

Feeling Comfortable Outdoors: A Phenomenological Understanding of Microclimate Perception in the Egyptian Context 2016

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Abstract

The pure physical approach used to characterise thermal comfort is not informative for many urban designers and landscape architects. Significantly, this theoretical approach was criticised due to the lack of consideration of human sensations and perceptions. Recent researches show an increased consideration for psychological and behavioural aspects of outdoor thermal comfort. However, the epistemological and methodological bases employed to consider human aspect raises questions which may argue the quality of the produced knowledge. On the other hand, the perceptual links between microclimate and spatial configurations studied in few researches is an interesting subject to landscape architects. Nevertheless, it remains poorly researched.

Therefore, this study takes an atypical approach to understand outdoor comfort in the Egyptian summer climate, aiming to inform the design of open spaces which people would perceive as comfortable. The study offers a possible phenomenological understanding of the inherent sense of microclimate (dis)comfort in view of phenomenological notions of embodiment and multi-sensory perception. The phenomenology of atmosphere and weather offered a theoretical perspective to approach and understand human relations to the microclimates. The methodological approach to understand the microclimate perception was inspired by Heidegger's philosophy with its emphasis upon the occurrence of understanding while being in the world, and valuing subjectivity and historicity in understanding. The researcher's prolonged touring and immersion in the microclimates was followed by investigation of 17 participants' intentional walking experiences within the microclimates.

The findings went beyond the intuitive knowledge held in mind about shade and water preferences as related to comfort in the Egyptian climate context. The study disclosed new insights into understanding outdoor comfort, originally within sunny microclimates. It was found that the microclimate perception is a perception of an atmospheric configuration, which is affected by the deep interplay of human, climate context and time. The perceived spatial physiognomies intruded with variant levels upon human

perception of (dis)comfort. This concluded design implications, which do not often support the conclusions of previous experimental studies in hot arid regions. This emphasises the differences between subjective and objective examinations of microclimate and comfort. The study concludes that the issue of evoking and promoting comfortable feelings outdoors should be given focal consideration in open spaces' design than expected impacts recommended from experimental investigations.