



**FACING THE COVID-19 CRISIS: SPATIAL  
CARE IN HOSPITABLE CITIES**

**ENFRENTANDO A CRISE DA COVID-19:  
CUIDADOS ESPACIAIS EM CIDADES  
HOSPITALARES**

**Emmanuelle Cheyns**

Researcher

CIRAD, UMR MoISA, Univ Montpellier, CIHEAM-IAMM, INRAE, Institut Agro,  
IRD, Montpellier, France

[\*emmanuelle.cheyns@cirad.fr\*](mailto:emmanuelle.cheyns@cirad.fr)

## ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 health crisis was unique in that we were all vulnerable. We could transmit the virus, be carriers of it. Our relationships were affected, particularly those that took place in public spaces. Taking care of others also meant avoiding even approaching them. On the other hand, the health crisis was also a period marked by inventiveness in finding new uses of public space. The question of hospitality, which involves welcoming people and preparing the environment to suit everyone, suddenly became urgent. In this article, I discuss the results of a study conducted in two city neighborhoods that are emblematic of the way in which uses and ambiances contribute to hospitality and care. These results contribute to thinking about the positive relationship between care and space in terms of variations in the qualities of ambiance in public spaces and in familiarizing the inhabitants with gestures and uses. They also invite us to place the ambient conditions of rest in the city at the heart of care.

**KEYWORDS:** Care. City. Hospitality. Ambiance. Public space. Crisis. Covid-19

## RESUMO

A crise sanitária da Covid-19 foi única porque éramos todos vulneráveis. Poderíamos transmitir o vírus, ser portadores dele. Nossos relacionamentos foram afetados, principalmente aqueles que aconteciam em espaços públicos. Cuidar dos outros também significava evitá-los. No entanto, a crise sanitária foi também um momento de grande inventividade para novos usos do espaço público. A questão da hospitalidade, que é receber bem e preparar o ambiente para agradar a todos, foi levantada com urgência. Neste artigo desenvolvo os resultados de dois bairros e praças emblemáticos da forma como os usos e ambientes contribuíram para a hospitalidade e o cuidado. Abordo também as práticas de atenção e cuidado com os ambientes, vivenciadas e moldadas cotidianamente pelos habitantes. Esses resultados contribuem para pensar a relação positiva entre cuidado e espaço em termos de variação na qualidade das ambientações em espaços públicos e familiarização de gestos e usos.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** Cuidado. Cidade. Hospitalidade. Ambientes. Espaço público. Crise. COVID-19

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Spring 2021, Montpellier (France). It's lockdown. In a neighbourhood called 'Méditerranée' nestled behind the train station, along the route she takes on her daily walk, Annick stops at the "chat corner". Here, on the street corner, her neighbors have opened the windows that give onto their balconies so they can chat to each other. Chat leads to conversations with people passing through the neighborhood, each one stopping for a few moments along their authorized daily kilometer. Thresholds and doors open onto public spaces in a context where everything else invites residents to keep their distance from other people.

*"Around here, everyone who wanted to, went out onto their little balcony with a cup of coffee or tea. As this is a street corner, several balconies are in sight of one another. When it all started, there were only two or three of us... We did know each other, but not all that well. Then we decided to 'meet' at 11 o'clock each morning. And because I live a bit further away, I walked here from my place bringing my authorization with me and just sat here with my coffee. We covered the four corners. And how we talked! We talked about everything..."* (Commented-walk with a resident, 2021).



Figure 1. One of the facades of the 'chat corner'.  
Source: E. Cheyns/L. Metreau, 2021.

From a scientific perspective, the Covid health crisis offered an unprecedented opportunity to identify the situated practices and environments that lead to greater resilience. In cities of flows that value mobility, inhabitants not only experienced deceleration of their rhythms, but also discovered the nooks and crannies of their city, a quieter sound ambiance (conversely to overpowering "saturated" sound ambiance, Antonioli et al., 2020), experienced gestures of appropriation and care towards their neighborhood. The unprecedented urban ambiance and the change in the rhythms of our mobility opened our senses to new sensory experiences of the city. How did this new ambiance contribute to the city's hospitality and care during the pandemic?

What material arrangements and uses of public space made it possible to take care of the city and enabled these uses to find their place in the city?

These were the questions we wanted to answer in the *UrbaSens* research project implemented in 2021 in Montpellier<sup>1</sup>, a city located on the Mediterranean coast in the South of France. The method we chose was based on photographs and sound recordings made in urban situations that recount the materiality, the different kinds of ambiance and uses (Chelkoff, 2001) in five city squares, during and after lockdown. We also undertook commented walks (Thibaud, 2001) with inhabitants within the authorized radius of 1 km from their home (limited authorization given during the first lockdown), in order to recapture the experiences (ambiances, gestures, uses) of successive lockdowns.

This article presents the results concerning two out of the five neighborhoods and squares that are emblematic of the way in which uses and ambiances have contributed to hospitality and care<sup>2</sup>. I also address the practices of attention and care towards ambiances during this period, as experienced and shaped on a daily basis by the inhabitants.

## 2. MEDITERRANEAN NEIGHBORHOOD: NEW CENTRALITIES

### 2.1 Opening the thresholds

In the neighborhood called *Méditerranée*, the porosity and expansion of thresholds (windows, a garage or store threshold, among others), as well as the extension of home life into public space (including through the revegetation of sidewalks), in gestures of care, helped provide emotional comfort. The neighborhood square, which is usually occupied by terrace cafés, opened up to new centralities and gestures of care toward others and Nature. Benches (re)emerged as places to exchange greetings, to sit down and rest and take care of vulnerable people, in a square whose inhabitants multiplied familiar gestures signaling appropriation of a public space.

In this neighborhood, the people we met suffered little from the lockdown. For them, the meetings and the solidarity between neighbors, as well as new soundscapes and decelerated rhythms, were a remarkable experience.

On *Place François Jaumes* (the main square in this neighborhood), the closure of the three terrace cafés due to the health crisis restrictions, gave way to the sounds of village life. The passage of the street cleaning vehicles, the postman, delivery pushcarts, the singing of the birds punctuated and ritualized the occupation of the

<sup>1</sup> The project was funded by MSH-SUD (See more details: <https://www.mshsud.org/projets/urbasens/>).

<sup>2</sup> Data collection was done between February and July 2021 by Emmanuelle Cheyns and Lucas Metreau (Master in urban design).

square. Yves, the owner of a café called *La Planche à pain* (Breadboard), decided to stay open, to keep in touch with his regular customers by selling takeaway coffee and snacks. The six public benches were there for residents who came to take a break, drink a takeaway coffee, meet others or simply relax. During the first lockdown, even retired residents who were born in the neighborhood but had never met before, now met each other there for the first time. The “bookshelf”<sup>3</sup> and the planters placed at the foot of the acacia trees, maintained by the inhabitants themselves, became a meeting point and the scene of intrigues between the inhabitants.

In this neighborhood, lockdown was characterized by an extension of home life into public space, the exteriorization of family life into the square, into the streets, which creates bonds and reassures. Some residents came down into the square bringing their cups of coffee with them from home, sometimes in slippers. The street became an extension of the children’s playroom. One resident put up a wooden sign saying ‘Warning! Children at play!’ at the entrance to the street to warn the occasional vehicle owner to drive carefully (Figure 2). During the first lockdown, a garage threshold was used to set up a table on the sidewalk to bring neighbors together for an aperitif every evening. A piano was set up in the street for a neighborhood concert. A family put their camping table up on the sidewalk for lunch. Annick put her coffee pot out on her window sill to serve her friends.



Figure 2. A wooden road sign built by local residents warning that children are playing in the street.  
Source: E. Cheyns/L. Metreau, 2021

The climbing plants growing along sidewalks and on the facades of the houses planted by the inhabitants flourished to the point of concealing a street lamp and a stop sign (Figure 3). Building doors were left open. The sounds of life in the apartments and in the street intermingled.

<sup>3</sup> Shelves containing books put there by inhabitants for anyone to read and exchange. In French: Arbre à livres.



Figure 3. Revegetation by local inhabitants.  
Source: E. Cheyns/L. Metreau, avril 2021.

On the street named *Méditerranée* some “essential businesses” that remained open put a chair on the sidewalk in front of their doorstep so their clients could be seated while waiting.

The opening and personalization of thresholds enabled the extension of “home space” into public space, which made people feel safe thanks to the presence of others (Breveglieri, 2018; Gamal Said, 2020). The care given to Nature and to others struck the inhabitants in particular. The greening of streets and sidewalks gained momentum during successive lockdowns with concern growing for both fauna and flora.

*“The first lockdown, you couldn’t hear anything, nothing at all.*

*You don’t want noise, and when there’s no noise, you want a little noise, but not too much. We really discovered the birds in our neighborhood, which we hadn’t heard before. Thanks to the flowering, biodiversity has taken root in all the plants. There were families of birds there that we hadn’t heard before. But as we could only hear them, it became a real topic of conversation, and a subject for walks too, because we went to see where there were birds.*

*To discover the birds, we had to get out a bit early in the morning. We had time, that’s all we had to do. Now we’ve identified places where we’re very careful. We’re careful. We say to ourselves: “Oh yes, there are birds there. I’m not cutting too much because they’ve settled in. And we’re careful when we prune”. We were the ones who created this vegetation. We hadn’t understood everything. We hadn’t understood that there were living creatures in the vegetation. Magnificent!” (Commented-walk with a resident, 2021).*

Public benches in the square recovered their central role as a place where we get news about regulars who happen to be absent, but also keep ourselves informed about vulnerable people, for whom taking a break on these benches became a ritual. The fact people were opening thresholds led residents to check on those who had not opened their shutters. Likewise, food solidarity became anchored in thresholds. Neighbors treated each other to meals during the lockdown, which was often an excuse to exchange some meals through the windows and get news of and care for others. The “chat corner”, which began on a couple of balconies on a street corner, was also the starting point of a food supply initiative to help students.

## 2.2 Making public benches visible

I was particularly interested in the benches on *Place François Jaumes*. During the lockdown, the benches in this square were occupied starting in the early morning; they became the focal point of the square. The benches were used for reading, sunbathing, working, making a phone call, resting, and meeting others: a place for local residents to get together in the morning for a coffee break, with a cup of coffee brought from home, and at midday for lunch. A place to exchange greetings, to get news about people who aren't there. A place where vulnerable people can be cared for, and where older people can sit down and take part in public life.



Figure 4. Public benches Place François Jaumes during the lockdown.  
Source: E. Cheyns/L. Metreau, 2021.

The benches let you choose between sun and shade, one bench allows you to catch the first rays of spring sunshine, another to sit under the filtered shade of an acacia tree, yet another is close to a wall that is still cool at midday when the sun is getting stronger. The benches also face one another, but are sufficiently far apart that you have to raise your voice a little, speak just loudly enough so that even casual passers-by feel free to join the conversation, which is obviously not intimate.

Benches are also places where you can hear sounds you weren't aware of before the lockdown. The chirping of birds perched on the branches of the acacia trees, the sound of the postman closing a door, the sound of a regular customer entering the *Planche à pain* to pick up a coffee, of a delivery cart being pushed by hand to a business in *Méditerranée* street, the sounds of ephemeral conversations of passers-by crossing the square and of those gathered in front of the "bookshelf", the sound of a child's scooter.

After May 19, when the terraces on the square opened again, these same benches would be deserted in the lunch hour, because the terrace cafés attract a considerable number of new passing clientele, they occupy the physical and sound space, and



overlook the benches. Nevertheless, the experience of lockdown left its mark. A year later, local residents were still coming there, early or later in the day, bringing small folding camping chairs to form a square with two facing benches to sit and have a coffee or an aperitif with friends and neighbors. Similarly, the residents are still trying to keep the bookshelf and communal planters on the square alive; they have negotiated to keep a space free in front of the bookshelf, a space not to be encroached upon by tables belonging to the terrace cafés, to enable continued free use of the square. What counts is the variety of uses of the public square, the free occupation of the space, and taking care of vulnerable people.

### 3. PLACES THAT BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

The third lockdown was also characterized by reoccupation of places whose hospitable atmosphere invites people to get together, to ‘vibrate together’. St Roch square and the steps of church are shaped like an amphitheater and provided a unique place for people to meet and rest. Its uniqueness is due to the profound modification of the former uses and ambiances and thanks to design of the physical environment that is both enveloping and resonant.

The steps of the Saint Roch church are emblematic of the period when groups of people formed and reformed, when public spaces were freely appropriated, where the shapes and atmospheres of the place become hospitable. In April-May 2021, beginning at noon, the church steps were occupied by people who gathered to have lunch, read, get some fresh air, nap, listen to music, people watch, play chess, rest, meet.



Figure 5. Lunch and rest time during lockdown on the steps of Saint Roch church  
Source: E. Cheyns, 2021.

As the steps form an amphitheater, they allow a reciprocal gaze between the “spectators” on the steps and “passers-by” in the forecourt, between those who stop and rest and those who keep moving. The usual hubbub that reigned in the terrace cafés on the forecourt and in the streets nearby, had given way to the sounds of a lived-in place: the sound of someone playing a piano in an apartment, postmen making their deliveries, a building door quietly closing, conversations on the steps, the sound of construction work underway in an apartment on *rue des Sœurs Noires*, the cooing of pigeons, the passing of a bicycle, church bells. The sound effect of resonance (Augoyard & Torgue, 2006) of the many conversations on the steps amplifies the vibratory atmosphere. More than public intimacy, the place responds to a fundamental need for public encounter, to “vibrate together”, in this time of “social distancing”.



Initially arranged in groups dispersed across several levels of the steps, which function as stands, the groups merge as the steps fill up, favoring chance encounters. The place is emblematic of a sense of shared community: *“We don’t really know who’s in the group with whom, but we are all looking in the same direction”*. For some, the steps help get through the stressful situation caused by lockdown and provide a *“dose of normality”*. For others, it is a demonstration of micro-resistance to body guidance. Face masks remain in people’s bags, people feel free to sit on non-normative public seating. All around the streets are quiet, all the café-restaurants are closed. As time passes, bodies relax back, supported by their forearms, feet are bare, some people simply lie down on a step for a nap. The sound ambiance starts to fade at 3 o’clock, crescendos again at 5 and continues until curfew, aperitif time. This is when the sun’s rays on the steps shift and the users of the square follow its movement to profit from the last rays of the day.

The users of the square feel safe enough to lie down and take a nap on one of the lowest steps near the forecourt (Figure 6). Bringing along a pet bird, a home-brewed mug of coffee, slipping off one’s shoes, relaxing, extending the lunch break (have a siesta, play games, watch passers-by aimlessly crossing the square), are signs of ease and of feeling comfortable plus the sense of security users felt there during the lockdowns.



Figure 6. Ease during rest time, on the steps of Saint Roch church during lockdown.  
Source: E. Cheyns/L. Metreau, 2021.

Before and after the lockdowns, the center of energy was focused on the forecourt and the nearby streets with their many terrace cafés, with another type of occupation. Following the lockdown, a few passers-by still dropped by in their lunch break to pick up a takeaway meal, but they moved more quickly, and were fewer in number. The artisans’ vans stayed parked at the foot of the steps for several hours, while delivery men on bicycles or scooters waited for orders.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The two neighborhoods recount the effects of sound de-saturation and the slowing down of mobility, as well as the wide variety of uses: the effect is to open up the space to encounters and care.

These observations contribute to thinking about the positive relationship between care and space in terms of variation in the quality of ambiances in public spaces and familiarization with gestures and uses. They also invite us to place the ambient conditions of rest in the city at the heart of care.

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# SENSORY EXPLORATIONS

AMBIANCES IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Mohammed Boubezari

Cristiane Rose Duarte

Ethel Pinheiro

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