

CASE STUDY ON URBAN ATMOSPHERES IN MARIBOR

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Our research explores how people living in, working in, or visiting Maribor experience different urban areas and the emotions these spaces evoke. We aim to move beyond the physical and functional aspects of cities to understand how the built and social environments shape daily urban experiences. The study focuses on “urban atmospheres” of two contrasting case studies: the Lent waterfront, designed to evoke calm, natural and positive feelings, and the Europark shopping centre, which creates a lively, consumer-driven atmosphere. By comparing these spaces, we aim to identify what makes them feel distinct and how diverse groups of people perceive them. Ultimately, our goal is to highlight the role of urban atmospheres in shaping lived experiences and to contribute insights to the field of urban studies. We emphasise the importance of designing cities that are not only functionally modern but also emotionally and sensory engaging and supportive of human well-being.

Keywords:
emotional experiences,
differences of gender,
social perceptions,
sensory environments,
urban design



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ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA URBANIH AMBIENTOV V MARIBORU

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Ključne besede:
čustvene izkušnje,
razlike med spoloma,
socialne zaznave,
senzorna okolja,
urbano načrtovanje

Študija ugotavlja, kako prebivalci, zaposleni in obiskovalci Maribora doživljajo različna urbana območja ter kakšna čustva ti prostori vzbujajo. Namen je preseči zgolj fizične in funkcionalne vidike mest ter razumeti, kako grajeno in socialno okolje oblikujeta vsakodnevne urbane izkušnje. Študija se osredotoča na »urbane ambiente« dveh kontrastnih primerov: obrežje Lenta, ki je zasnovano tako, da vzbuja mirne, naravne in pozitivne občutke, ter nakupovalno središče Europark, ki ustvarja živahen in potrošniško usmerjen ambient. S primerjavo teh prostorov želimo ugotoviti, kaj jih naredi drugačne in kako jih zaznavajo različne skupine ljudi. Končni cilj raziskave je poudariti vlogo urbanih atmosfer pri oblikovanju doživetih izkušenj ter prispevati spoznanja k področju urbanih ambientov. Poudarjamo pomen načrtovanja mest, ki niso le funkcionalno sodobna, temveč tudi čustveno in senzorno vključujoča ter podpirajo dobrobit ljudi.

1 Literature background

Atmosphere describes the character or “feel” of spaces, whether interior or exterior. Gernot Böhme (2021) describes atmospheres as “felt spaces.” Every city has its own “aura” and “aliveness” expressed in the performative flow of human activity (Hasse, 2019). In urban contexts, it refers to the sensory and affective qualities of streets, squares, or parks (Andrzejewski & Salwa, 2020). Kazig (2008) emphasises that atmospheres arise from the constant sensory connection between people and their environment. Thibaud (2003) describes them as the medium shaping these relations, while Gandy (2007) highlights their ambiguities, noting how atmosphere links space and subjectivity.

Shopping centres illustrate this interplay. Beyond consumption, they act as semi-public, social, sensory, and symbolic places. Kazig and Laroche (2024) demonstrate how malls utilise lighting, soundscapes, scents, and architecture to influence movement and engagement. Pettersen et al. (2024) conceptualise them as “third places,” particularly valued by women for social and leisure purposes, while men often approach them functionally. Such differences highlight that atmospheres are not uniform but rather mediated by factors such as gender, age, and social roles.

On the other hand, central open spaces or green areas (such as Lent and Glavni Trg in Maribor) function as “third places,” but their perception differs across user groups. While both residents and tourists often value these spaces for beauty, relaxation, and sociability, they attach distinct meanings: visitors emphasise scenery and novelty, whereas locals relate them to everyday identity and lifestyle (Ryan & Aicken, 2010). Thus, squares and parks are inclusive gathering places, yet their atmospheres remain plural, shaped by users’ backgrounds and modes of engagement.

2 Methodology

Two case studies were conducted in Maribor: the Lent waterfront and the Europark shopping centre. For the Lent location, we employed the “go-along” method (Kusenbach, 2003; Carpiano, 2009), which involves walking with participants while observing their interactions with the environment. This approach, as described by Kusenbach (2003), combines participant observation and in situ interviewing, allowing researchers to access the meanings, practices, and spatial experiences that

emerge directly from moving through places together. It emphasises the way individuals perceive, use, and emotionally relate to their surroundings in real time. This was complemented with open-ended interviews involving tourists, international students, local residents, and bar employees.

For the Europark location, we conducted short, open-ended interviews with ten young adults (five women and five men), supported by field notes and observations. Questions invited reflection on atmosphere, sensory impressions, and differences when alone or with others. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

This combination of observation and interviews provided a comparative understanding of how atmospheres are experienced socially and individually. The empirical work was based on Kazig's (2008) different applied types of urban place atmospheres, to better describe current socio-spatial ambience: (1) Atmospheres of "expansion" versus "narrowness," (2) Atmospheres of fear or unsecurity, (3) Atmospheres of transition, (4) Collective atmospheres ("quality to rest/stay"), and (5) Atmospheres of aesthetic stimulation.

3 Case studies

3.1 Lent

The Lent waterfront, stretching along the Drava River, is one of Maribor's most recognisable public spaces. The Lent waterfront underwent significant renovations as part of a project aimed at regenerating the area by 2023. The urban redevelopment project included a new landscape design featuring trees, stages for cultural events, and public playgrounds, along with new street furniture and lighting, to create a more vibrant urban space. To understand how people experience it, we interviewed approximately 10 individuals, comprising tourists, local residents, and employees working in nearby cafés and bars. Each group engaged with Lent in different ways, some temporarily, others routinely, and some professionally.

Tourists overwhelmingly described Lent as a calm, welcoming, and picturesque destination. A retired Irish couple told us, *"It feels very relaxed and lovely by the river; people are friendly."* Similarly, a group of Czech musicians praised the benches, swans, and

cleanliness, calling it “*peaceful and inviting*.” For international visitors, Lent offered openness, water views, and a sense of leisure.

Local residents, however, gave more complex accounts. One Maribor resident explained, “*It depends on which side of the river you’re on. The right side is greener and calmer, but the left side feels livelier*.” Others pointed to practical issues that shaped their everyday use, such as limited parking, disruptive construction, or the presence of swans, which tourists found charming but locals sometimes found aggressive.

Employees, such as bar workers, highlighted how their perception and spatial experience were tied to the rhythms of their work. While they appreciated the lively summer season, some described the atmosphere as “*empty in winter*” and noted that seasonal variation strongly influenced how Lent felt.

Taken together, these findings reveal that while Lent projects a generally positive and relaxed atmosphere, interpretations differ depending on whether one visits the location temporarily, lives nearby, or works there. Tourists tended to romanticise the riverside, while locals focused on functionality and liveability, and employees emphasised seasonality.

Mapped area of the atmosphere in Lent

Based on the collected responses and our personal observations, we mapped the area, as presented in Figure 1.

The main finding is the significant amount of transfer and transit occurring along the main paths of Lent. According to Kazig’s (2008) classification, this creates a *transit atmosphere* (highlighted in red, Figure 1), characterised by movement, with people walking, running, or cycling between different points of interest. The second type of atmosphere present in Lent is a *relaxing atmosphere* (indicated in green), found mainly along the left bank of the Drava River. This area is frequented by people resting, sitting, or chatting. The third atmosphere observed in Lent is a *mixed atmosphere of relaxation and consumption* (indicated in yellow). This is linked to the concentration of cafés, where music and ambience encourage people to linger and consume. Finally, two areas can be classified as *atmospheres of insecurity* (also marked in red). These are located in narrower spaces, such as under the bridge crossing the Drava and in certain confined streets.

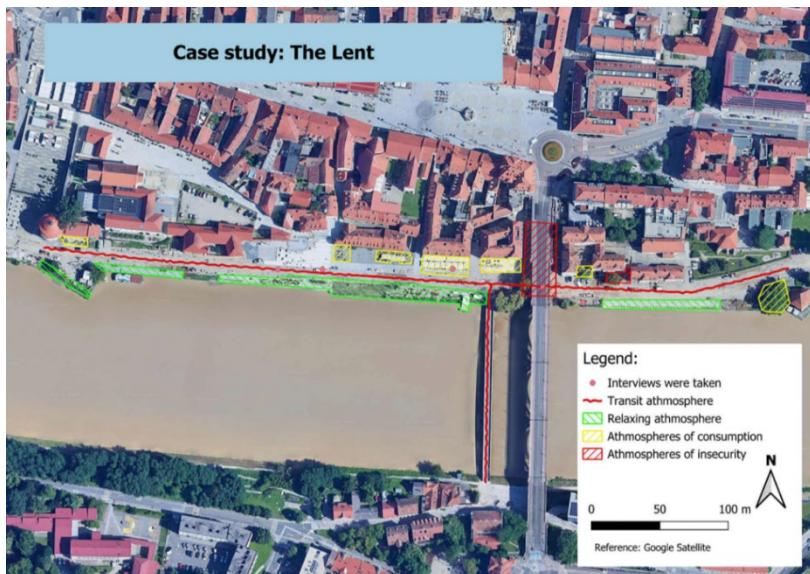


Figure 1: Map of urban atmosphere in Lent

Data: Field work (27-28/08/2025)

Authors: Donnay, F., Prokešová, Z., Svozilová, A., Tänzer, D., and Vešligaj G.

3.2 Europark

Europark, Maribor's largest shopping centre, is not only a retail hub but also a sensory and social environment. Its design actively shapes how people move, pause, and interact. Observations showed that entrances channel visitors into commercial areas, sometimes in strategic ways; for instance, a playground placed next to McDonald's appeared to "trap" families. The layout inside was disorienting at times, possibly encouraging visitors to pass by more shops.

The atmosphere varied by location and time. On the ground floor, narrow corridors and crowd density generated stress, particularly at lunchtime when music and conversations blended into an overstimulating mix (See Figure 2a). By contrast, the first floor felt brighter and calmer thanks to roof windows, wider corridors, and art displays that engaged older visitors (See Figure 2b). Shops themselves generated micro-atmospheres: darker boutiques with music encouraged immersion, while brighter stores invited quick browsing.

Interview responses highlighted subtle gender contrasts. Women frequently commented on sensory aspects. A participant from Vienna described the space as “Open, bright, I feel very fine,” while another called it “Energetic, happy, but a little bit chaotic.” Several participants noted that being alone heightened their noise sensitivity, with one commenting that she wears earphones when visiting alone. Seasonal changes were also important: ordinary days felt “basic,” while the holiday season was “vibrant and fun.”

Men more often emphasised functionality and service. One praised the “positive energy everywhere” and helpful staff, while another stressed that “shops don’t force you to come in,” appreciating a sense of relaxed navigation. Food smells, particularly from restaurants, were described as a defining sensory feature.



Figure 2a and Figure 2b:

a) Picture of the high traffic area (ground floor), b) Picture of the open and light-filled area (first floor)

Data: Field work (27-28/08/2025), authors: Prokešová, Z., Svozilová, A.

Although women tended to focus on aesthetic and emotional impressions, and men on practical aspects, practices often overlapped. Women were more often seen around beauty shops, while men were more frequently found around restaurants; however, both used the mall as a meeting and leisure space. Europark functions as

a “third place” (Pettersen et al., 2024), combining shopping with social interaction; its atmosphere is influenced by both its design and the people who bring it to life.

4 Comparison and conclusion

The two case studies demonstrate that urban atmospheres are not neutral backdrops, but rather lived experiences of place and space, shaped by both architectural design and social interaction. In Lent, the “felt space” showed the clearest contrast between tourists and locals. Tourists emphasised openness, beauty, and friendliness, framing Lent as a calming leisure space. Locals and employees, however, saw it through the lens of everyday life: parking shortages, seasonal emptiness, construction noise, or even the behaviour of swans. This illustrates how visitors may romanticise spaces that residents assess more pragmatically with different needs and visions.

In the case of Europark, differences appeared along gender lines. Women paid closer attention to light, sound, and mood, while men highlighted service, navigation, and food. The mall’s design encouraged both stress (in crowded corridors) and relaxation (in open, bright areas), showing how atmospheres are strategically orchestrated. Importantly, Europark challenged mall stereotypes as primarily women’s spaces, as men also actively used it as a meeting place.

Together, these cases demonstrate that atmosphere is co-produced by spatial design and human interpretation of the experience of place. Tourists, locals, men, and women bring distinct expectations and roles, shaping how they perceive the same environment. For planners and designers, this means that creating successful urban spaces requires more than efficiency or aesthetics. It involves recognising the emotional and social dimensions that make spaces inclusive, welcoming, and meaningful for diverse users.

In sum, Maribor’s Lent and Europark highlight the layered nature of urban atmospheres: riverside calm, commercial orchestration, and gendered perceptions, as well as leisure and routine. Atmosphere is not a fixed property but a living, negotiated experience, an insight essential for urban design that seeks to resonate with both temporary visitors and long-term inhabitants.

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