Chapter 3

Perception, Aesthetics, and Envelopment – Encountering Space and Materiality

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In this chapter, I will get involved in the physicality of everyday life in railway and ferry terminals. The analysis presented here will wedge itself between people and what they encounter. Feeling for the pressures and pulls that are exerted in between people and their surroundings, an analysis that traces the relations between perception and social-spatial-material constellations will be developed, offering the term envelopment as a tangible approach to understanding the ambivalences of everyday life in the city.

In this in-between space, many things are happening in a constant flow of actions and events: people, things, and other people align themselves to each other, they collide with each other, sometimes changing in this process. Seen from a very distanced perspective, these constant interactions between things and people can very well be interpreted as relations between entities of a very similar status – as opposed to hierarchical subject-object relations. This perspective offers many opportunities for research into the relations between space, materiality, and people, as is witnessed by the numerous publications which make productive use of concepts like Bruno Latour's actants (Latour 1993; Latour 2005) or Andrew Pickering's mangle of practice (Pickering 1995). In my Ph. D. thesis, I am also working with these concepts to get a better understanding of the way architecture and technology interacts with people the terminal. In this chapter, however, I will take a different perspective on these relations. I will look at the in-between spaces, but I chose to look at them from the perspective of the actors themselves. How do they experience their interactions with the place, the stuff, and with the people they encounter? How do they perceive their environment and how may these perceptions find their way into what people actually do in places like railway and ferry terminals?

Answering these questions requires both theoretical decisions and empirical 'data'. The theoretical decisions that I made will be flagged in the course of this text – one of the major routes that I steered away from has already been mentioned: actor-network theory and related concepts. What about the 'data'? I collected it during stays in terminals, both as the product of participant observation and as the product of video recordings done with a digital video camcorder. In addition, I spent and am [26] still spending a lot of time in railway stations and ferry terminals traveling between places – some unsystematic observations have been made during these occasions, and some of the pictures and video sequences have been taken spontaneously when something interesting was going on and I happened to have my camera or camcorder with me.

The video recordings are of particular value for this chapter because they allow me to see and hear one occasion repeatedly, and, as a result, analyze those fleeting moments and tiny adjustments that are happening in the in-between spaces and moments. It is during those moments and in these spaces that a quite peculiar process can be located, it is this process, called for lack of a better term envelopment, or *Einhüllung* in German, that I will discuss in this chapter.

Unease and Materiality

In this section, I will try to track the roots of the term envelopment, to allow for a critical appreciation of its possibilities and limitations. Ever since finishing my diploma thesis on the Potsdamer Platz area in Berlin (Frers 2001), I was looking for something that could grasp the unease that I feel in many urban places, some kind of name or term to grasp the feeling that grows when spending time in places like the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz in the Potsdamer Platz area, or in modern or refurbished railway stations. In my experience and in my analysis of the Potsdamer Platz it became quite clear that the perception of my surroundings, of the concrete ways in which they are designed had a distinct impact on the ways in which I felt and acted.

The search for a word to describe this feeling – a feeling that is based on a process of perception – got more and more specific during the years that followed. Pondering the experience of spending time in places that leave me with a certain unease and talking to others about this experience, it became clear that this feeling is on the one hand a very personal experience, not felt by everyone at the same place in the same way, but on the other hand it is a feeling that is experienced in a wide range of different places and experienced by different kinds of people. Intertwined with these different ways of feeling was another aspect. In situations where I felt uneasy, someone else might feel safe and comfortable. This ambivalence between unease and comfort was difficult to trace but it is at the

heart of one of the bundles of roots that merge into the term envelopment: the search for a term to describe experiences that differ from person to person but that, in their ambivalence, are shared by these individuals and that are, though different, quite specific to the places in which they are experienced.

The next bundle of roots is originating in theoretical considerations. Inspired by concepts such as Foucault's panopticism (Foucault 1995), Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), and other postmodern or poststructuralist approaches to the understanding of power, I was looking for a non-hierarchical concept of power and social control. This concept should make the productivity [27] of these non-hierarchical approaches tangible, it should allow an understanding of the role that everyone plays in the creation of social control – a kind of control that originates at many places, in many people, that may flow in one direction, disposing people to do certain things and evade other paths of action (similar to Foucault's dispositives), but that may also collapse suddenly, disappearing into historical rifts. Everyone's participation in the permanent re-creation of the world, both as an active supporter, an active 'resister', or a more or less passively involved part of the social and material production of space should be touched by this term.

Another strand that grew into the term envelopment comes from the recognition that the body plays a central role in the relations of space, materiality, and people. As Sennett demonstrates vividly in *Stone and Flesh*, the body, its corporality, and its flesh is in intimate contact with the city. Architecture is experienced by the body, pain and joy are bodily sensations that are in many ways specific to time and place, to the historically changing ways cities are built and used. Sennett's master image for the modern world is the 'passive body'. This passive body is only remotely connected to its surroundings, and for Sennett this remoteness raises a central critique of modernity:

> Lurking in the civic problems of a multi-cultural city is the moral difficulty of arousing sympathy for those who are Other. And this can only occur, I believe, by understanding why bodily pain requires a place in which it can be acknowledged [...] Such pain has a trajectory in human experience. It disorients and makes incomplete the self, defeats the desire for coherence; the body accepting pain is ready to become a civic body, sensible to the pain of another person, pains present together on the street, at last endurable – even though, in a diverse world, each person cannot explain what he or she is feeling, who he or she is, to the other. But the body can follow this civic trajectory only if it acknowledges that there is no remedy for its sufferings in the contrivings of society [...] (Sennett 1994, 376)

I will neither discuss Sennett's notion of the multi-cultural city nor the connotations to Christianity in this context, instead, I want to focus on the role of pain and the sensitivity to the pain of the other. The lack of this sensitivity is exactly what makes the comforts of modern life and the distancing or remoteness that goes along with these comforts problematic. I tried to embrace this master image of the passive body and use *passivity* as the

metaphor that should represent a central problem of contemporary urban life. However, I was justly criticized for using this term,[1] since passivity is only one side of the process that is actually happening – there is always a moment of active choice involved, even if it passes almost instantaneously and usually goes unnoticed. Deciding not to do something also requires effort, and this tiny but crucial effort might get lost if passivity is the lens through which one looks at urban life. [28]

These are the general sources or roots that grew into the concept of envelopment, growing and developing in my mind when I spent time in terminals, thinking, looking for a word that would evoke the meaning of what I felt and what was part of my unease.[2]

Aesthetics and Perception

Before spelling out what exactly is meant by the term envelopment, it should be made clear how perception – one of the basic moments of envelopment – is understood in this context and what role is played by the other element of this chapter's title: aesthetics. Aesthetics and aesthetical judgments are not understood as being striving for an ideal aesthetics, for beauty per se, or for a specific aesthetic quality such as Kant's sublime (Kant 1952). Instead, the aesthetics of our mundane, everyday surroundings are of relevance here. How do objects appear to us, how do we like their looks, their texture, their smell, sound, and mass? Design as a feature not only of particularly artistic products, but as a feature of all the things we use and interact with is of much greater significance for this work. Some things attract certain people, others are repelled by the same things. The smells of a bakery in the terminal may make your mouth water, the stench of the toilets may make you look for some other place to stay. The sunlight that is entering through the windows of a terminal's windowed ceiling may invite people to stand in its rays, shadows may make certain corners better be evaded in the late evening. The gentle curve of a bench and its wooden panels appear comfortable, while the iron grille and edgy corners of a metal seat may be perceived as cold and uninviting. These material aesthetics are the subjects of Böhme's phenomenological approach to a philosophy of design and materiality (see Böhme 1995).

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1   My thanks for this go foremost to my advisor Helmuth Berking, whose keen observations and comments are very helpful, enriching my empirical and theoretical efforts.

2   There are two other sources that probably made the concept of envelopment salient to me. One of them is Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1950), where he develops the notion of the 'blasé' attitude. The other, part of North American popular psychology, is the so-called 'personal bubble', a space that is closely attached to a person and more or less clearly delineated; if the border of this space is crossed, an intrusion of privacy is experienced and personal offense can be taken. Both of those sources have also been pointed out by the participants of the panel on which this volume is based.

Phenomenology is probably the most central tool for this analysis or, put differently, it is the lens through which the unfolding of human agency is observed here. Böhme in his "new aesthetics" focusses on the role of nature in our life and the possible implications of a phenomenology that takes our relation to nature and the ecological movement into account. For this article, perception and processes of perception are crucial, therefore I will take a different turn in phenomenology than Böhme does – a turn that is going into the direction that Merleau-Ponty takes us in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002). Perception for Merleau-Ponty is not an analytical process that sets independent entities into relation with each other, be they things for themselves or be they the sensory data that is processed by individual sensual organs like the skin, the nose, the eyes, or the ears. Instead, perception is conceived as a 'live' process. Merleau-Ponty describes perception as it is experienced by the perceiving human being, as a process that [29] always takes place in a specific context, as a process in which the relation of sensual impressions to expectations is quite intimate. These expectations, sometimes described as the horizons of perception and agency, are not just mental expectations based on evaluations of the current situation – they are produced by body and mind as one. The body for Merleau-Ponty is not restricted to the physical shell. In its corporality it encompasses both perception, thought, and physical action; and, in his later work (Merleau-Ponty and Lefort 1968), corporality extends as the flesh, or *chair* in French, from the body to its surroundings. This is the perspective that is taken here; perception is a permanent achievement in which the corporality of the perceiving being is put into an intimate and encompassing relation with its sensual environment. All senses work together, they are directed to certain horizons, which in turn can shift and change in interaction with current circumstances.

This understanding of human experience is very closely related to the way in which ethnomethodology treats human agency.[3] The emphasis on process and context is shared by both. Agency or behavior in ethnomethodology is mainly seen as an unfolding sequence of acts in which actors take different turns, aligning themselves to preceding acts and constituting in each one of their acts the social and shared world on which we rely as the more or less normal environment of our everyday life. The constituents of a sequence of actions can be tiny: in conversation analysis it has been demonstrates that pauses with a duration of significantly less than one second are treated as being meaningful by the participants of a conversation. This zooming in or blowing up of sequences of acts reveals the permanently ongoing, fine-grained adaption and mutual attention that people display to their environment, thus demonstrating social order as a process that is accomplished in real time by participants in a shared environment.

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3   The close relation of ethnomethodology to phenomenology—particularly as championed by Alfred Schütz (1967)—is present in many of ethnomethodology's production (see Maynard and Clayman 1991).

This ethnomethodologically informed attention to detail, to the fine-grainedness of human agency is the way in which I can delve into the in-between spaces and situations that happen when people align themselves with their material and spatial surroundings. Looking at the way someone will turn her or his head and shoulders for a brief moment while passing through a door, looking at short stops and phases of re-orientation, at irritations that happen when following a course of action, all of this reveals the subtle ways in which we align ourselves to our environment; at the same time, we shape our environment – depending on what we do we alter the circumstances, we make certain actions more salient to co-present others, we challenge the social order. This constant production, re-production, and challenging of social, spatial, and material order will be examined with the analytical tool that is being developed in this chapter: the term *envelopment*. Taking the perspective of the actors themselves, following the permanent and live unfolding of actions and events, inspecting subtle but powerful details, the term envelopment should make it possible to follow or re-feel (*nachfühlen* in German) [30] how social-spatial-material constellations we enter in concrete places work, and how these constellations order our everyday lives.

Building the Envelope

For the following part of this chapter, I chose one concrete situation – leaving a train at Kiel Hauptbahnhof (Kiel's main railway station, a stub terminal) – as an instance which is helpful for understanding the characteristics of envelopment as will be shown in the following. Since printed text is a linear medium, I will have to proceed in an analytical way. First, I will present the details that make up the setting which people enter when leaving this train: the material, spatial and social organization of the platform. Doing this, I will stage an interplay between text and pictures – to escape some of the linearity of a narration, to show some of the richness and complexity of the setting, and to give you as much raw stuff as I can in this context.[4]

Figure 2.1 Leaving the Train   Figure 2.2 Entering the Platform

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4   However, I do recommend visiting the website that accompanies this chapter (either search for the terms "frers" and "envelopment", or enter the URL http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~frers/perception-envelopment.html). On this website, you can watch or download the actual video sequence from which the pictures have been taken. Watching the video repeatedly, focussing on different details, scrubbing through the video, and watching select passages frame by frame helps a lot in understanding what is going on and makes it possible to check the basis of my argument.

00:07:12   00:07:15

[31] All of the pictures are still frames taken from a video sequence which I recorded on 1 September 2005. Below the pictures, you can see a time code and a marker. The first four digits of the time code give the current position in minutes and seconds, the last two digits give the number of the frame[5]. The marker shows the current position relative to the rest of the recording. Looking at the time code and the marker helps you to reconstruct the speed in which the events unfold and in which both I, wielding the digital camcorder, and others act and orient themselves in the spatial, material, and social organization of the platform.

Leaving the train, figure 2.1 shows the presence of others passing by in the sunlight outside on the platform. On the platform, in figure 2.2, captured 2.8 sec later, I turn left after leaving the train, following others, who carry bags and pull trolleys. They pass by to the left of two obstacles, one a flower pot, the other a sand storage chest. It is between these moving people and the static, solid obstacles that I have to find my way, following others who want to get to the exit of the platform.

Figure 2.3 Obstacles   Figure 2.4 Dangers

00:07:17   00:07:25

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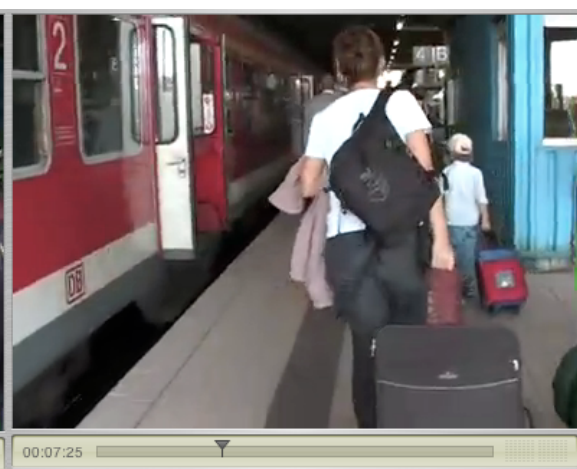
5   Since the video has been recorded in PAL format, one second consist of 24 frames.

[32] The obstacles displayed on figure 2.3 make it even more evident how much management is involved in walking down the platform. Not only is it necessary to navigate one's own body through the moving people, in case of the woman on the picture it is also necessary to pay attention to the child that accompanies her – all of this while holding a sweater and keeping the trolley case under control. The slowdown that is caused by the simultaneity of these actions contrasts with the straightforward movement of the man who is at the same height with the woman on figure 2.3, and seven seconds later is several strides further down the platform (see figure 2.4). Additionally, the information that is given on the displays (figure 2.3) might capture some attention – even though it could be hard to read against the bright sky reflecting on the glass of the display. On figures 2.1 to 2.4 it also becomes apparent that the light is changing while walking down the platform. It begins with very bright sunshine that fades in a twilight zone into until we enter the shadowed and electrically lit passage along the platform.

On figure 2.4 a few of the more immediate dangers that have to be taken into account while moving down the platform are visible: the train itself might start moving, its doors may open or close. There is a gap between the platform and the rails, opening to a space of lethal danger: the rails and the wheels of the train – the deadliness of this particular combination has been pondered by most users [33] of subway systems or railway lines. Most people will keep a significant distance between themselves and this gap.

Up to this point, I have only written about the visual and the bodily-material aspects of the setting. In the video clips, another sensual layer is added to the experience: sound. Walking down the platform, many different sounds are recorded by the camcorder; the most prominent being announcements made through the terminal's public address system and, more and more with each step that brings us down the platform, construction noise consisting of the screeching and hammering of metal working its way through other hard matter. This construction noise drowns almost all other sounds when it is at its peak.

Taken together, and not even paying particular attention to other aspects of the setting like temperature, wind, moisture, and smell, it becomes apparent that a multitude of perceptions is or can be made while the walking, rushing, standing, generally navigating through the setting is accomplished by the co-present actors in this setting. This is still not the whole experience of walking down the platform. Other thoughts cross the minds of those walking down, and one is not only attentive to the things present in the current field of sight, one is also aware of presences and actions that happen out of sight, behind your back, above the roof, or at the other side of the train. [34]

Being Enveloped

Leaving the train leads to an encounter with a specific social-spatial-material constellation. As has been described in preceding section of this chapter, this constellation is highly complex and consists of myriad impressions, all of which surround those who enter the setting almost immediately – enveloping them. This process of being enveloped by one's surroundings has many different aspects, which affect the quality of the envelope and the process of envelopment in ways that are specific to the setting that is encountered. Following is a brief list of the characteristics of the envelope:

- One of the most apparent characteristics of the envelope is the way it dampens or filters perceptions. Not everything is let through, a reduction in quantity and a qualitative shift occurs in the perception of the surroundings.
- At the same time, the envelope reduces the zone of bodily reach or activity. The envelope may be closer to the physical body of the person, limiting actions and gestures to ones that are oriented to one self, or it may stretch out further, encompassing even people and things around the person.
- The envelope can also be thicker or wider in some places than in others. It may allow perceptions concerning a wide field in front of the person but limit the perception of what is going on above or behind or on one particular side of the person.
- The border of the envelope is not a thin, clearly delimited line, it should be imagined more like a zone of different composition and thickness, ranging from quite solid and thin to wooly and wide.

As may be gathered from the last point, the term envelopment does not refer to an 'object in the real world' or a measurable process. 'Envelopment' as a process or 'the envelope' as an entity are intended as images or imaginations in the sense created by Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 2003) – these terms should be seen as walking the difficult line between playfulness and solidity, between analysis and empathy – a tool to help understanding a corporeal feeling that is difficult to name.

The character of the envelope directs attention and activities to certain areas. Since it fades out certain impressions and lets others pass, the enveloped person is focussing on certain aspects of her or his surroundings, while others escape attention. In this regard it is quite similar to the *blasé* attitude as described by Simmel (1950) – it keeps out some impressions, making the rest easier to manage – and thus has a certain functionalistic turn to it. The function that the envelope serves is the protection of the individual from distraction and sensual risk, helping the individual to focus on certain areas. In everyday life this means that the envelopment that happens when someone enters a socio-material-spatial constellation makes people not look at others, not notice certain things around them, ignoring noises and the talk of others, reducing one's sense of smell, and evading physical

contact with [35] the surroundings. Seen from the outside, a shell or capsule[6] is being put around the people that encounter a setting like the railway platform.

Enveloping Oneself

One of the problems that I had with the concept of passivity was that it made it appear as if people just let things happen to them (or to others around them), having no part in the events themselves. Accordingly, envelopment would not be a better concept if it too would only allow for reception, not for a co-production or participation in the process. This active aspect of the process of envelopment will now be put into focus.

[36] People who enter a setting envelop themselves too – the expression 'to brace myself for something' refers to a similar experience or act. Other tangible examples are the pulling together of a cloak, wearing of sunglasses, and listening to music through headphones. Generally, a central aspect of enveloping oneself is the directing of one's attention. By focussing on a specific task like leaving the train station, changing trains, or looking out for others waiting on the platform, supposedly non-relevant perceptions are not allowed to pass through. This 'active filtering' is more complex than it may sound.

Figure 2.5 Time and Orientation   Figure 2.6 Arranging Stuff

Changing trains may require simultaneous attention to time, the way from one platform to another, possible announcements regarding changes in schedule and platform, and so

6   For a long time, I was not sure whether to translate the German '*Einhüllung*' as 'encapsulation' or 'envelopment'. *Encapsulation* has the interesting connotations of white bloods cells encapsulating foreign matter in the blood or of other organic tissue growing around foreign matter in plants. The capsule is stronger than the envelope, something that grows with time. *Envelopment* has the benefit of being softer, quicker, and lighter, evoking a sense of the wrapping-around of sensual impressions is easier achieved. In addition, the term envelopment has an interesting meaning in mathematics (and, applied, in acoustics), describing curves surrounding and delimiting the amplitude of other curves or mathematical functions.

forth. Meeting others may require a very different stance if one is looking for a lover than if one is looking for a business partner or even a stranger one has never met before. Bodily posture, facial expression, and the way one feels may vary on a wide spectrum. Nonetheless, people's attention will be directed to specific things, and the envelope will be shaped accordingly. The look to the clock on figure 2.5 and the arranging of one's stuff (figure 2.6) are hints at what may occupy the attention and thus shape the envelope.

The shape, texture, and especially the circumference of the envelope will generally be influenced by the mood one is in. Being in a hurry shapes the envelope in a way that shuts out as many things as possible that (again, supposedly) have nothing to do [37] with the reaching of the goal, opening it to certain perceptions in front and keeping it dense in all other areas. Being frightened, one produces a very tight envelope, which may even feel like a clasp. However, other moods can also open up the envelope; taking one's time allows for perceptions that are usually not made, giving attention to details or aspects that would not be let through normally. An interesting case would be absent-mindedness – some vague, general attention is being paid to the surroundings, but there might also be sudden openings in the envelope.

In this chapter, I do not have the space to provide empirical furnishings for these personal aspects of the envelope using the video recordings that I have made. I am not yet sure, in how far this will be possible, although I am confident that at least some hints of the directedness of the envelope and of the enveloping effects of mood can be gleaned from paying very close attention to the video. For this more immediate context, I will have to rely on the productivity of the image evoked by the term and by the examples that I wrote down above. [38]

Passage through Envelopes

The last characteristic of the envelope that I will sketch out in this chapter is that it can consist of multiple layers – layers that are acquired and that will fall off, be shrugged off, or just slowly erode. How this moving through different kinds of envelopes can take place will again be demonstrated using stills from the video that I captured after leaving the train in Kiel.

One particularly remarkable aspect of the setting is the construction noise that has already been mentioned. Stepping out of the wagon, this noise is very much present, only to get even louder when one walks down the platform. Since the construction happens in the area at the end of the station's hall, where it opens up to the outside, the further one goes down the platform and into the hall, the less one hears the construction noise. As I argued above, for protection from the high-volume screeching and hammering an envelope is ge-

nerated, perceptions related to hearing are being reduced, a general awareness of potential hazards coming from above, and a tightening of the envelop are some of the features of an envelope that would be produced in interaction with the noise. When one walks away from the noise, it becomes less audible with every step. The process that accompanies this growth of distance could be characterized as a slow erosion of the envelope – it becomes thinner and wider until it fades away completely. At the same time, other things happen and other perceptions are made, producing their own envelopes. [39]
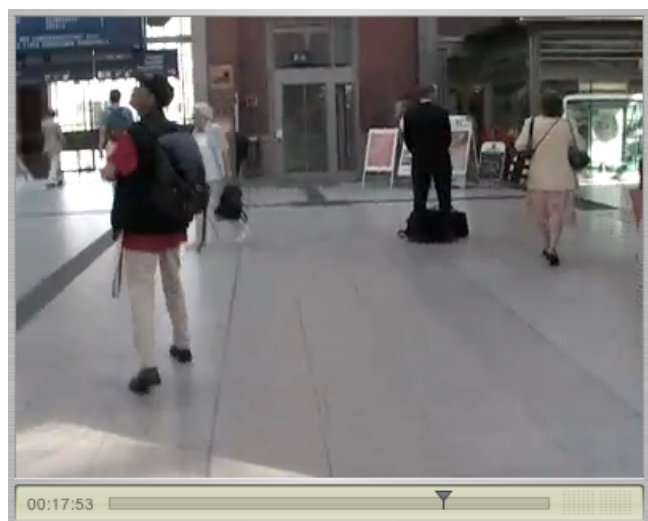
Figure 2.7 Down the Platform

Figure 2.8 End of Platform

Figure 2.9 Turning Head

[40] The change of light and the widening of accessible space are also changing the envelope's layers. This dynamic process can be perceived if one sees the figures 2.7 to 2.9 as a sequence: walking down the platform to its end (figures 2.7 and 2.8) and entering the reception hall, new perception-activities are available, grasping these some people's heads are turning from left to right (figure 2.9), the pace might be reduced or increased, looking up becomes more appealing because of the texture of the freshly renovated wooden ceiling, and because of the main display of departures that is hanging at the wall above the main entrance. At the same time it has to be decided if the seductions of the stores surrounding the main hall are being ignored or inspected. Depending on the outcome of these decisions, depending on the intensity of the bakery's smells, of the person's current mood, and on the presence and behavior of co-present others, another layer might be produced that shuts out all of these attractions, reducing the options, and leading the way to an exit or another platform.

The final sequence of video stills (figures 2.10 to 2.12) demonstrates a very remarkable change in the process of envelopment. The very bright light[7] outside the exit on figure 2.10 prepares for what is to come: a sudden change. However, more than the amount of light changes when one leaves the eastern [41] exit of Kiel's Hauptbahnhof. A completely new scenery or field of perception becomes available.

This profound change from a closed, interior space with artificial lighting, reduced extension to the sides, relatively clear options for action (standing and waiting, shopping, consuming, or passing through) to an open space with a wide horizon – in direction of the harbor limited only by the curve of the globe – , with many different things and people, a stairway that leads down into the scenery, wind that is blowing, and a change in temperature and humidity – perceiving and being part of this field causes several layers of the envelope to either change or fall off completely in a matter of seconds.

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7   The video recording shows a much stronger contrast than most people would experience with their own vision—the perceived contrast would depend on the age and the sensitivity to light, but also on the current emotional state of the person that is approaching the exit.
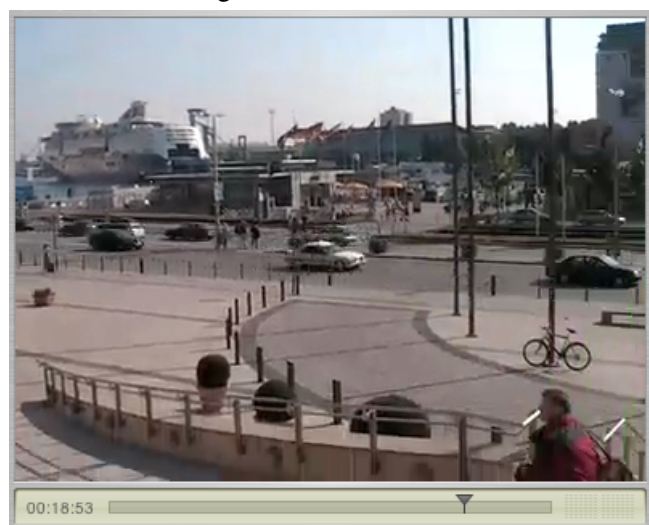
Figure 2.10 Exit

00:18:10

Figure 2.11 Outside

00:18:32

Figure 2.12 View

00:18:53

This sudden change, this shedding of layers and widening of the remaining envelope is accompanied by and displayed through behaviors that I could frequently observe at this location: people stop or pause (*innehalten* would be a proper term for this in German). They became part of a significantly different spacial-material-social constellation, requiring a reorientation on their part – a look at the time code below figures 2.11 and 2.12 shows how long this took for the man wielding the bicycle: more than 20 seconds. On the video recording, I myself stop right after passing through the exit too. I let the camera scan over the surrounding area and zoom it in on the ferry, which will depart with me for Oslo a few hours later. [42]

In itself, such a change in scenery does not necessarily cause a stop. To reiterate the point: the condition for this pausing is a change in perception, not a change in environmental factors or the sensitivity of a physical organ. If one is familiar with the setting, knows about view and weather, is in a real hurry, or otherwise preoccupied, the things one perceives might well not change so drastically, the perception focussing instead on potential hazards like wind, other people, and the stairs that have to be descended. My pausing in the video can, to some degree, be attributed to the lack of pressure that I felt at the time of recording – even though I knew the setting, knew that the harbor was outside of this exit and that the ferry would be moored to its berth, the sunlight and the attractiveness of the scenery enticed me so much that I changed my intention of producing a straight recording of the passage from the railway station to the ferry terminal – opening a gap for enjoying the view and breathing some of the coastal atmosphere.

Envelopment and Encounters – Risk and Safety

The images, the descriptions, and the small stories that I have presented in this chapter serve to show that envelopment is both a tangible and concrete, and an imagined and fleeting process. Some of the bollards to which the concept of envelopment has been tied are the concrete material, spatial, and social features of the actor's environment. The design of places, their aesthetics – relating to all of the senses – and the potential field of activities that they offer, enters an intimate relation with the people who are present in this place, who are using it and thus participate in its production. Other ties are less tangible, relating to the moods and feelings of the people that are enveloped and that envelop themselves. These ties I have tried to show too, by telling about my own feelings and reactions, and by paying close attention to the subtle adjustments displayed by others whom I have recorded, making their activities available for detailed and repeated scrutiny. Both solid and fleeting aspects of the process of envelopment have been inspected and, taken together, they produce envelopes of specific characters, relating to the design of the places which

people encounter in their everyday lives. Understanding the envelope as something that is co-produced by actors and their surroundings evades the traps inherent to concepts of passivity, enabling the analyst to untangle the different strands that are weaved into the envelope. Following, I will again list some of the potential features of envelopes – again, the list is neither exclusive nor complete. It is intended foremost as an impulse for the imagination and, to some degree, as a guide to reflection on the ways one feels when walking through everyday life, encountering people and places, acting in certain ways, not following other paths of action.

The envelopes that are produced in social-material-spatial constellations have a certain thickness, filtering or dampening perceptions more or less strongly. The envelopes also have different circumferences, they can be very wide, opening spaces for interaction, or they can sit close and tight, keeping one's attention focussed on the care for one's own corporality. The envelope is not necessarily smooth and uniformly [43] spherical. It can bulge out at certain points, be tighter in some areas that in others, be of a different texture in front than above, and so forth. The envelope does also not necessarily consist of a single sheet. It can be made up of several stacked layers, sheets which can fall off without affecting other layers that are related to different perceptions.[8] Taken together, the process of envelopment produces a dynamic and complex layering, that affects the way in which people relate to their environment. Since perceiving as it is understood by Merleau-Ponty cannot be separated from acting, the effects that the process of envelopment has on perception is also an effect on the multiple ways in which we interact with our environment. The process of envelopment is intended as one way to approach what Lefebvre has analyzed as *The Production of Space* (1991).

This is not to say, that envelopment is a clearly definable and unproblematic concept. Who envelops whom? Is the place, or the social-spatial-material setting enveloping the person? Is the person mainly enveloping him- or herself? It is difficult if not impossible to decide these questions and, for example, to locate concrete processes on a continuum from active to passive. It is also difficult to trace the feelings and moods of those who are participants of the constellations that we encounter. It is even difficult to keep track of our own feelings, spontaneous reactions, and of all the things we do – usually without being particularly aware of them at any given moment.

Nonetheless, the concept of envelopment has a lot to offer for helping to understand the ways in which our lives unfold at concrete places. In this text, I have developed envelopment as a concept, I have not yet applied it as an analytical tool. However, in this conclusion, I will try to sketch some of the perspectives it offers, perspectives from which one may be able to formulate a critique of urban places, of concrete material-spatial-social constel-

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8   It might also be interesting to think of the envelope as having folds in some places. What could these folds conceal? Where and why would they be lifted?

lations. A particular benefit of the concept of envelopment is the ambivalence that it harbors. This ambivalence makes it obvious that there is no perfect design, that the unification of places according to one particular ideal is problematic and that conflicting uses and practices should be taken into account. What is this ambivalence? On the one hand, the process of envelopment reduces the risks of everyday life. It shuts out many irritations. The envelope protects its bearer from potentially harmful involvements. It heightens the comfort, is something one could huddle into, sheltering from outside influences. It may also provide an increase in efficiency, focussing one's attention on the tasks at hand. On the other hand, however, the process of envelopment reduces one's engagement in and towards one's environment. A tight envelope will not let seductions pass. The chances of an encounter with a charming stranger, the possibility of taking pleasure in the aesthetics of some thing or event, the number of handles by which one can change and affect one's environment – all of this opportunities pass by much more easily. Coming back to the citation from *Stone and Flesh* that I gave in the section on "Unease and Materiality", the chances for [44] paying attention to the experiences, and the corporeal sufferings of others are greatly diminished by a set of strong and tight envelopes. Sympathetic involvement in one's surroundings is not easily achieved if one does not perceive the many sufferings and the many opportunities for joy or pleasure that are potentially available in one's surroundings. Following these ambivalences is, I think, taking me along the path that to an understanding of the unease that I am feeling in many places. Places like a modernized railway station offer many interesting possibilities: there are many other people, there are shops, there is a mixture of architecture, art, and advertising that may be more or less interesting or pleasant. However, certain features of these places – the way advertisements are placed, the non-availability or secure design of waiting facilities, the presence of security personnel, the focus on consumption, the way visibility is produced (Frers 2006) – work together to produce an envelope that makes managing my affairs an easy and smooth experience, but also an experience that lacks involvement, that lacks sympathy and room for encounters that may enrich the lives of their participants.

In this way, the ambivalences of the concept equal the ambivalences of everyday life in the city. Walking the line between comfort and excitement, between efficiency and leisure, between protection and risk is an everyday affair. This chapter argues that this everyday affair is based on perceptions of the aesthetics of the city and its places. In interaction with these aesthetics, with the design of places and with their uses, envelopes are generated which regulate our perceptions, thus regulating our involvement in our surroundings. The concept of envelopment is both inherently ambivalent and intended as an image or imagination, not a technical term accurately describing a measurable process. It should evoke a sense of what we experience and help understand why we do certain things, why we are

complying with specific orders that are established in space, matter, and social rules – and when and why we might find opportunities for challenging these orders.

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