, emphasizing the sensory, emotional and symbolic aspects of the body. In the urban environment, the most basic actions – walking, sitting, breathing – are transformed into tools to reshape our relationship to space, to ourselves and to others. As Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) demonstrated in his book *Topophilia*, this embodied subjectivity also refers to memory. Attachment to a place stems from a collection of sensory and emotional experiences: the garden is then transformed into a space of tactile memory, a receptacle of memories, of reunion with oneself.

However, this ability of the body to experience is perpetually under tension in an urban environment. According to Paul Virilio (1991), the urbanity of speed, control and surveillance imposes restricted rhythms and postures on the body. Thus, green spaces can be perceived as ruptures in the urban environment, while also being mechanisms of social control. According to Bernard Andrieu (2008), who introduced the concepts of the sensory body and the environmental body, the idea of a body in permanent interaction with the surrounding elements, capable of perceiving micro-changes (shadow, wind, temperature, flux density) and responding to them in a sensitive way is defended. This approach finds a fertile echo in the phenomenology of the environment constructed by Tim Ingold (1993), who sees in the landscape not a static scene, but a dynamic canvas traversed by bodily movements. The garden is transformed into a place intertwined with temporalities, an inhabited space and not simply geometric. In the same way, Jean-Paul Thibaud (2015), through his theory of atmospheres, encourages us to consider places according to the impressions they arouse: vague intensities, perceptible nuances that influence actions, postures and feelings. In this context, the Habib Thameur Garden will not be studied as a static urban entity, but rather as a place of experience, a sensory space in perpetual movement, whose meaning is redefined through the interaction with the body. Depending on the seasons, weather conditions, the influx of visitors and the state of mind of the moment, the garden serves to highlight the perceptual variability of public space. Thus, it serves as a privileged point of observation of the sensitive urban body, through which we can understand how space, far from being constant, is perceived differently according to time, atmosphere and subjectivities.

2. Seasonal ethnography of the Habib Thameur Garden in Tunis: Significant variations in the same space

Presentation of Habib Thameur's Garden in Tunis

The Habib Thameur Garden, which is in the center of Tunis, is one of the few green spaces available in a dense urban area. This modest garden (approximately 1.5 hectares), a vestige of the colonial era (formerly the Square Gambetta), is visited daily by various individuals: walkers, workers, students, pensioners, people in a situation of exclusion.

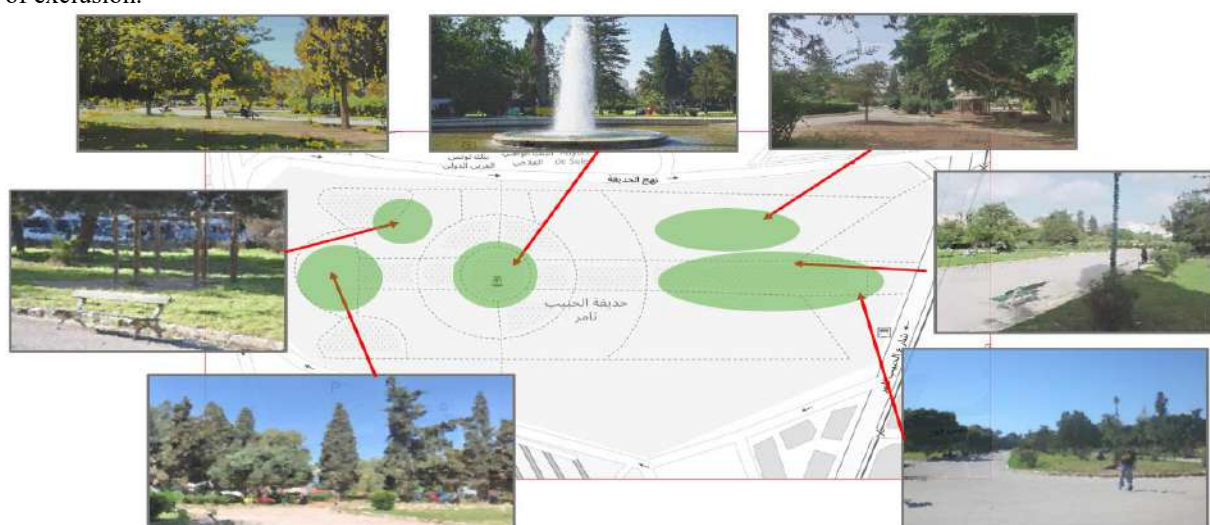


Figure 1: Overview of the garden of Habib Thameur of Tunis
the figure above offers a glimpse of the garden. The map used corresponds to a screenshot of Google Maps, as

the landscape and architectural plans are not accessible due to the wait for official authorization from the town hall.

Its strategic position, near the Avenue de Paris and the Lafayette district, makes it both a central and busy place. It is located close to major roads, making it very sensitive to city noise, but also easily accessible on foot or by public transport. This compromise between accessibility and sound saturation is characteristic of the residual gardens located in the urban centers of the southern Mediterranean.

Constituted on a relatively rigid orthogonal plane. Its straight paths delimit closed green spaces, bordered by hedges, dotted with trees with large growth (Ficus, pines, palm trees) and some more ornamental species. The city's furniture — benches, garbage cans, streetlamps — are standardized, often old, and offer little flexibility in the face of seasonal changes. Even if it is a non-recreational facility but the garden assumes a crucial function as a space for urban breathing, stopping or discreet sociability. Although formally stable, its application and atmosphere change significantly depending on the seasons, times of day, and internal microclimates. This garden therefore offers an appropriate context for studying, through the filter of the sensitive body, the perceptual and behavioral variations caused by the rhythms of the city and the environment.

II. Ethnographic observation

The ethnographic observation or direct observation carried out in the Habib Thameur Garden is based on a seasonal systematic immersion, spread over a period of one year (summer 2024/ autumn and winter 2024-2025/Spring 2025). The observation protocol was based on a grid of criteria that combines bodily practices, perceived atmospheres, users and social relationships. Each season was recorded by a series of regular routes (morning, noon, afternoon), which made it possible to observe the spatial and temporal dynamics according to the daily and seasonal cycles. To prepare sensitive maps, indicating the trajectories commonly taken, the areas of activity and the locations of the various user profiles, the data will be consolidated. The analysis also focused on the observation of changes in sensory atmospheres, new or habitual practices, as well as occupancy patterns.

Four seasons of perception: atmospheres, practices and rhythms

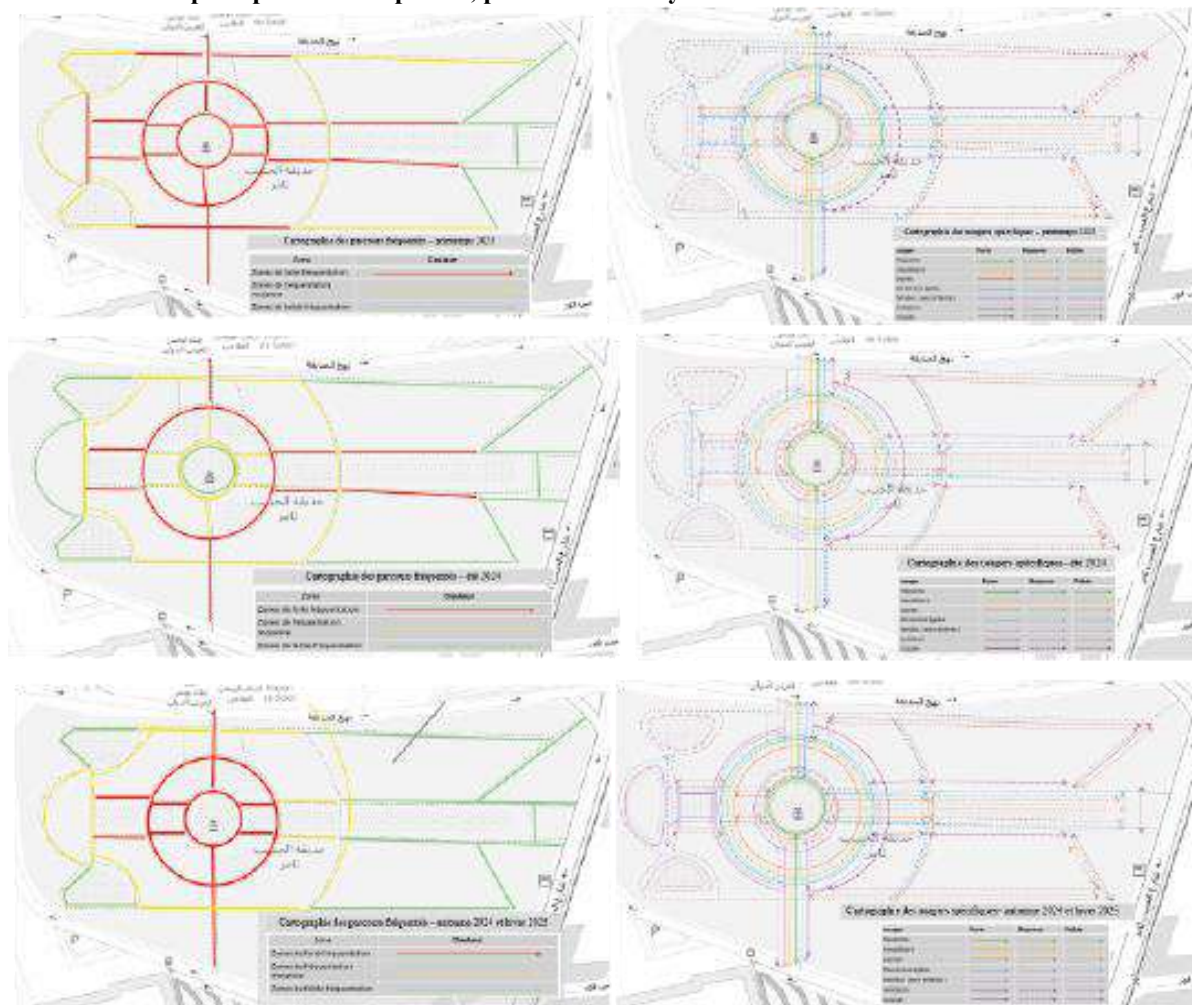


Figure 2 : Sensitive mapping of the frequentation and uses of the Habib Thameur seasonal and annual garden
This map illustrates the frequent routes, rest areas, spaces for exchange and places. The map shows the

concentration of activities in the main alleys, the existence of sub-spaces and the bodily movements of appropriation.

In spring, the garden regains plant energy that encourages strolling. Foliage develops, blooms to create small sensory landscapes, and moderate temperatures encourage a diverse and constant presence. The pace is fluid, swinging between action and stop. The promenades are transformed into spaces of quiet conviviality where pass-byes, families, elderly, young people, couples and sometimes a few tourists meet. It is a period of blossoming of the body where the light favors openness, postures are relaxed, exchanges are abundant.

On the other hand, the summer is marked by a kind of tension. Intense heat changes habits. By midday, almost the entire garden is deserted. Only the dark areas maintain some activity. Indeed, they are being transformed into strategic shelters. Attendance tends to be concentrated at the end of the day, with generally faster, targeted and functional uses. The bodies move quickly, sketching out the exposed surfaces. The sound atmosphere intensifies at the end of the day with the appearance of gangs of young people, sometimes rowdy or conflictual. The garden is therefore transformed into a polarized place, where the intensity of the currents in certain areas generates sensory saturation.

Autumn offers a return to stability. The contemplative atmosphere is created by the moderate temperatures and the golden oblique light. The garden is transformed into a haven of peace, occupied by isolated individuals or small gatherings. The bodies are dragging, leafing through, whispering in a low voice. The tempos are more moderate, the trajectories less straight. It is a season favorable to sensitive memory (Tuan, 1974): there are ritualized routines, frequent visits that reuse the space as a familiar place. Winter, in the end, is characterized by withdrawal. Attendance is considerably reduced by the cold, humidity and subdued light. Physical activities are becoming increasingly rare and are limited to specific time slots (around noon, when the light and heat are tolerable). The body tenses, the positions are static, the movements become lively. Some regions become non-functional, almost spectral. The feeling of abandonment emerges, and the garden loses a portion of its symbolic and sensory charge.

Sensory effects and bodily affects

An in-depth study of atmospheres has highlighted several key sensory elements influencing the variation in physical experience.

Firstly, light plays a structuring role. During the summer, its strength encourages escape. Bodies dodge sunny places, seek shade and limit their movements. During the winter, the scarcity of light creates a dull and uniform atmosphere that does not stimulate entertainment or strolling. On the other hand, the delicate glimmers of spring and autumn create a cocooning atmosphere, conducive to relaxation and peaceful taking possession of the place. Light becomes a means of bodily openness here, as Merleau-Ponty highlights: "To see is in a way to enter the universe of what one sees" (Phenomenology of Perception, 1945). Noise acts as an amplifier or a disruptor. It's not just background noise, it shapes behavior. The sound atmosphere of the garden, intensified during the summer, can sometimes lead to withdrawal due to sensory overload, group nuisances, screaming children, nearby motors... However, the atmosphere of introspection is favored by the relative silence of winter or the subdued sounds of autumn.

Heat plays a dual role. Indeed, it invigorates the body in spring but suffocates it in summer. Thus, several bodily activities — stopping, moving, grouping — are influenced by the internal microclimates of the garden (shaded areas, air flow, water availability). These adjustment strategies show an organism that is delicately sensitive to climatic variations, in perpetual interaction with its environment (Andrieu, 2008). The impact of human presence is also considerable in terms of excessive crowding, causing physical disorientation and loss of bearings, while prolonged emptiness can cause a certain degree of anxiety. The garden acts as a place of emotional resonance (Thibaud, 2015), where individuals interpret the symbols of others and modify their behavior accordingly.

Ultimately, vegetation plays the role of a sensory intermediary, as it regulates temperatures, noises, hues and scents. The bodily experience is much more pleasant when the vegetation is lush, diverse and vigorous. In winter, its visual and sound absence makes the space more austere and less habitable. In this way, the garden is transformed into a perceptible ecological environment (Ingold, 1993), and not just a visual background.

Bodily behaviors and appropriation strategies

Observation revealed various postures of adjustment, indicating a sensitive intelligence of the bodies. Individuals can be observed living in partial shade, perched on low walls, leaning against trees, positioned according to the light or wind. During the summer, bodies strive to avoid any prolonged contact with space: they cross it quickly, move in a straight line and seek coolness as a temporary refuge. It is a body that defends itself against space.

During the winter, the bodies become static or freeze in withdrawn attitudes. This through, hands buried in pockets, shoulders shrugged, back facing the wind. On the other hand, during spring and autumn, open postures occur such as intertwined legs, wide movements, muscle relaxation.

In addition, social exchanges can also change depending on the atmosphere. Spring stimulates conversations, joint reading and children's play. Some interactions are concentrated at certain critical points during the summer, sometimes until a conflict breaks out. Autumn encourages subtle, often silent or ritualistic exchanges. During the winter, exchanges become infrequent, characterized by a co-presence at a distance.

To conclude, we observed temporary modes of use of the garden such as picnics, gatherings to play or listen to music, transits, ritualized use of a bench or a specific corner. These practices reflect a relationship to space that is both creative and delicate, where the body finds ways to create a place despite restrictions. Here we find what Yi-Fu Tuan (1974) evokes with the concept of *topophilia*: a connection to place established by sensory memory and daily use.

3. Between stable structure and unstable perception: the garden as a space of sensitive modulation

The seasonal observation of the Habib Thameur Garden highlights a fundamental tension between the formal constancy of space and the perceptible fluctuation of the atmospheres experienced. The garden exudes a stable spatial identity throughout the year thanks to its regular layout, perpendicular paths and fixed furniture. However, this constancy is challenged by the notable fluctuations that can be observed through physical experience: clarity, sound, warmth, affluence radically change the way space is felt, occupied, and used.

This contrast between a sustainable structure and uses sensitive to variability highlights what Jean-Paul Thibaud refers to as the "plasticity of atmospheres": they are neither exclusively created by space, nor only the result of individual perceptions, but result from the co-construction between the place, the climate and the bodies in action (Thibaud, *La fabrique des ambiances*, 2015). As a result, the same space, the same row of seats can be conducive to relaxation in the spring, anxiety in the winter, or avoided in the summer — not because of its aesthetics, but because of the light reflection, lack of shade, social isolation, or extra noise that comes with it. From this perspective, the garden can no longer be considered as a simple inactive accessory, but rather as a dynamic space of embodied perception (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945). It transforms into what Tim Ingold calls a "web of relationships" (Ingold, *The Temporality of the Landscape*, 1993), a dynamic and changing space that influences and is in turn influenced by the bodies that roam it. The garden is constantly redesigned by sensory stimuli such as wind, grazing light, scattered sounds or the presence of individuals. These atmospheres are never neutral: they are imbued with emotions, memories, anticipations - they solicit the body in its historicity and sensitivity (Le Breton, *Anthropologie du corps*, 2015). The garden thus manifests itself as a device of physical and social modulation. It modifies behaviors, imposes cadences, proposes attitudes, but it is also shaped by the way users use it. It is therefore in agreement with the logic of the environment that offers opportunities, as described by Kaplan (Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature*, 1989), where natural or modified elements offer possibilities for action and adaptation. We therefore notice entities that seek shade, dodge noisy places, turn around or ritually occupy a specific corner of the garden. These subtle tactics of appropriation expose a living bodily interaction with the place, where the demarcations between imposed uses and actual practices become blurred.

This physical and intuitive interpretation of the garden offers a better understanding of urban uses beyond functional frameworks. It encourages the consideration of green space not as a static design element, but as an area of sensitive possibilities. She thus aligns herself with Bernard Andrieu's perspectives on sensory bodies, which state that the environment in turn modifies the perceptual and expressive abilities of the body (Andrieu, *Sensitive Bodies, Sensory Bodies*, 2008). The garden thus becomes a space for sensory experimentation where the body interacts, avoids, adapts or resists, depending on the present circumstances.

However, this method has limitations. By emphasizing situated perceptions and bodily rhythms, it could neglect certain structural factors such as disparities in access, gender variations in use, and problems of security or social control (Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, 1991). In addition, it is often difficult to transcribe sensory experience in terms of management or urban planning. However, its critical potential cannot be denied: by redefining the body as a central element of urban space, this approach paves the way for constructions that are more sensitive to lived realities, seasonal cycles, and unofficial appropriations. To consider the Habib Thameur Garden through the prism of the sensitive body and its seasonal changes is to consider a different interpretation of space: not as a standardized installation, but as an environment in unstable equilibrium, both constant and changing, formally structured but perceptually variable. A place whose value derives not only from its configuration, but also from its ability to accept the range of perceptions, practices, and physical conditions over time.

III. Conclusion – For a sensitive and rhythmic reading of urban space

The ethnographic examination of the Habib Thameur Garden, by adopting a seasonal perspective, has facilitated a new interrogation of the link between the body and the urban space through the sensory dimension. Based on the question of a possible discrepancy between the immutable structure of the green space and the experience lived by its users, the study revealed the fluctuating nature of urban atmospheres, perceived differently depending on the seasons, the time of day and the physical states. This contextual method, based on prolonged immersion and temporal changes, demonstrates that the uses of the same public space are neither uniform nor constant. These are regulated by sensory elements such as light, heat, sound, and population

density, which have a direct influence on bodily and emotional cycles. The garden is then transformed into a place of constant negotiation between the material context and the lived experience, where the body acts as a perceptual intermediary, adjusting its movements, directions and positions to the changing variability of the environment. With a focus on bodily rhythms, felt atmospheres, and localized methods of appropriation, this study offers a different approach to understanding urban space – not as a neutral background, but as an emotional, dynamic environment, in perpetual dialogue with the bodies that pass through it. It paves the way for a more attentive urbanism, one that would recognize the importance of lived temporalities and perceptual micro-experiences in the design and management of public spaces. To conceive of the garden, and by extension, the city, as a space to be adapted according to the seasons and the users, is to envisage an accessible, dynamic city, capable of transforming itself according to uses and points of view.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Andrieu, B. (2008). *Sensitive bodies, sensory bodies*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- [2] Ingold, T. (1993). The temporality of the landscape. *World Archaeology*, 25(2), 152–174.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.1993.9980235>
- [3] Kaplan, R., & Kaplan, S. (1989). *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Le Breton, D. (2015). *Anthropology of the Body and Modernity* (7th ed.). Paris: PUF.
- [5] Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phenomenology of perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- [6] Thibaud, J.-P. (2015). *The Making of Ambiances. A sensitive approach to urban spaces*. Geneva: MétisPresses.
- [7] Tuan, Y.-F. (1974). *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [8] Virilio, P. (1991). *Speed and Politics: Essay on Dromology*. Paris: Galileo.