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Sensorial Design as a Mediating Practice in Leisure Events: Atmospheres of Engagement at the Boom Festival in Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Leisure spaces, particularly transformational festivals, function as civic arenas where political and social discourse unfold through shared atmospheres. Recognizing these as multi-sensorial constructs integrating perceptions of space, culture, and philosophies of life, this article examines the Boom Festival as a case study to analyze how its inter-subjective atmosphere fosters shared emotional experiences, enabling a distinct style of political engagement. Adopting an ethnohistorical and sensorial ethnographic approach, based on participant observation from 2010 to 2024, this study illuminates how bodily experiences and discourses interact to shape the festival's ideological and experiential landscape. Findings reveal that Boom's curated environment acts as a performative space where spatial and sensory strategies articulate forms of alterity.

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Introduction

The notion of leisure is neither “innocent” nor exempt from power relations. Instead, it is embedded in the same social and political forces that shape other aspects of social life (Wearing et al., 1994). Leisure can play a significant role in resisting, redistributing, or overturning dominant power structures in ways that contribute to human emancipation and social justice (Hemingway, 1999).

Thus, the idea of leisure as a context for social change underpins two current lines of scholarship. The first is leisure as resistance (Sharpe, 2008). Although festivals are generally seen as social gatherings for celebration or thanksgiving, they have long been linked to resistance and social protest (Waterman, 1998). As Turner (1998) noted, festivals represent “antistructural” spaces where dominant social relations are inverted or suspended. Therefore, festivals can serve as opportunities for groups to claim cultural space, challenge dominant ideologies, and bring marginalized issues to the

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forefront, particularly when an event centers around a culture or identity that is marginalized within the dominant culture (Kates & Belk, 2001).

The second line of scholarship explores how leisure can function as a social space for individuals to organize, deliberate, identify with, or otherwise engage in civic and political life (Jackson & Burton, 1999). Leisure events are inherently political, often expressing ideological conflicts that favor specific social interests while marginalizing others (Jackson, 1988). Such events can act as catalysts for building trust, mutual support, and shared identity (D'Andrea, 2006; Duffy et al., 2011; Maffesoli, 2006; Siročić, 2025). As Kearns and Forrest (2000) pointed out, these dynamics can produce a “spill-over effect,” where social cohesion at a meso level influences, or spills over into, broader society.

Building on this, it becomes crucial to consider how the atmosphere of leisure events mediates and reinforces the underlying ideological frameworks through which participants experience and interpret them. Atmosphere does not merely envelop an event; it actively conditions how meanings are felt, shared, and contested within that space (Degen & Rose, 2012). An atmosphere is an entity in the world ‘that proceeds from and is created by things, persons, or their constellations’ (Böhme, 1993, p. 122). Therefore, understanding the conditions under which leisure events are produced is essential for understanding how atmosphere helps shape discourse (Degen, 2008; Ryan & Wollan, 2013). It is important to note that the concept of atmosphere integrates multiple interrelations between sensory perception, spatial experience, esthetics, culture, and philosophies of life. The physical environment cannot be detached from the activities constructed through the interrelationship with an individual’s psychological and social processes (Cresswell, 1992; Yaneva, 2018). Because an atmosphere is intersubjectively perceivable, it creates a common ground for the emergence of shared emotions. Sensory interactions arise from experiencing places, and these experiences are translated into solid emotional bonds that influence attitudes and behaviors (Howes & Classen, 2013). Without attention to its empirical dimensions, its specificity risks being lost in abstraction (c.f. Trigg, 2020). Every place has a spectrum of sensory experiences (Abusaada, 2020).

However, far from being a novel concern, this multidimensional approach has deep roots in retail and marketing research (e.g., see Alexander & Nobbs, 2020; Roschk et al., 2017) and also in religious environments (e.g., see Grand-Clément, 2021; Guillebaud & Lavandier, 2019; Sullivan, 2023). Across the literature, festivals are widely understood as dynamic environments in which sensory stimuli, ranging from visual displays and sonic landscapes to tactile, olfactory, and gustatory encounters, coalesce to shape shared affective and social atmospheres. For instance, Chau (2008) introduces the concept of ‘honghuo’ to describe the social heat generated by interactive sensory engagement in Chinese temple festivals, while others studies (Cavalcanti, 2002; Mendoza, 2015) demonstrate how corporeality, movement, and sensory layering in samba parades and Andean pilgrimages foster communal belonging and embodied memory. Also, the notion of ‘sensual geographies’ (Duffy & Mair, 2017; McClinchey, 2022) has been particularly influential in framing festivals as sites where synesthetic perception and spatial practices converge. These works reveal that the multisensory nature of festivals is not incidental, but central to their capacity to produce atmospheres of connection, resistance, and transformation.

The Boom Festival was specifically selected as a case study because it is an event with a political agenda that places sensory stimulation and bodily immersion at the core of its aesthetic, philosophical, and political vision. It offers a deliberately crafted environment designed to induce altered states of perception and interpersonal connection. These sensory strategies are intricately linked to the practices associated with so-called “transformational festivals.” According to St John (2001), music festivals, especially transformational and electronic gatherings, can be understood as heterotopias: spaces that are simultaneously real and imagined, removed from normative social structures. A liminality that involves a temporary suspension of the familiar to allow a transition to a temporary experience of something different (Wels et al., 2011). The Boom Festival is a ritualized heterotopic environment where participants temporarily exit dominant socio-economic paradigms and engage in collective practices of self-expression, ecological awareness, spiritual exploration, and community experimentation (John, 2001).

Therefore, the study of the Boom Festival not only enriches the existing body of scholarship with a paradigmatic case study of a transformational festival, but also provides a critical lens through which to examine the intersections of sensory production and contemporary forms of cultural resistance in Portugal since it is largely grounded in the idea of leisure as resistance (Sharpe, 2008). This research specifically enriches the leisure discourse by demonstrating how the deliberate integration of sensory design elements creates a performative space.

The first Boom Festival was held in 1997. Initially located on the outskirts of Lisbon, in Herdade do Zambujal, Setúbal district, it was described as a biennial independent artistic cultural event (Carvalho et al., 2014, p. 84). Since 2012, the festival has taken place in Idanha-a-Nova, Castelo Branco district, a rural area in the countryside, since when it has become one of Portugal’s most internationally renowned alternative events. While the festival’s early renditions featured mostly ephemeral structures, the current location includes some permanent infrastructure, adapted as needed to each new rendition (www.boomfestival.org/).

This study examines how the leisure atmosphere of the Boom Festival engages in a dialogic movement with the organisation’s effort to promote alternative perspectives to dominant ideologies. In this context, the festival facilitates the formation of a distinctive sense of “we” which contributes to constructing the symbolic framework of “who we are” (Guzmán Useche, 2018). Alterity is understood here as “the other existence as outside this one existence” (Hegel, 2010), while acknowledging the persistent challenge of establishing a fixed definition of the term (Xiang & Fang, 2020). Building on this theoretical framework, the study investigates how the environment crafted by the festival shapes its experiential character, and how this influences the festival’s effectiveness in strengthening alterity (c.f. Sharpe, 2008, p. 219). The significance of atmosphere lies in its function as a space for attunement, which in turn fosters a sense of togetherness (Atha, 2018; Trigg, 2020), in this case, a togetherness that embraces difference. This is because community operates according to principles that generate practices and simultaneously foster the development of the human being as an intentional, creative agent within a total field of organic-biological, psychological, sociocultural, and historical-political relationships (Gibson, 1977).

To summarize, this study aims to explore how the sensory design mediates one's engagement with the alterity dynamics at the Boom Festival, hence rendering insights into the importance of the multisensory character of any atmosphere.

This article is organized as follows. The first section addresses the role of the human senses in environmental design theory to understand their impact on social and cultural approaches. The second section presents the research methodology. The third section introduces the analysis of how the atmosphere of the Boom Festival mediates engagement with alterity. Finally, the main conclusions are presented in the closing section.

Theoretical framework

The principal aim of this section is to provide a summary of the role of the human senses in environmental design theory. To achieve this, it is necessary to study the senses both individually and, more importantly, collectively, as that is how we perceive any environment. As Pallasmaa (1996) stated, architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation occurs through the senses. A built environment is not experienced as a series of isolated retinal images, but rather through its fully integrated material, embodied, and symbolic essence.

Since environmental design can act as an agent for societal change (Luck, 2019), the design process must address three main factors: neuroscientific insights, environmental purpose, and user culture (de Paiva, 2018). Only by considering these three elements holistically can we begin to understand the sensorial effects of design on the social and cultural mindsets manifested in any environment.

Any environment is corporeity, so its spaces must be conceived both from and for the body, as it is perceived through bodily and sensory activity. Therefore, the design of an environment must address all the senses involved in its perception. This relationship between the environment and the individual is not purely cognitive, it is also emotional. People possess multiple subconscious tendencies and behaviors that influence their responses to environments (McHugh, 2009; Rock, 2009). Consequently, every environmental project, beyond solving rational problems and meeting functional and technical requirements, must be capable of evoking the diverse sensory worlds of each culture for which it is intended, as every space, natural or built, is interpreted by the brain differently depending on cultural context (Holland et al., 2001).

It is essential to understand how the conceptual framework of any environment is constructed in order to identify the strategies used by designers to transmit specific mindsets. In other words, we must explore the concept of 'design thinking' by examining how designers have created 'frames' (Dorst, 2011) that express ideological perspectives favoring particular social interests.

Recently, there has been growing recognition of the importance of non-visual senses in various fields of design (Haverkamp, 2014; Lupton & Lipps, 2018; Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004). During the Enlightenment period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, society began prioritizing the senses of sight and hearing over those of smell, touch, and taste (Henshaw, 2014). This prioritization of vision, in particular, was fully embraced by modernism (Barbara & Perliss, 2006). Such visual dominance can to an extent be explained through neuroscience (Hutmacher, 2019; Meijer et al., 2019): a

significantly larger portion of our brain is devoted to visual processing than to any other sense (Gallace et al., 2012). For example, Felleman and Van Essen (1991), estimated that more than half of the cortex is involved in visual processing, compared to 12% for touch, around 3% for hearing, and less than 1% for smell and taste.

Despite this inequality in sensory processing, all the senses contribute to spatial experience to varying degrees. Sounds can provide subtle cues about the identity, proportions, or function of a space (Blessner & Salter, 2009) (Eberhard, 2009) (Rosenblum & Robart, 2005). However, environmental design tends to focus only on avoiding or minimizing unwanted noise. In fact, most research has centered on the concept of noise as ‘unwanted sound’ (Porteous, 1990). In architectural education, sound is generally addressed only in terms of reduction, isolation, and absorption (Schafer, 1993). A similar trend exists in thermal perception, which tends to emphasize neutrality and comfort, ignoring how heat transfer can also create pleasurable experiences (de Dear, 2011).

The tactile aspect of built environments is similarly overlooked (Tham, 1997). Although architecture is often described in terms of abstractions such as space, light, and volume, buildings are fundamentally physical artifacts. Architecture is experienced physically, and the tactile element is essential to the full (multisensory) experience of environmental design (Spence, 2020).

Olfactory considerations in environmental design have focused primarily on eliminating unpleasant odors and controlling air pollutants. Many spaces appear to be deliberately designed to lack any noticeable smell. However, the olfactory element can positively influence behavior, as odors act as hedonic agents associated with pleasure, as well as serving protective functions (Diego et al., 1998; Engen, 2012). Researchers have also demonstrated the benefits of scents like lavender, which are commonly used in aromatherapy (Cannard, 1996), and in retail settings, ambient or category-congruent scents reportedly increased product-category sales and purchase probabilities (Sandell, 2019).

Even more crucial than considering each sense individually is examining how the senses interact. Neuroscience increasingly points to the brain as a “multisensory mind” (Ghazanfar & Schroeder, 2006; Talsma, 2015). The senses constantly influence one another, though we are often unaware of these cross-sensory interactions. There is strong evidence of multimodal integration systems in humans, where spatial representation arises from the multisensory coding of tactile-visual, tactile-auditory, and visual-auditory events (see e.g., Humphreys et al., 1998; Lalanne & Lorenceau, 2004; Spence et al., 2004). Since we receive simultaneous information from all senses in real-life contexts, our perception of the world is the product of integrated sensory processing (Ladavas & Farne, 2004).

It is also important to emphasize that sensory perception can be defined in two ways: as the detection of sensory information, and as a mental insight formed from sensory input combined with memory and expectation (Rodaway, 1994), in other words, culturally mediated. As Eberhard noted, “You may not literally taste the materials in a building, but the design of a restaurant can have an impact on your ‘conditioned response’ to the taste of the food” (Eberhard, 2007, p. 47).

Gibson (1966) reformulated the traditional five senses into perceptual systems, which serve not merely to arouse sensations but to acquire information. These systems are

understood as active, based on activity modes rather than conscious sensory qualities. Gibson emphasized perceptual systems over classical senses because perceptions are shaped by learning, whereas sensations are presumed to be innate. By tracing how environments are created and how they transmit meaning, we can understand the central challenge of design reasoning regarding sensory perception, a way to uncover the values embedded in spatial design. As Debray (2000, p. 13) stated, transmission involves adding strategy to logistics, praxis to techne, and engineering a system of symbols and meanings.

Symbols and signs are tools that structure, encode, and enable the understanding of an environment (Lévi-Strauss, 2018). The legibility of the environment is not only visual but also affective and symbolic, often drawing on specific memories and lived experiences, both individual and collective (Lynch, 2015). These take shape through different sensory experiences (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001) in ways which can be considered as an umbrella term which encompasses the sensory signs associated with the concept of atmosphere as outlined in this article (Beatley et al., 2018).

Festivals, as rituals of gathering and celebration, are composed of a complex system of signs, such as words, gestures, objects, images, music, clothing, and behaviors, which together create a symbolic environment capable of expressing and transmitting the experience of participation. On one hand, festivals appropriate certain spaces for their symbolic value; on the other hand, they also imbue the very space of representation with meaning. According to Eliade and Fernández (1981), symbols are the vehicles of this dual dimension, as they possess tangible forms that appeal to the senses and refer to meanings and experiences that go beyond the physical world and connect with the human being. An ontological identification process takes place, that is, a model of knowledge is created that allows for the interpretation of the underlying meaning of the set of sensory experiences (c.f. Danto, 2010). Integrated multisensory processing enables the creation of diverse effects that align with the dynamic production of memory and the maintenance of collective identity. Therefore, in order to analyze the atmosphere of engagement at the Boom Festival, it is essential to uncover the underlying framework, that is, to develop an understanding of space that goes beyond its literal meaning. The objective is to elucidate how place, social actors, and sensory experiences converge in the production of an atmosphere of alterity. This approach will guide the analysis of how sensory perception is addressed within this context.

Method

This study on the identification of sensorial design that guides the Boom Festival (under an agenda of alterity) required work on the articulation between bodily experiences and discourses (Howes, 2022). This approach allows for the discovery of the underlying logic that links the sensorial design of the Boom Festival to various perceptions of the self. According to Nakamura (2013), this is most effectively achieved through sensory ethnography, since places and bodily experiences are mutually constitutive, therefore sensory experiences mediate ethnographic interactions within an environment.

The fieldwork was conducted between 2010 and 2024. However, one of the authors of this paper has been attending the Boom Festival since its inception in 1998, enabling

Table 1. Profile of the interview participants.

Interview participants		
1. Student	11. Boom Festival Producer	17. Musician, Producer and DJ
2. Student	12. Festival Producer	18. Musician, Producer and DJ
3. Student	13. Musician, Producer and DJ	19. University Professor
4. Digital content creator	14. Producer and DJ	20. Digital Artist
5. Sales Manager	15. Army officer	21. Boom Festival Pioneer
6. Therapist	16. DJ	22. Producer, DJ
7. DJ		
8. Game Designer		
9. Personal Trainer		
10. Professor		

an experiential process through which one can access and comprehend a deeper form of knowledge, one that is never articulated verbally and therefore remains beyond the reach of ethnographic observation or interviews (Bloch, 2018). This long-term engagement enabled a process of embodied familiarity and longitudinal insight into the festival's evolution. While such experiential immersion enriches understanding of the event's sensory and social dynamics, reflexive strategies, such as detailed field notes, peer debriefing, and triangulation with interview and archival data, were employed to maintain analytical distance.

The methodology combined three main qualitative techniques: participant observation, semi-structured interviews (Table 1), and oral history (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012). Participant observation provided embodied insights into the festival's multisensory environment, rituals, and spatial configurations. Following this, twenty-two semi-structured interviews have been conducted with producers, DJs, musicians, and other artists, as well as with Boom goers more broadly, capturing diverse perspectives on design, performance, and sensorial experience. Oral history has been considered a key component of the methodology employed in this research, as the festivals have taken place during the late twentieth century and into the twenty first century. This technique enables the inclusion of voices from the recent past as an invaluable source of data. These were collected from long-term participants and early organizers, offering retrospective accounts that traced continuities and transformations in the festival's cultural and architectural practices. Visual documentation and field recordings from different renditions of the festival between 1998 and 2023 further supported the interpretation of spatial and sensory phenomena.

Data from these sources were analyzed thematically through the interpretive framework by focusing on the perceptual systems. Triangulation across interviews, oral histories, and participant observation enabled the identification of recurring sensory motifs, sound, materiality, temperature, light, and bodily proximity, and their relation to collective expressions of alterity.

A total of twenty-two participants were interviewed, representing a broad range of professional backgrounds and age groups. The sample included individuals identifying across gender identities, although most participants used conventional male/female categories when describing themselves. Since neither age nor gender were central to the analysis of sensorial experience, only a general overview is provided here. Participants ranged from their early twenties to over sixty-five years of age, with the majority belonging to the younger cohorts most active in the festival's creative and performative dimensions.

Findings and discussion

Based on field observations and participants' narratives, the festival's ephemeral and immersive environment offers a lens through which to explore how atmosphere reveals underlying cultural values *via* sensorial experience. Sensory stimuli are deliberately orchestrated within a rich symbolic universe. Accordingly, understanding how sensory design interrelates with ideological discourse requires a reconstruction grounded in both material and cultural dimensions of perception, that is, the sensory signs of the atmosphere. These include the visual, auditory, taste-smell, basic-orienting, and haptic systems. This study adopts the analytical framework of the five perceptual systems proposed by Gibson (1966), treating them as space-sensory construct categories.

One of the festival's core perceptual strategies is its deliberate emphasis on alterity. As observed during multiple renditions of the festival (field notes, 2010–2023), alterity at the Boom Festival is often expressed through counter-conducts or enacted as practices that resist nearby authorities and the power structures of authoritarian relations (c.f. Lilja, 2018). Through participant observation it was observed as a temporary inversion of social norms, with transgressive behaviors in dress and interpersonal interactions confined to the spatial and temporal limits of the event (Ravenscroft & Gilchrist, 2009).

Ethnographic field observation revealed the absence of gender distinctions in bathroom facilities, an intentional choice reflecting the festival's commitment to inclusivity and the deconstruction of socially constructed binaries (Figure 1). Such spatial interventions operate not only as symbols of equality but also as acts of political resistance against normative regimes of privacy and gender construction deeply embedded in Portuguese society. By challenging conventional norms and reconfiguring everyday bodily practices, the festival transforms the politics of space into a performative statement of alterity. The design process draws on preexisting architectural and social frameworks. Participants



Figure 1. BF 2023 non gender bathrooms. Source: Author.

utilize familiar symbols, resources, and behavioral models, reconfiguring them within a socially constructed space to materialize alterity (c.f. Simmel, 1906).

Participant accounts confirm that privacy is intentionally minimized across the site. At the Boom Festival, private enclosures are reduced to a minimum, promoting collective modes of inhabiting space in stark contrast to the Western preference for compartmentalized, individual domains (Figure 2). This spatial intimacy not only serves as a sensorial device that reinforces the festival's ethos of unity and openness, but also embodies a political gesture toward communal living and resistance to individualism. By reconfiguring the relationship between the body, intimacy, and space, the festival articulates an alternative politics of coexistence grounded in shared sensory experience.

Moreover, alterity is also visually constructed through a distinctive graphic language that stands in marked contrast to the visual conventions of everyday environments. Interviews with production staff (e.g., Interview 12) suggest that distinctive typography constitutes a prominent feature of the festival, appearing on festival tickets, maps, lineups, the website, analogue and digital communications, and the Boomer bracelet. While cohesive, these graphic choices form a complex system of signs that creates a symbolic environment of suspending everyday referents, expressing a unified visual identity that supports the festival's immersive aims and transmitting the experience of participation. Beyond aesthetic coherence, this visual system operates as a form of cultural and political communication. In other words, it is a political expression of collective identity that reinforces, rather than diminishes, the sense of otherness by making the festival's visual identity clearly divergent from the dominant cultural and political esthetics outside its gates.

From an identity perspective, information and communication technologies support collective identity ... it ultimately becomes a lifestyle that has been absorbed ... (Interview 11 – BF Producer)



Figure 2. BF 2023 reduced individual space. Source: Author.

Aesthetic decisions further underscore the perceptual dislocation from normative expectations (Figure 3). As observed on-site during the different renditions, fluorescent colors that glow in the dark, psychedelic visuals, and unconventional architectural forms work in concert to construct an environment that not only defies conventional spatial logic but also materializes a countercultural critique of standardization and dominant aesthetic regimes. Thus, the festival's visual environment embodies its broader political agenda by fostering a space where collective visual expression replaces normative expectations.

Architectural analysis conducted by one of the authors highlights a striking example of scale deformation: monumental pillars supporting lightweight tents suggest an architectural language based mainly on symbolic rather than structural dominance (Figure 4). This inversion, which subverts dominant contemporary Western architectural conventions, provokes sensorial and cognitive otherness associated with altered states of perception, highlighting the festival's aims. Within the festival's architecture, out-of-scale proportions become a medium through which resistance to prevailing systems of order and regulation is materially and symbolically performed. The resulting sensorial and cognitive disorientation encourages participants to question the norms that structure perception, value, and hierarchy in everyday life.

Building on this analysis conducted by one of the authors, materials play a pivotal role in embodying this ethos. The use of bamboo at the Boom Festival functions as a symbol of resistance to disciplinary norms. In this sense, bamboo construction can be considered as countercultural, and its meanings are actively negotiated, and reflexively fought over, in the course of its practice (c.f. Fiske, 2010) since it is a material rarely seen in traditional Portuguese building practices. But in the Boom festival



Figure 3. BF 2023. Structures + audiovisual installations. Source: Author.



Figure 4. BF 2023 dance Temple - Monumental construction. Source: Author.

bamboo is employed in sculptural forms that challenge local building conventions. These structures, defined by organic curves and non-linear geometries, intentionally disrupt the Cartesian logic characteristic of contemporary Western architecture (Figures 5 and 6), functioning as a conduit through which construction itself becomes a performative expression of subversion. These choices reflect the festival's political agenda by enacting a vision that reconceptualizes the relationship between humans, unconventional materials, and the environment.

As one producer explained:

Decoration enhances the environment, making it more beautiful and aesthetically refined, but beyond that, it opens sensory channels to other levels of perception. The gathering should be regarded as a holistic event, aimed at activating all the senses. (Interview 12 – BF Producer)

Spatial representation arises from the multisensory coding of tactile-visual stimuli that activates the imagination. So, the festival's approach to materiality supports a strong haptic dimension. As noted in field observations, natural materials such as earth, sand, and wood provide soft, tactile surfaces that remain comfortable even in direct bodily contact. These design decisions reflect a philosophy of embodied experience, creating a sensory landscape in which touch serves not only as a form of interaction but as a channel for transmitting alterity. In fact, oral histories consistently highlight these tactile and communal activities as key sensory domains of the Boom Festival. It comprises several areas specifically designed to engage the sense of touch. Dance spaces encourage uninhibited movement, expressive body language, and



Figure 5. 6: BF 2010 – construction using alternative materials. Source: Author.



Figure 6. BF 2022 *émergence*: Alternative materials, bamboo sculptures/constructions. Source: Author.

spontaneous physical contact, through both intentional gestures like hugs and incidental brushes in the shared kinetic space. Other areas offer activities such as massage, aquatic therapy, meditation, yoga, women's circles, and mud rituals (see [Map 1](#)). Many of these foster non-normative interactions, such as embracing strangers or communal nudity ([Figure 7](#)). In this way, touch becomes not merely a sensory register but a political act: a means of reclaiming corporeality as a field of embodied agency and collective expression. The sense of touch emerges as one of the most visible domains through which a performative expression of counter-position to disciplinary society is exercised.



Map 1 Boomland map. Source: <https://www.boomfestival.org/map>

As a game designer noted:

The tangible presence of human warmth and other natural elements in the environment influences the psyche; the five senses play a decisive role in the immersive experience of this event. (Interview 8 – Game Designer)

In these contexts, the body becomes not just a vessel for experience but a principal tool for sensory exploration and political expression.

As a boomer concluded:

The BOOM, as a multidisciplinary festival [...] is indeed political, political in its form and in the way it presents itself to society.[...] Seen from this perspective, and through its various manifestations, these can be read through a political lens, as statements and landmarks that are highly assertive in the kinds of orientations they advocate for life in the world. (Interview 6– Therapist)

Auditory perception is also central to the festival's multisensory architecture. Field observations and oral histories confirm that music functions as the primary catalyst



Figure 7. BF 2018. Boomers. Source: Author.

for perceptual and behavioral experiences, extending beyond hearing into embodied cognition and affective resonance. The sonic environment supports both individual introspection and collective euphoria.

As a pioneer explained in the oral histories:

These gatherings allowed people to be in a space free of judgment (...) they emanate a certain quality (...) which resonates with individuals and has a transformative effect. It is a positive phenomenon (...) the music, the movement, and the dance (...) it is wonderful. (Interview 21 – BF pioneer)

Boom's diverse musical offerings, ranging from Psychedelic Trance and Goa to Chill Out and Organic, create an immersive soundscape that encourages entrainment. Here, rhythmic synchronization fosters emotional connectivity and social cohesion (Simão & de Magalhães, 2015; Simão & Moura, 2023). The interaction of high-decibel sound, fluctuating beats per minute (BPMs), and dynamic performances generates an auditory landscape conducive to counter-conduct (Figure 8). It becomes a form of embodied resistance that reclaims shared experience through rhythm, movement, and collective identity. This kind of music functions as a political practice, suspending normative temporalities while simultaneously enacting an alternative mode of collective being.

I think it is natural for people to associate some spiritual component with these festivals, because through them things that are actually very close to us, such as music, movement, and dance, are recreated. (Interview 21 - Boom Festival Pioneer)

In contrast, other areas provide subdued, contemplative auditory experiences (Figure 9). These zones enable participants to engage in introspective and meditative listening practices, fostering atmospheres conducive to healing.



Figure 8. BF 2024. Dance Temple - Musical ambiances. Source: Author.



Figure 9. BF 2012 beind Fields - Musical ambiances. Source: Author.

There is a healing dimension, it can be applied to music, but not exclusively. There is communion, and a person feels emotions or a sense of deep connection. (Interview 21 – BF pioneer)

The different musical environments are conveyed through distinct visual strategies, fostering diverse modes of behavior and sensory engagement.

Olfactory and gustatory perceptions also make a significant contribution, as reported in the oral histories gathered during fieldwork. Held during the peak of summer in Portugal's arid interior, the festival's setting in high temperatures intensifies the presence of scents: the earthy smell of mud constructions, vegetation, and human bodies in high heat conditions. Ritual fires and incense, particularly nag champa, sandalwood, and other fragrances associated with Hindu and Buddhist traditions, further enrich this aromatic tapestry. By drawing on non-Western spiritual traditions, these rituals give form to a subtle form of ideological contestation to hegemonic ideologies. They reclaim the olfactory experience as a medium of communal connection, reinforcing the festival's ethos. Aromatic oils, herbs, and spices add further complexity helping to produce a form of synesthetic experience that align with the collective identity of alterity.

We found magical places, decoration, colourful clothing, and scents everywhere (...) (Interview 15 – Army Officer)

Two main gastronomic zones serve a variety of cuisines, with vegetarian options especially prominent. These areas further shape the multisensory character of the festival. Chai, a traditional tea-based beverage, holds cultural significance, echoing the early days which featured by Psytrance raves.

Chai Shops were always present in Psychedelic Trance parties, I think is a way to keep them alive. Boom is not a Psy Festival anymore but it's common to find it. (Interview 16 – DJ & Photographer)

A defining characteristic of sensory perception at Boom Festival is the influence of psychoactive substances (Figures 10 and 11), particularly within the context of Portugal, where drug consumption has been decriminalized (Rêgo et al., 2021). Several interviewees acknowledged that these compounds not only intensify auditory and visual stimuli but also significantly alter olfactory and gustatory experiences. Substances such as hashish, LSD, psilocybin mushrooms, changa (DMT), ketamine, and MDMA can profoundly transform the perception of shapes, colors, and sounds, as well as the way scents and flavors are sensed, depending on dosage, specific substance, and contextual factors (Valente et al., 2019).

Perhaps the most persistent scent is that of cannabis, the most visibly consumed psychoactive substance. Other odors, such as changa (a DMT-based blend), are particularly common on the dance floors and surrounding areas, marking specific zones of altered consciousness. Within this context, altered states of consciousness are not merely regarded as forms of escapism, but rather as sensory, spiritual, and collective experiments, experiences in which pleasure, transcendence, and communion intertwine, challenging the prevalent pathologization of drug use. In fact, by amplifying and intertwining the senses, these altered states make the political meanings embedded in other sensory experiences, such as the spatial, tactile, and olfactory dimensions of the festival, more perceptible. They foreground the body as an active



Figure 10. BF 2018 symbolic performances. Source: Author.



Figure 11. BF 2022 symbolic performances. Source: <https://www.boomfestival.org/gallery/2014/boom-festival-2014-joao-curiti>.

site for challenging dominant modes of awareness, enabling participants to embody alternative forms of perception and existence rather than merely conceptualize them.

Some genres of electronic music emerged as a consequence of a movement already accustomed to altering consciousness. It arose from the need to create a ritual surrounding the consumption of psychedelic substances, in order to contextualize collective catharsis. (Interview 11 - Events Producer)

Although the Boom Festival spans an entire week, it does not offer daily tickets, a decision that, according to interviews with the production team, is intentionally designed to encourage attendees to remain in Boomland for an extended period, allowing them to undergo a fully immersive sensory experience of disconnection from everyday life and reconnection with altered forms of consciousness. Immersion in the festival's unique landscape often lingers in participants' memories and contributes to the construction of their sense of self and place (Green, 2016).

The purpose [of the Festival] lies in the inner journey toward self-knowledge, healing, and personal growth. Sharing and communion serve as practices that allow for the repositioning of the ego and the opening of a spiritual window. (Interview 11 - Events Producer)

Drawing from participant narratives and longitudinal field experience, the multisensorial design of Boom Festival makes it clear that sensory perception is not a passive process but an active engagement with spatial forms that embody ideological and political meanings. Through embodied participation, attendees engage in temporary counter-conducts that challenge dominant cultural norms, revealing how atmosphere operates as both a sensory and political construct. The festival's atmosphere, drawing attention to alterity, encourages participants to see, feel, and inhabit space differently, thereby making perceptible the values embedded in its design. Tangible forms are used to appeal to the sensory experiences as signs and to refer to meanings that go beyond the physical. In this context, the "art of transmission" emerges as a dynamic dialogue between form and perception, strategy and logistics, prompting a reconsideration of how to create environments that resonate on both sensory and symbolic levels. To resist in a disciplinary society begins by elaborating an environment that fosters a conception oriented toward otherness, one that begins with the material and spatial conditions but ultimately transcends them.

Given that real-world experiences involve simultaneous input from multiple senses, the Boom Festival exemplifies a truly integrated multisensory environment (Ladavas & Farne, 2004), making it a uniquely embodied phenomenon that has frequently reported spiritual awakenings and transformative experiences. This helps illustrate that the festival's multisensory landscape activates a profound connection with an 'other' world, one defined by alternative values and perceptions, while at the same time fostering a temporary disconnection from the external world and its normative structures. The Boom Festival is thus designed as a liminal space (Turner, 1998), intentionally constructed to challenge established social, perceptual, and existential boundaries.

It aspires to redefine the relationship between human beings and the environment, and to foster a daily life immersed in art and personal expression. Boom seeks to transform the human being for the better. (Interview 12 - BF Producer)

The negative image the Boom once had in Portuguese society is not a coincidence... (Interview 10 - Professor)

Conclusion

The central tenet of this article is the recognition that atmosphere can serve as common ground between people, thereby creating a framework for the emergence and maintenance of shared insights.

From the outset, the guiding question has been: How does sensory design mediate one's engagement with the political alterity dynamics at the Boom Festival in Portugal, hence rendering insights into the importance of the multisensory character of any atmosphere?

This is evident in its spatial arrangements and in its graphic and architectural elements, which challenge dominant cultural conventions. For example, the absence of gendered bathroom facilities exemplifies a deliberate effort to transcend socially constructed binaries which continue to be deeply embedded in Portuguese societal norms, reinforcing the festival's ethos of inclusivity. Additionally, the minimization of private enclosures encourages collective spatial inhabitation, standing in sharp contrast to the Western preference for compartmentalized spaces. This shift toward shared spatial intimacy generates an immersive sensory landscape that fosters connection and communal experience, both physically and symbolically.

Materiality further supports this shift, particularly through the strategic use of bamboo, a material rarely found in traditional Portuguese architecture. By incorporating bamboo into sculptural forms with organic curves and non-linear geometries, the Boom Festival actively challenges Cartesian spatial logic, positioning itself within a broader discourse of resistance to disciplinary societal structures. The festival's atmosphere thus functions not only in practical terms but also as an ideological statement, reflecting an ongoing negotiation between local architectural traditions, mainstream practice, and an alternative design ethos.

The multisensory experience at the Boom Festival extends beyond the visual and tactile to encompass auditory, olfactory, and gustatory dimensions. Music, as the primary auditory stimulus, acts as a catalyst for both individual and collective engagement, where rhythmic synchronization fosters a shared state of entrainment. The festival's soundscape is deliberately varied, oscillating between high-intensity sonic environments of electronic music and more contemplative, meditative spaces, thus accommodating a wide range of perceptual and emotional responses. Similarly, olfactory and gustatory stimuli enrich the immersive experience, shaped by environmental conditions, culinary practices, and the ritualized use of incense and psychoactive substances.

The spatial and sensorial strategies employed at the Boom Festival underscore the active role of perception in shaping social and ideological meaning. This is an affectively charged experience of joint concern, one that participants care about to varying degrees (c.f. Helm, 2009) since atmospheres serve as markers of shared investment (Alves et al., 2021). In the Boom Festival this is represented through the creation of a liminal state that involves the three kinds of separation: spatial, temporal, and social/moral (Yang, 2000). It takes place in an environment removed from everyday settings, a rural landscape in Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, offering a full week of immersive experience governed by inverted norms and rules. For these reasons, attunement to atmosphere fosters a sense of integrative togetherness between people and place (Kaczynski et al., 2022). Consequently, the festival's atmosphere and sensory design operate as a lens through which to interrogate broader questions of spatial ideology, as expressed through the performative nature of multisensory experience.

This study argues that the Boom Festival constitutes as a recurring experimental space in which alternative forms of perception, embodiment, and sociality can be temporarily enacted. The findings point to processes of individual and interpersonal

transformation, as participants engage in multisensory experiences that reconfigure their relationship to the body, others, and the environment (Gross, 2025; Ruane, 2017). As argued by Bennett and Woodward (2014), festival spaces play a crucial role in shaping identities and enabling forms of belonging that persist beyond the event itself. Accordingly, the politics of Boom do not reside in producing immediate structural change, but in enabling situated forms of contestation and alternative modes of being that resonate beyond the festival. These processes contribute to the gradual reconfiguration of subjectivities and everyday practices, and to the broader dissemination and normalization of values associated with the festival (Bennett & Woodward, 2014; St John, 2017). Looking ahead, there is great potential to integrate these lessons into leisure sciences and environmental design by utilizing this growing body of knowledge concerning the human senses and their dynamic interrelations.

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Author statement

All persons who meet authorship criteria are listed as authors, and all authors certify that they have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for the content, including participation in the concept, design, analysis, writing, or revision of the manuscript. Furthermore, each author certifies that this material or similar material has not been and will not be submitted to or published in any other publication before its appearance in the Leisure Sciences.

Credit author statement

Emilia Simão: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation., Writing—review and editing. **Monica Alcindor:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Writing—Original draft preparation, Writing—review and editing.

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