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Shrinkage and Marginalisation in Large Housing Estates: Impacts on Atmospheres in Public Spaces

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Abstract

The article focuses on the interplay of built and lived spaces and its impacts on atmospheres in public spaces using the example of large housing estates in East Germany. These neighbourhoods were affected by the demolition of vacant residential buildings and infrastructure due to shrinkage, but have recently experienced an unexpected influx of new residents, accompanied by processes of marginalisation. Thus, the estates remain "left-behind" in terms of both built and socio-economic conditions. Changes in spatial layout, infrastructure provision, and population, in turn, influence the perception of atmospheres in public spaces. Based on theoretical approaches from phenomenology, anthropology, and architecture theory, "atmospheres" as interactions between built and lived space were identified. Map-based walking research with representative groups of residents across all three neighbourhoods provided insights into residents' perceptions of place. The findings reveal how built materiality affects residents, how people give specific meanings to certain places and infrastructures and, accordingly, develop certain feelings, all together forming urban atmospheres. The results reveal case-specific and more general principles of urban atmospheres, enabling conclusions relevant to the adaptation and conversion of large housing estates into liveable and sustainable neighbourhoods.

Keywords

built and lived space; left-behind places; spatial feelings; urban regeneration

1. Introduction

Urban atmospheres play a central role in whether people feel at home and welcome in a place (Richardson, 2019). This study aims to explore urban atmospheres in so-called left-behind places—that is, areas with inadequate built and infrastructural provision where fundamental preconditions for quality of life and social participation are often lacking (Tomaney et al., 2024). Large housing estates in East German cities are exemplary "left-behind" places, as shrinkage and marginalisation were, and continue to be, constituting paradigms of the estates (Kabisch & Pössneck, 2022). Compared to those elsewhere, left-behind places are particularly segregated (Helbig, 2023) and in part stigmatised (Pinkster et al., 2020). In addition, they have challenging ownership structures that have been described as a "segregation machine" (Bernt, 2021). Since 2015, many of these estates have experienced a sudden population increase after years of shrinkage, as their vacant and affordable dwellings provided favourable arrival conditions for refugees (Wiegand & Pilz, 2023).

The research examines how urban atmospheres emerge and what effects they have through their reciprocal relationship with neighbourhood characteristics and residents. The goal is to identify future-proof courses of action for left-behind places that help create liveable conditions conducive to well-being, against the background of limited resources existing and envisaged for the development of these neighbourhoods. Thus, the article concentrates on how shrinkage and marginalisation in large housing estates influence atmospheres in public spaces and what this implies for future development strategies.

Research on urban atmospheres lacks suitable approaches that connect the built and the social. In combination with existing knowledge about the built space of neighbourhoods, the lived space will be examined with a focus on atmospheres. The basis for this is Schmitz's phenomenological concept of atmospheres, which places immediate life experience at its centre and thus differs from traditional-philosophical, neuroscientific, or psychological accounts (Schmitz, 1969).

The Schmitzian atmosphere concept provides an interpretive framework for an exploratory approach. It is grounded in bodily, situational stirrings and includes all experience-related feelings. Urban studies addresses place identity (Antonisch, 2010) and belonging (Pinkster & Loomans, 2025) as highly specific, felt connections to space. Architects use atmospheres as producible stagings (Böhme, 2013); geographers formulate city-specific atmospheres (Hasse, 2008) or the overall impressions of cities (Griffero, 2013). Our focus is on the bodily perception of everyday experiences in urban space and on being affected by them in concrete situations. From perceptions of everyday situations, we attempt to decipher the urban atmospheres they evoke.

Using large housing estates as examples, we analyse how atmospheric conditions can facilitate or impede residents' getting to know one another, the emergence of trust, and a sense of home and togetherness—building on findings that, for instance, show that a lack of places of encounter hinders contact between people (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023). Factors such as high residential turnover, cultural and ethnic diversity, and processes of marginalisation present additional challenges for living together. Moreover, the few existing publicly frequented places in the neighbourhoods are often marked by conflict and racism (El-Kayed et al., 2023).

The study is based on case studies in three neighbourhoods (Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf in the city of Schwerin, Southern Neustadt in the city of Halle, and Sandow in the city of Cottbus). These case studies

were chosen for an inter- and transdisciplinary research project investigating the challenges for the future development of large housing estates, which addresses urban planning and governance, and integration policies. The selected case studies can be described by indicators of left-behind places, such as weak social infrastructure and low civic or social participation (Royer & Leibert, 2024). Added to this are the unfavourable physical and functional conditions of East German large housing estates, such as vacant sites created by demolition, monofunctionality (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023), and residents' socio-economic situations (Grunze, 2017). Within left-behind places, the neighbourhoods under study represent a specific type characterised by large-scale urban structures, facilities thinned out by shrinkage, and the challenges associated with arrival neighbourhoods. These specificities have already been examined in classical spatial studies (StadtumMig-Projektteam, 2023). In the course of the project, close collaboration was established with local administrations and local civil society partners. In particular, three local initiatives facilitated access to specific groups of residents.

A first analytical step is to understand the perception of public spaces. To this end, various groups of residents are involved, and the entanglement of respondents and their feelings in public situations is examined in a differentiated manner. Narratives of experiences in places make it possible to interpret subjective and collective urban atmospheres. The research design and the interpretation of the data are grounded in a specific understanding of space and of the "situation": first, as the fundamental condition of human existence, and second, as a methodological approach (see Section 2). To capture urban atmospheres, we used "map-based walking research," which combines methods of "promenadology" (Burckhardt, 2006), the narration of subjective, collective, and historical narratives (Schapp, 2012), "participant observation" (Flick, 2019; Spradley, 1980), and "critical cartography" (Harley, 1989). Data collection, adapted to the specifics of groups and places, was carried out in cooperation with civil society partners. A wide range of conversations brought to light atmospheric place attachments and subjective entanglements with the neighbourhood, which were subsequently recorded. Sketches of the situations were made. All data were checked, discussed, and validated by the local partners (see Section 3). The results include both general and case-specific principles of urban atmospheres, beginning with the comparable entanglements and perceptions of the different representative groups (see Section 4). Finally, suggestions for the future development of these neighbourhoods are presented (see Section 5).

2. Theoretical Background

The following describes the study's theoretical foundation.

2.1. The Concept of Space

The concept of space is based on philosophical-anthropological, phenomenological, architectural-theoretical, and experiential-scientific foundations (Graf Dürckheim, 2005; Hahn, 1997, 2008; Plessner, 1928; Rothacker, 1982; Ströker, 1977). According to Schmitz, atmosphere takes centre stage within lived space (Schmitz, 1967, 1969, 2014). Schmitz differentiates three types of lived space:

- Bodily space (*Leibraum*) is the subjectively experienced space. It cannot be measured but can be felt. Bodily experience is situation-bound and is also shaped by a person's life history and disposition.

- Feeling space (*Gefühlsraum*) is the atmospheric space in which feelings expand in a bodily felt way. Spaciousness and constriction are central here; they describe human stirrings of constriction (mostly negative feelings such as fear, shock, disgust, pain) and expansion (mostly positive feelings such as joy, relaxation, cheerfulness).
    - Atmospheres are bodily feelings, yet for Schmitz they are not bodily in the corporeal sense. Thus, a "lump in the throat" does not mean that there is literally a lump in the throat, but only such a feeling. This also makes clear Schmitz's central distinction between *Leib* (the so-called lived body or felt body) and *Körper* (physical body). The "lump" can arise as a bodily feeling, for example, in connection with grief, speechlessness, or fear.
- The dwelling (what we would call the home) is a familiar and well-lived-in place. It is the place of security and safety (Bollnow, 2011) and constitutes the basis for self-location. For Schmitz, a favourite cafe also belongs to the dwelling.
    - The understanding of dwelling as extending beyond a physical apartment or house, and the recognition of a relationship between private and public space, is consistent with the present study. A home (dwelling) constitutes a complex of well-being that may encompass not only the private sphere, but also neighbours, the neighbourhood, and beyond (Friedrich, 2015; Friedrich & Rößler, 2023; Pinkster & Loomans, 2025).
    - Finally, the orientation of this study concerns the appropriation of a home (Friedrich, 2011; Richardson, 2019) and the engagement that results from positive attachment (Bennett, 2014).

According to Schmitz, the built space is the local space (*Ortsraum*); it corresponds to objectively describable and measurable geographical space. Earlier analyses of built or local space (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023) can and have been incorporated and interpreted in the findings presented here. In its qualities (those of its streets, parks, benches, etc.), the built or local space can influence people's everyday lives (Gehl, 1987). This relationship is also confirmed empirically, although the atmospheres in public places exhibit a far more complex logic.

2.2. The Situation: Empirical Access

The "situation" is not merely an empirical starting point; in philosophical anthropology, it is regarded as a constitutive condition of human existence, meaning the bodily, social, and spatio-temporal embeddedness of the human being (Rothacker, 1982). Rentsch describes it as a "lifeworldly ineluctable structure," which includes situationality, locality, linguisticity, spatiality, and temporality (Rentsch, 1990). Locality entails that human beings are located (Janz, 2017), yet must also locate themselves (Plessner, 1928). This includes the task of creating a home in which to stay (Hahn, 2008) and points to the entanglement of the human being with their place. In this context, the significant place stands in contrast to an empty container (Casey, 1998).

For data collection and interpretation, this implies that scholars must develop suitable methods to access feelings in public places (Brill et al., 2026) and to interpret participants' statements about their felt experiences in light of their lived realities and specific situational contexts. The situation in which human beings are affectively, actively, and interpretively entangled (Rothacker, 1982) links place as built space with lived space. It is the locus of bodily affectedness in which feelings arise and take effect as atmospheres (Schmitz, 1969; see Figure 1 in the current article).

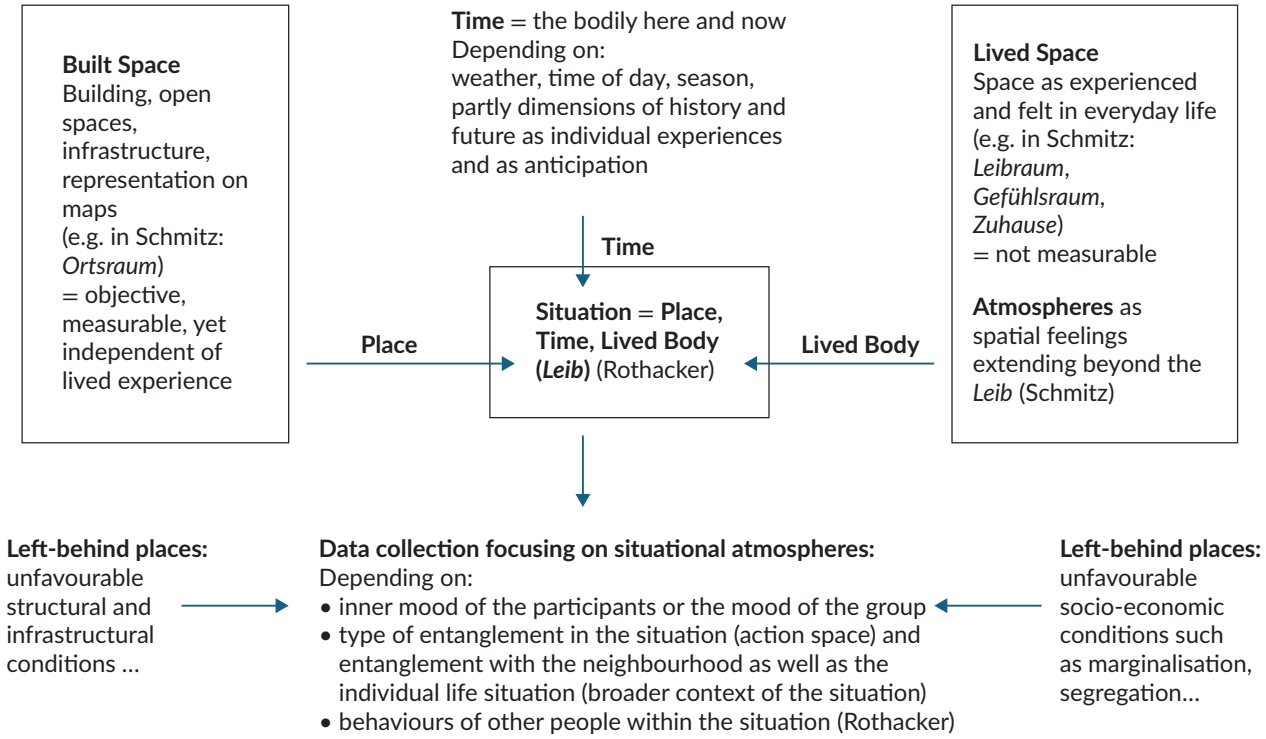

Figure 1. Investigating urban atmospheres: Theoretical framework and empirical access by means of the situation, following Schmitz (1969) and Rothacker (1982). On the relationship between place and space: The place is a part of space; it is the concrete location within the built environment where the situation is experienced.

3. Method

The following section outlines the study areas, the methods, and data collection.

3.1. Three Neighbourhoods as Case Studies

The study is based on three case studies: Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf in Schwerin, Southern Neustadt in Halle, and Sandow in Cottbus. All three large housing estates are affected by processes of shrinkage, ageing, international migration, and socio-economic disparities, which characterise their status as left-behind places (see Table 1).

In particular, the neighbourhoods in Schwerin and Halle have experienced not only substantial population decline, but also an influx of migrants, and particular refugees. The Cottbus neighbourhood shows a more balanced development, as it is centrally located next to the inner city, and the demolition of surplus buildings was carried out in other large housing estates of the city. Nevertheless, significant social upheaval has been reported due to the influx of refugees (see Table 1).

In all studied neighbourhoods, shrinkage, decay, and void are visible in terms of vacant and dilapidated buildings, demolition sites, and large wastelands (see Figure 2).

Table 1. Overview of the case studies.

City	Schwerin	Halle	Cottbus
Case study	Mueßer Holz/ Neu-Zippendorf	Southern Neustadt	Sandow
Size	2.9 km²	2.4 km²	1.7 km²
Population development	2000: 23,000 2010: 15,000 2017: 16,000 2021: 16,000 –32%	2000: 19,000 2010: 15,000 2017: 16,000 2021: 15,000 –20%	2000: 18,000 2010: 16,000 2017: 16,000 2021: 15,000 –17%
(compared to city-wide population development 2000–2021)	(–3%)	(–3%)	(–9%)
Age development	0–14 yrs: 2000: 14.4% 2020: 18.2% +65 yrs: 2000: 14.5% 2020: 23.5%	0–14 yrs: 2000: 13.8% 2020: 18.9% +65 yrs: 2000: 13.4% 2020: 22.8%	0–14 yrs: 2000: 10.1% 2020: 11.1% +65 yrs: 2000: 20.1% 2020: 36.3%
Proportion of unemployed persons among residents of working age (15–64 yrs)	18.9%	17.2%	11.2%
(compared to city-wide average, 2021)	(8.3%)	(9.1%)	(8.2%)
Percentage of population with non-German citizenship	26.7%	35.3%	10.9%
(compared to city-wide average, 2021)	(8.2%)	(10.7%)	(9.1%)

Note: The selected indicators reveal typical characteristics of left-behind places—population development and age development indicate shrinkage, proportion of unemployed persons indicates socio-economic marginalisation, and percentage of population with non-German citizenship indicates segregation. Sources: StadtumMig-Projektteam (2025); Wiegand and Pilz (2023).

Figure 2. In Schwerin Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf, entire building blocks were demolished, leaving a vast wasteland (Photo by Katja Friedrich).

3.2. Method: Map-Based Walks

The chosen method responds to the research questions and aligns with the aim of studying atmospheres. Data were collected through "map-based walks" to capture residents' place-related feelings as authentically as possible. The following conditions are relevant to selecting this method:

- Walking in public space (Burckhardt, 2006; Clark & Emmel, 2010) enables shared experience and links movement to participant observation (Flick, 2019). Researchers can directly witness moods and their changes. The research process is thus intended to reveal the entanglement of people, things, and urban space (Hultman & Cooper, 2023).
- While walking or resting, narratives emerge as real unities of meaning about connections to the neighbourhood (Pinkster, 2016; Schapp, 2012). These narratives are supplemented by entries on maps showing everyday routes, places of residence, or notable places. In addition, where participants come from, what occupations they have, whether they have children, and so on, become apparent. Such insights provide the contextualisation of individuals' statements and a "feeling into" the participants' life situations. The public environment thus becomes accessible from the experiences and perspective of those affected—a strategic building block for the later interpretation of the data.

In cooperation with local partners, three map-based walks were developed. The selection of locations and routes was based on initial research on the relationship between built and lived space in the three case study neighbourhoods (Friedrich & Rößler, 2023). Collaboration with intermediaries in the estates enabled contact with specific representative groups. The local partners proposed the specific settings, and the actions were jointly implemented by the researchers and the local partners.

The mappings followed a common scheme. At the beginning, researchers introduced the topic and the guiding questions: Where and when do you feel comfortable in your neighbourhood? Which situations/places do you avoid because you do not feel comfortable? What do you like? What do you not like? In the second part of the exercise, researchers and participants walked together through the neighbourhood. The route, length, and duration were chosen by the participants. Initially supported by maps, sites and situations were identified and collated. These maps served as orientation aids during the walks and were used afterwards to locate specific statements cartographically. The maps helped ensure that, despite language barriers, there was a shared understanding of the issues that were important to the group. Conversations and observations were recorded later. After the map-based walks concluded, local partner institution representatives validated the gathered information.

The shared experience facilitated the building of trust within the group of participants, researchers, and local partners. There is a methodological challenge not only in accessing participants such as the long-term unemployed, migrants, or primary school children, but also in the openness to speak about the sensitive topic of feelings in urban space. To encourage participation, local partners conducted awareness-raising activities and group-specific preliminary discussions before the map-based walks, during which perceptions and experiences of public space were explored.

3.3. Data Collection and Validation

In each of the three large housing estates, we collaborated with locally active civil society associations, which also acted as local partners within the research project:

- In Schwerin, data collection was organised with gardeners in a neighbourhood garden operated by AWO Soziale Dienste GmbH Westmecklenburg, a social agency.
- With the support of the Refugee Network Cottbus—a self-organised migrant association—refugee women exchanged views about life in the neighbourhood, which were collected as a data source.
- The arts-oriented association Mio e. V. enabled primary school children in Halle to participate in data collection as part of a summer academy.

Data collection took place in the partners' premises with tea and homemade biscuits. Everyone was able to say what they wanted to. In the case of children, the conversations were held outdoors in various places. Audio or video recordings were deliberately avoided in order to have an informal, honest conversation about a confidential topic with participants who are reluctant to be involved (Glimmerveen et al., 2022). Instead, notes and impressions were recorded afterwards from memory, together with sketches of the situations (see Figures 4, 5, and 6). The results were supplemented and validated by expert discussions with the local partners, who have closely monitored the groups and neighbourhoods for many years. In some cases, on-site follow-up meetings enabled a deeper engagement with individual topics and impressions.

Towards the end of the project, the results concerning urban atmospheres were presented, discussed, and validated. The events in the three case studies were very well received, with approximately 80 participants in total. Municipal integration officers, representatives from youth, social services, and urban development departments were involved. Researchers from other fields, representatives of local civil society associations, as well as other project-relevant actors, also took part.

The data collection in the three case studies differed in terms of group composition and modes of communication. It became apparent that the responses were strongly influenced by the participants' individual relationships to the settings and neighbourhoods. The three "map-based walks" can be summarised as follows:

- In Schwerin (Mueßer Holz/Neu-Zippendorf), the full day of data collection from different groups of participants took place in the garden run by a project partner and in the project coordinator's office. Information was gathered during walks, visits to local food kiosks, and conversations on the street. The roughly 25 participants—men and women of different origins, ages, and social standings—formed a heterogeneous group. Accordingly, a broad range of experiences played a role, from experiences with racism, being reported by migrants, to concerns about the development of the entire neighbourhood being raised by long-term residents.
- In Cottbus (Sandow), ten mothers and young women from Arab countries, as well as several German project staff members, took part. Conversations took place in a community house, on walks, and during a visit to the Arab market "Sindbad." The need for language translations made the exchange more difficult, but led to more intensive reflection. Due to the shorter residential duration of most of the participants, historical references were lacking. An additional workshop with Arab women took place, during which participants had opportunities to express themselves in more detail.
- The data collection in Halle (Southern Neustadt) took place as part of a two-day summer academy, with 17 child participants from the neighbourhood, and it was characterised by the children's strikingly positive perceptions. This may have been influenced by the question about favourite places. Observations confirmed a basic optimistic mood overall, but some negative topics were also raised during the walks.

3.4. Interpretation of the Data Using Example Hermeneutics

As a link between theory and method, and to derive both case-specific and generalisable principles of urban atmospheres, we use "example hermeneutics" (Hahn, 1994, 2022). This constitutes a methodological procedure that proceeds directly from concrete, vivid examples to gain general insights. Unlike abstract theory-building, moments of experience, concrete situations, descriptions, and narratives are central. Such hermeneutic examples are not mere illustrations but function as vehicles for identifying principles, in this case, of human experience. With the help of "example hermeneutics," facets of urban atmospheres and their potential for living together in neighbourhoods are worked out. The data analysis was guided by the following sequential steps:

1. Orientation on sensitising concepts: The analysis focused on specific phenomena, terms, descriptions of feelings, and spatial situations.
2. Identification of relevant terms and places: Terms such as "shame" or "fear," as well as other descriptions of emotions, were recorded. At the same time, specific places were noted—for example, places associated with well-being or unease, places longed for, or locations with special atmospheric qualities, including those situated outside the neighbourhood.
3. Identification of atmospheric indicators: Expressions that could indicate atmospheric experiences were further coded and analysed.
4. Category formation and pattern recognition: Based on the coding, categories were developed, patterns identified, and relationships revealed.

5. Analysis of public situations: In parallel with the text analysis, selected public situations were examined, which often became apparent as particularly relevant during the walks, sometimes depending on the participating groups.
6. Typology of public spaces: Within the relevant locations, specific types of public spaces were identified, reflecting different urban planning contexts.
7. Overall interpretation and pattern derivation: Drawing on urban planning foundations (from an earlier research project: Friedrich & Rößler, 2023), the qualitative data from the "map-based walks," participant observations, and documentation through sketches and photographs, relationships between places, participants, their entanglements, and atmospheric experiences were revealed according to individual and collective patterns.
8. Exemplary hermeneutics and case selection: Using exemplary hermeneutics and taking into account the particularities of the data from the three case studies and their specific conditions, representative resident groups were identified, and specific case examples were selected for an in-depth analysis.
9. Derivation of principles: After further interpretative iterations, it was possible to derive both case-specific and general principles of urban atmospheres.

4. Results: General and Case-Specific Principles of Urban Atmospheres

General as well as case-specific principles of urban atmospheres are revealed through different depths of data. The first layer of data is taken from three case studies—three large housing estates—in which, among other findings, three groups of residents can be empirically identified. People within each group are similarly entangled with their neighbourhoods as a whole and with various public situations, and thus experience them in comparable ways.

The second layer of data describes three case examples located in two different neighbourhoods. These three examples represent concrete situations and, at the same time, three urban spatial types. This article focuses on the following selection of case examples, which differ in their urbanistic features:

- a centrally located urban square (Keplerplatz in Schwerin);
- a pedestrian zone functioning as a district centre with shops, with a focus on an Arab market (in Cottbus);
- a fenced neighbourhood garden (in Schwerin).

Within these examples, a third layer of data is examined as individual cases that reveal personal entanglements. An individual case may be person-related, that is, individual or subjective, but it may also be intersubjective and point to initial group-specific findings. In this way, various interactions become apparent between perceivers and the conditions and situations of their perceptions.

4.1. Groups of Residents and Their Comparable Entanglement and Perception

The following three representative groups can be found in all three neighbourhoods:

- Long-established residents who perceive their quarter as home because of their long residential duration. They are generally positively disposed towards life there. However, they are experiencing changes: Demolition measures and increasing social segregation are perceived as burdens. Their life

situation is stable, which means their attitude towards the neighbourhood remains predominantly positive. Due to long-term entanglement, there is a close biographical connection with the entire residential area.

- Marginalised residents who primarily include German persons who have moved to the neighbourhood because of low rents or who grew up there. Many work in the low-wage sector or receive social benefits. The group is marked by multiple concerns and, in part, dissatisfaction due to, for example, unemployment, illness, poverty, or single parenthood. In comparison to other groups, they are more sensitive to negative external factors, as these intersect more strongly with their stressful life situations.
- Migrants, and in particular refugees, often live in affordable housing within the neighbourhood and usually perceive their environment positively, as they have not experienced its decay. Despite their own burdensome life circumstances, they often see the neighbourhoods as an opportunity for a new beginning. This positive feeling is, however, partly overshadowed by experiences of racism, which have varying effects depending on personal exposure.

Depending on how residents are entangled in a situation, their experience of urban atmospheres may differ markedly, as examined in greater depth in the individual cases below. Migrants are affected by racism, and among them, particularly migrant women who wear the hijab. They especially live in fear of racist attacks in public spaces and in residential buildings (El-Kayed et al., 2023). Children perceive public spaces primarily as positive spaces of movement and discovery, as they carry an inner cheerfulness and are still little aware of external stigmatisation. An important general finding is that all groups perceive nature positively and as beneficial, even though it is used in varied ways.

4.2. Effects of Left-Behind-Place Conditions on Atmospheres

With the exception of the children, all residents address the inadequate infrastructure—some directly, others more indirectly. Migrants note that large-scale demolition without subsequent new construction does not occur elsewhere. Long-established residents sense emptiness as cherished amenities have gradually disappeared over the past 25 years. Marginalised residents feel losses in the neighbourhood particularly acutely and sometimes develop feelings of envy and anger. Their individual strains amplify the effects of negative developments. When, for example, the last familiar restaurant closes, this is often experienced as a personal loss. Such changes intensify the feeling of not being valued. For people living alone, the lack of meeting places reinforces isolation and loneliness. Even if they express it differently, all adults long for appreciation. Negative quotes describing the neighbourhood include “desert, emptiness, nothing, bad path” (see Figure 3). Only the garden (see Section 4.3.3) is described positively as an “oasis,” and a kiosk for Arab food as a “home kiosk” (see Section 4.3.2). Mostly, the places of well-being mentioned lie exclusively outside the neighbourhoods.

Figure 3. A central demolition site in Schwerin is called a "desert" that cannot be filled with life (Photo by Katja Friedrich).

4.3. Case Examples That Characterise the Emergence of Urban Atmospheres

The following presents concrete situations in greater detail. Due to the limited comparable data regarding the children in Halle, descriptions below are of examples in Schwerin and Cottbus. The case examples are deliberately described from different perspectives in order to highlight the group specificity and the diversity of perceptions depending on entanglement.

4.3.1. Case Example: Keplerplatz in Schwerin

Keplerplatz in Schwerin stands for the type "square," although without the typical built density and enclosure of a classical urban square (see Figure 4). A bottleneck (there is only a single crossing over the main road to a tram stop) shapes the way it is used and perceived by the public. Kiosks and different user groups form diverse situations, and perceptions of them can be different. Examples below describe a mother and an older couple, and the situation at a kiosk that sells Arab food. The situation at the kiosk is comparable to that at the Arab market "Sindbad" in Cottbus, also described below.

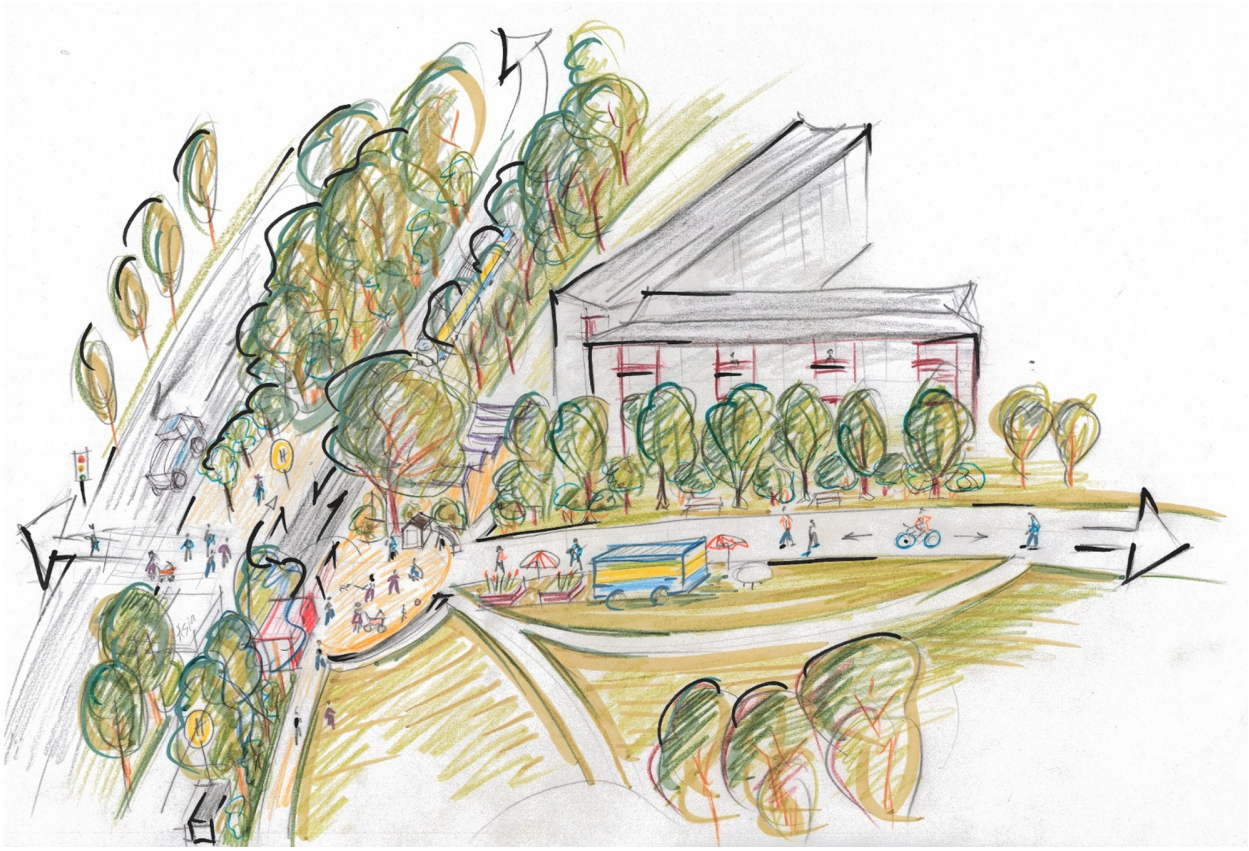

Figure 4. Keplerplatz in Schwerin Mueßer Holz: The central pedestrian zone connects a shopping centre, a tram stop, residential blocks, and a neighbourhood garden. Additional facilities such as kiosks take advantage of passing trade. Many residents use the square as a central meeting point. Different groups occupy it, and sometimes dominate it with their behaviour—such as alcohol consumption or drug use. The square is at times littered, and the police are regularly on site (Sketch by Katja Friedrich, created as part of the data collection).

4.3.1.1. Individual Case: "Disgust" of a Single Mother

This case description refers to a single mother who grew up in the neighbourhood and has experienced its development over the years. In conversation, she appears empathetic and emphasises the needs of families, in particular the provision of educational and leisure amenities. At the same time, she voices criticism of urban development, especially the disappearance of leisure facilities, which for her is linked to a feeling of cultural estrangement. For example, of a restaurant, she speaks of the loss of German dishes and of having "felt understood in that place."

The mother crosses Keplerplatz several times a day on the way to shops, the nursery, etc. When doing so, she says she is confronted with people consuming alcohol or drugs, sometimes in the presence of small children. These observations literally elicit "disgust" in her. As a result, she avoids the square, takes detours, and uses alternative tram stops, although this takes more time.

Interpretation of an urban atmosphere—situational and beyond: The mother's repeated experience of discomfort leads to a rejecting attitude towards the place. Her interpretation of the place aligns with her perception of the entire neighbourhood. Moving away seems desirable to her, but it is not feasible due to

limited resources. Insofar as the insights from data collection allow, there is currently no way to change this woman's mind; she perceives places positively only outside the neighbourhood.

4.3.1.2. Individual Case: "Shame" of an Older Couple

This case describes the view of a long-established older couple. They have lived in the neighbourhood for many years and reside in the immediate vicinity of the square, which they use regularly on the way to shops or the tram. Due to their long residential history, both feel deeply rooted in the neighbourhood and identify with their living environment. However, they are not willing to become accustomed to the nightly police operations and their flashing lights. They emphasise that the problems mostly involve German persons.

They feel shame when visitors walk through the square from the tram stop to their flat and are confronted with litter or intoxicated people. In such situations, the ambivalent side of their belonging becomes apparent: On the one hand, they identify with their neighbourhood; on the other, they clearly distance themselves from what happens in the square and from the noisy, intoxicated people there. This development saddens them and fills them with concern for the future of the quarter, whose change they perceive with increasing anxiety.

The negative effects of the square result less from its physical design than from groups of intoxicated people. Seating, shadowy corners, and busy pedestrian traffic might make such spatial appropriation easy, but they are not the main cause. Comparable problems are evident in the other case studies. In Cottbus-Sandow, for example, all three pedestrian zones are affected by harassment and racist incidents.

4.3.2. Case Example Infrastructure: Arab Markets as an Expression of "Home" in Cottbus-Sandow

The Arab food markets "Sindbad" in Sandow and the "home kiosk" at Keplerplatz in Schwerin display fresh fruit and vegetables outdoors, enlivening public space (see Figure 5). They improve local supply to the neighbourhood overall, but are particularly significant for migrant residents.

The markets are considered here from a migrant perspective. Refugee women describe the pedestrian zone in Sandow near where the market "Sindbad" is located as a "bad path," as they frequently experience racism and insults there, both within shops and outside. According to their statements, refugee women feel hated, and criticise their experiences as "hate poison for living together in the neighbourhood." This makes clear that feelings can effectively shape urban atmospheres and that this effect is group-specific.

How do infrastructures of provision become places of identification and community? At places such as markets, Arabic and Persian are spoken; products from the old country are available; people meet acquaintances or meet new people with similar backgrounds and get help. Although these provisions are not intended as places for lingering, customers make use of them as meeting areas, inside and outside.

The shop operators are engaged and supportive of the Arab community. Memories, familiar smells, and other sensory cues provide a sense of belonging. While observing participants, shifts in atmosphere were evident. Only moments earlier, on the "bad path," and then, just around the corner, the atmosphere at the Arab market "Sindbad" suddenly brightened; there was laughter, and the women felt free. One could sense that this is their everyday meeting place and part of their "home."

Figure 5. The sketch shows the centre of Sandow. The "bad path" is located between the orange arrows. Here, women feel afraid due to insults and racist attacks. The Arab market "Sindbad" is just around the corner (Sketch by Katja Friedrich, created as part of the data collection).

Interpretation of an urban atmosphere—situational and beyond: Even points of infrastructure can be atmospherically effective. This case illustrates the spatial boundaries of atmospheres, as well as of biographical references and group specificity. Bodily communication, like smiling and helpfulness, foster positive perceptions. The market in Sandow provides a protected place in which a friendly atmosphere unfolds through reciprocal communication. For the women, the Arab market functions like an island of well-being in the midst of fear.

4.3.3. Case Example: Neighbourhood Garden in Schwerin

The neighbourhood garden was initiated by a local social organisation (AWO Soziale Dienste GmbH Westmecklenburg). It represents a special type of public open space that offers diverse opportunities for use and encounter (see Figure 6).

The garden coordinator organises the allocation of plots, construction activities, and events, and is the main contact person. She helps resolve disagreements and works to build trust and stable relationships among those involved in the garden, as well as with other associations in the neighbourhood. All people feel comfortable in the neighbourhood garden and call it an "oasis."

The garden site is highly visible and, in principle, open to all interested parties. The gardeners represent a broad spectrum of the resident population—families, older people, migrants, and single persons. In addition to individual plots, areas are cultivated collectively by school classes, cooking clubs, and members of language courses. Guests are regularly welcome on open garden days, at film evenings, or harvest festivals (Rathsmann, 2025).

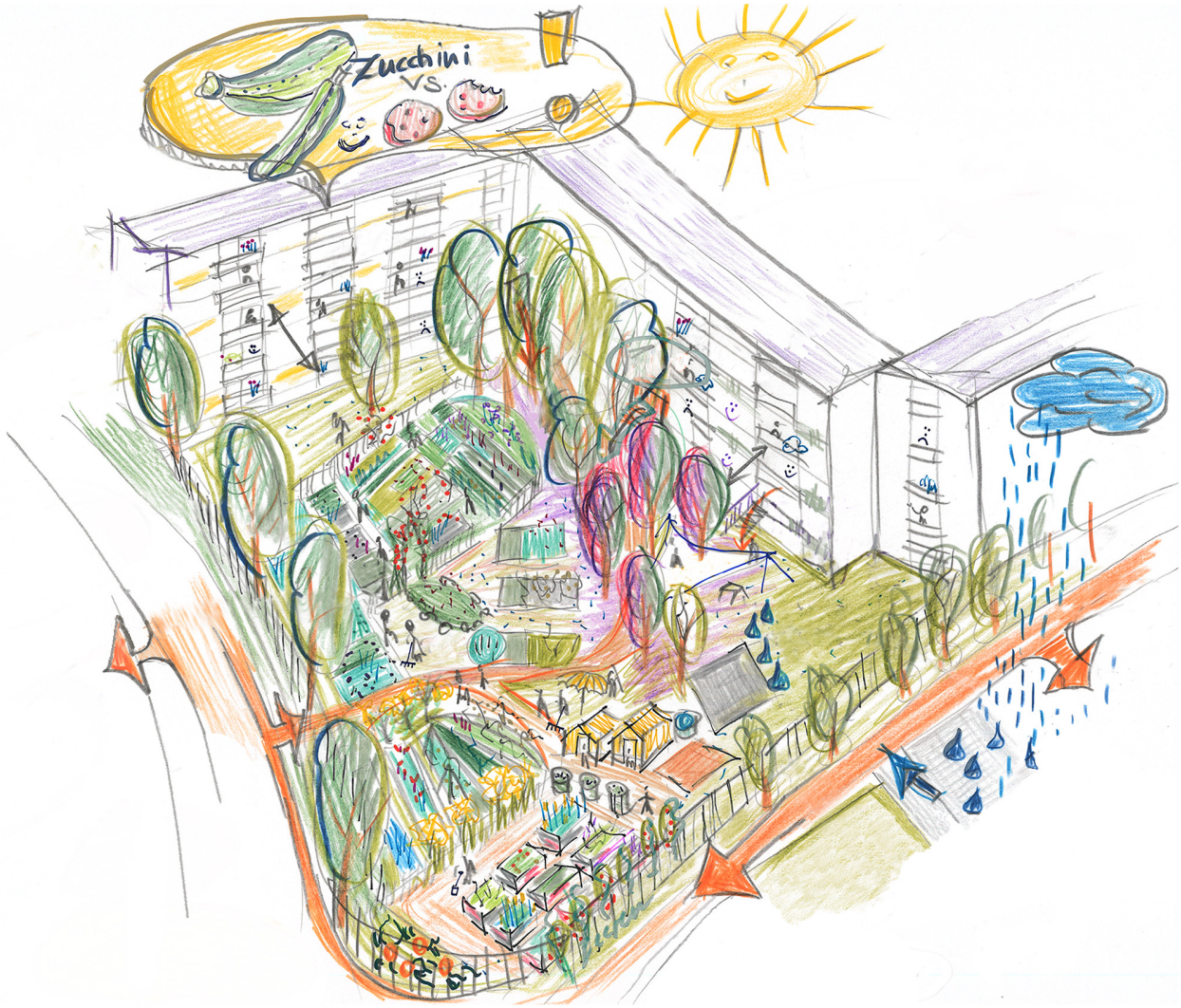

Figure 6. Neighbourhood garden in Schwerin Mueßer Holz. The sketch illustrates the diverse activities and linkages. Rainwater is collected from the roof of the neighbouring building and directed into the garden (Sketch by Katja Friedrich, created as part of the data collection).

The following sections describe how the garden is experienced and perceived by the three representative groups of residents.

4.3.3.1. Long-Established Residents

Often, older residents come to do gardening near their homes. Many previously had a distant allotment garden with a small shed, but in other cases, they had no means, strength, or willingness to travel so far. All older

gardeners are therefore glad to have a small plot and to remain meaningfully active, and people living alone are grateful for the company. Long-established residents often volunteer contributions to the garden community, such as building a children's outdoor kitchen or planting trellises for themselves or for everyone.

Everyone contributes. People appreciate one another. Some of the long-established are involved in integration tasks. They give voluntary courses for refugees. Through involvement via "temporary community work placement," close and trustful connections arise; people speak in confidence about life stories.

A particularly strong need is evident among the long-established to contribute meaningfully. After all, this is the group that is rooted here, and many are retirees with free time. Their private life situations are good apart from age-related frailty. They are warm-hearted and open towards everyone. Racism is not to be found here.

4.3.3.2. Marginalised Residents

This group uses the garden to grow fruit and vegetables and to let the children play safely (thanks to the fence). They are open and friendly towards migrants when they know them personally, e.g., through gardening together. Alongside engagement with families and children, envy of state subsidies or frustration over missing job opportunities and economic advancement can indeed be observed in this group. Everyday life in the garden makes it clear how mis- and disinformation is unmasked and prejudices against migrants are reduced. Shared activities almost incidentally create felt connections among all groups.

Initially mistrustful residents who looked down on the garden from the upper storeys of their high-rise apartment buildings became benevolent neighbours through, for example, exchanging "zucchini for cookies." Invitations to garden festivals and friendly everyday communication help foster a positive atmosphere.

4.3.3.3. Migrants and Refugees

Migrants and refugees' integration succeeds via language courses or as part of the gardening community. Once involved, most stay and use the garden. In addition to cultivation or learning, there is, above all, the opportunity to meet and converse with German people. The garden is a meeting place for residents of Arab origin, a place of well-being within the garden community, and—during festivals—an atmosphere that can radiate into the whole neighbourhood.

The garden coordinator plays a central role in building bridges and solving private as well as institutional problems. She organises water for irrigation, finds jobs for some users, connects people who might help one another, and so on. Despite all the problems that a gardening community typically has, she is appreciated for her work. Over time, she has received support as other persons take on responsibility, mediate between groups, and organise events. New capacities among residents grow, but they are not self-propelling, and volunteering alone cannot accomplish these tasks (Friedrich & Rößler, in press).

Interpretation of an urban atmosphere—situational and beyond: The garden has succeeded in bringing people out of isolation and integrating migrants. The place functions as a hub of integration, community, friendship, meaningful activity, social encounters, and conflict resolution. It is a space where nearly everything succeeds in fostering social cohesion and engagement. Nevertheless, it was on the verge of disappearing and was saved

only at the last minute. This shows that the relevance of such places is not sufficiently recognised and that places of positive identification and community are not understood as a core municipal provision, including their funding (StadtumMig-Projektteam, 2025). A utilised left-behind place such as this can encounter its limits particularly quickly because resources are scarce and the municipality has no room for manoeuvre.

The garden, as an oasis, is an important place in the neighbourhood. It succeeds in generating positive atmospheres and—through the trust, self-sufficiency, and experiences of individual gardeners and groups—in changing the urban atmosphere in the neighbourhood. A larger temporal and spatial scale is opened up, allowing further potentials to present themselves. This requires additional places that also enable encounters in winter or bad weather.

4.4. General Principles of Urban Atmospheres

Common to atmospheres is that they are palpable and partly visible (as confirmed in participant observation), they can be contagious (affective contagion), and they are pre-reflective—i.e., involuntary, non-linguistic, and often prior to any conscious interpretation. Although the operative principles are dynamic, complex, and usually non-linear, urban atmospheres are effective for living together. The following unravels some relationships; these are sketch-like insights into the specific operative forces:

- Belonging manifests at different levels—within groups (e.g., among gardeners or refugee women), in relation to infrastructures such as restaurants or shops, and to the neighbourhood itself, whether the private home, specific places such as gardens, or the entire district.
- Time acts on urban space in different ways: according to the duration of residence in the neighbourhood; according to the lifetime and personal experiences in housing history and origin; and according to the seasons and time of day. Despite the brevity of feelings at certain moments (Massumi, 2002), longer-lasting atmospheres are discernible that relate to individual places, the entire neighbourhood, and typical public situations.
- The context and locality of residents are expressed both in the concrete here-and-now and against the backdrop of long-term, multi-layered entanglement with the neighbourhood. Felt relationships to individual places, as well as deep individual or collective embeddedness in the neighbourhood, are possible.
- Inner and outer atmospheres operate on different spatial and temporal levels (see Figure 7). A person's mood, the immediate atmosphere at the study site, and the longer-term perceived neighbourhood mood influence one another. The latter can be understood as an atmosphere of a left-behind place, and as a feeling of being left behind that extends beyond concrete situations or places (Hertrich & Brenner, 2024).
- Atmospheres unfold at different speeds: Shocks often act immediately and intensely, while identity linkages or the sense of safety in a place or group usually arise through more enduring positive experiences. For example, feelings with an ambush-like character, such as anger, are different from slow feelings, such as love (Schmitz, 2019).
- Belonging, as a felt bond, is a focus of urban studies. Its ambivalence (Wright, 2015) is evident in its positive and negative effects. The feeling "we do not belong there"—as in one example concerning a visit to a theatre in the historical centre of Schwerin—can be understood as simultaneous feelings of self-exclusion and of being stigmatised. Spatial delineation and group belonging overlap.

- The perception of urban atmosphere arises through an interplay of the individual and the collective, of the private and public, and of active and passive roles. Like the appropriation of private living spaces, identification with a place does not necessarily presuppose active intervention. Habit, passive participation, or merely benevolent observation can also generate a sense of belonging (Friedrich, 2011). In private space, individual scope for design is greater, while public spaces require coordination with others and are therefore more prone to conflict.
- The importance of bodily communication is particularly evident in public space, as in "the look of another that can strike to the core" or "evil looks" (Schmitz, 1969) in connection with xenophobia. "Sharing cheerfulness" illustrates the positive potentials of affective contagion. This form of communication can influence both fear and trust. Here, the particularities of places that are bodily experienced, enabling community, identity, etc., become apparent. Bodily communication in public spaces can, however, be inhibiting as well as enabling.
- The loss of familiar places (Reckwitz, 2024)—such as the disappearance of an established restaurant—can trigger collective experiences of loss and serve as an emotional point of reference for certain groups, e.g., long-established residents or citizens of the former East Germany. Such places or infrastructures can become symbols of collective experiences, such as the East German transformation (Mau, 2019), and may evoke nostalgia for former ways of life, as well as a form of group identity.

4.5. Graphical Summary of Findings About Urban Atmospheres

Following, the findings regarding urban atmospheres are graphically summarised. The sketches were created within the framework of the data analysis and the sharpening of the findings.

Atmospheres are spatial feelings that extend beyond the boundaries of the body and display different ranges and modes of effect. A person's inner mood (whether being in love or fearful) shapes perception, yet it is more than a private, internal feeling. Joy or hate form part of embodied communication, influencing both individual well-being and social interaction (Figure 7, left side).

The urban atmospheres discussed in this article represent a further development of Schmitz's concept of atmospheres. In addition to the built environment, nature, and embodied communication between people, perception—and, in particular, the mode of entanglement with the situation at a given place—plays a crucial role. Publicness is more complex than the situation of a private dwelling. A public situation is shaped by stable conditions, such as a transport stop, as well as by temporary/unstable influences, such as the behaviour of other people (Figure 7, right side).

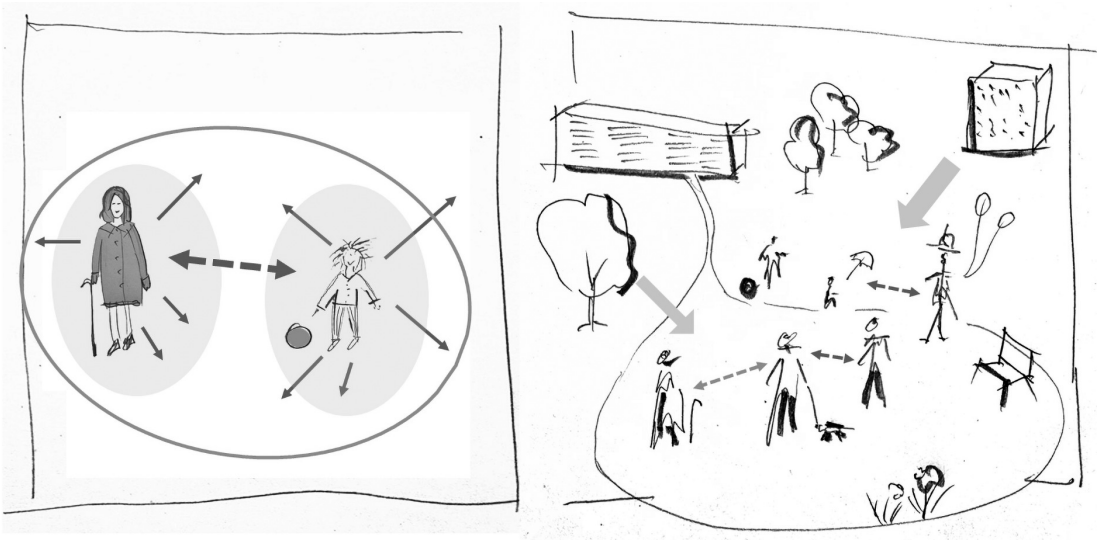

Figure 7. Left: inner individual moods influence perception; right: embodied communication in the built space (Sketches by Katja Friedrich).

Keplerplatz, as perceived by a mother, is characterised by drug use, intoxication, and litter. She experiences disgust, giving rise to a subjective negative atmosphere. She seeks to protect her children from the behaviour of certain individuals (Figure 8, left side).

At Keplerplatz, the elderly couple experiences shame in relation to friends who live elsewhere. The police are constantly called; blue lights, sirens, etc., are observed regularly. As various residents repeatedly perceive the atmosphere at the square negatively, the atmosphere solidifies into an interpretation of the place. When different people share the same feelings, a subjective atmosphere becomes intersubjective, and over time, a collective urban atmosphere emerges—perceived, however, only by those similarly entangled in it (Figure 8, right side).

Figure 8. At Keplerplatz, it becomes clear how people with similar forms of entanglement feel negative urban atmospheres (Sketches by Katja Friedrich).

In Sandow, refugee women are exposed to a particularly hostile atmosphere. Fear of racism affects refugee women and shapes their feeling of urban atmosphere. Yet even for them, there exists an island of positive feelings of home, solidarity, and friendliness (Figure 9, left side).

In Schwerin, everyone perceives the garden as an oasis. Positive experiences foster a connection to the place and to the people. Feelings of belonging, such as identity and community, develop. Such a public place creates a sense of belonging and has the potential to radiate a positive atmosphere throughout the neighbourhood (Figure 9, right side).

Figure 9. Left: group-specific urban atmospheres; right: a collectively experienced positive urban atmosphere (Sketches by Katja Friedrich).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In our study, urban atmospheres, and the multi-layered feelings they evoke, showed their effectiveness in describing how people live together. Although they are fragile and can quickly tip or even disappear, engaging with them is worthwhile, especially in left-behind places. In East German neighbourhoods, there is often astonishment that dissatisfaction persists despite investments (Faus et al., 2023). When people long for dignity and recognition, this is not necessarily tied to material prosperity (Großmann et al., 2021). Yet, a central insight is that atmospheres and appreciation can be positively influenced.

By considering the conditions for the emergence of atmospheres and identifying places of conflict as well as of positive potential, places of well-being, such as the neighbourhood garden in Schwerin Mueßer Holz, can be fostered, and spaces of fear, such as the "bad path" in Cottbus Sandow, can be countered by supporting civil society engagement.

For the generation of positive urban atmospheres, the following is central:

- bodily experienced places where well-being—as well as the experience of community or identity—is possible;
- actors such as business operators, associations, or neighbourhood managers in their functions of organising, moderating, and motivating residents.

The engagement of artists' collectives, migrant self-organisations, or coordinators of neighbourhood gardens enables places of well-being, because such actors work to moderate conflicts and oppositions, and convey confidence and hope (Friedrich & Rößler, in press). In disadvantaged areas, their work requires consistent support from the state, municipality, or private sector (e.g., property owners). The capacities and competences of residents in left-behind places are not sufficient for the magnitude of the challenges. Financial resources are needed to provide social support for migrants, and to meet the costs of the appropriation, maintenance, and use moderation of the many unused or misused sites, to avoid further disparaging feelings and disappointment (Pilz et al., 2024).

Urban spaces where fear dominates require more comprehensive and targeted responses. To combat racism and violence, a dedicated community association is currently seeking to build a resilient civil society through "community organising." So far, actors have faced much rejection and resignation (Pagel, 2025). However, considerably greater capacity is needed here to build civic courage through political education.

In places of well-being, built and lived spaces intertwine. Solutions are context- and target-group-dependent. Empirically, it was found that only experiences of nature are experienced as positive atmospheres by everyone. Belonging can be strengthened through small-scale built interventions, such as kiosks (especially in urban configurations such as large-scale housing estates), and through diverse infrastructures that enable the experience of cultural identity. Such places—even at a single point—can be starting points for collective cohesion.

In Schwerin, it became apparent that an "oasis" can grow out of "emptiness," yet turning a wasteland into a successful neighbourhood garden required multiple preconditions (Friedrich & Rößler, in press). Not every garden will become a place of cross-group community, but in this case, it is a hopeful story which demonstrates how narratives can spread positive feelings by fostering pride in what has been achieved communally.

Atmospheres are not something built, but they are essential to the feelings humans have about the places they inhabit. Empirically, it becomes evident that interpersonal feelings—whether joy or fear—clearly outweigh the effects of the built environment. Thus, pleasant experiences can make unrenovated buildings feel positive, and attractive pedestrian zones can be marked by negative urban atmospheres.

What is the potential of urban atmospheres? They offer future-oriented courses of action for the left-behind places discussed in this article and can help improve living conditions there in terms of well-being and social participation. A multi-layered, ongoing interdependence can be identified between feelings of comfort in the home and neighbourhood, belonging to places (Pinkster & Loomans, 2025) and groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), engagement with the neighbourhood (Bennett, 2014) and the community, willingness to solve challenges and problems collectively (Blokland, 2023), and personal development in the process (Bandura, 1997).

Only those who stay long-term can appropriate a home and a neighbourhood, settle in, and establish their place of belonging. Positive urban atmospheres are linked to concrete places that enable and simultaneously generate the experiences described above. The places of community—termed "thick places" (Duff, 2010)—through sport, gardening, music, etc., or of learning and integration, increase the motivation to remain in the neighbourhood and to become involved. Thus, the will to stay and the capacities among residents grow.

The garden is exemplary of a bodily experienced place that makes positive atmospheres palpable. At the same time, it provides preconditions for diverse practices, such as communication and moderation between civil society actors and residents, as well as for active engagement or simple enjoyment. Places like the Schwerin garden show how a positive force (Duff, 2010) can unfold through joint appropriation. Left-behind neighbourhoods need such places since, as the examples show, they possess different operative potentials. These are places of resonance that, in their "unavailability" and non-planability, enable successful relationships and evoke social energy (Rosa, 2016, 2020).

Large housing estates constitute a considerable proportion of the housing stock in German cities and beyond. They are therefore relevant to questions of sustainable and just urban development. These stocks are a built resource that must continue to be used—this requires the estates to be liveable, and knowledge of atmospheres can contribute to this. Beyond the left-behind places discussed here, there is a need for further research that develops a deeper spatial understanding of urban atmospheres, social energies, and places that productively engender community. Such knowledge could help improve the quality of life in all cities while helping revive available underused urban resources.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

LLMs Disclosure

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