

Governed by atmospheres: Affect, materiality and everyday benevolence in homeless encampments during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article explores the operation of homeless encampments as a part of governance by highlighting the role of affective atmospheres. The COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of lockdowns have seen the introduction of unprecedented measures into homelessness governance in Czech cities. Some have set up temporary homeless encampments as a response to the declaration of the state of emergency. Relying on interviews and observations, this article reveals that such measures in cities differed significantly in both character and outcomes. Based on a repeated instances comparison of the socio-material and affective entanglements of operating two emergency encampments – one in the regional city of Pilsen and the other in the capital city of Prague – the article argues that affective atmospheres play a vital role in their practical operations and perceived outcomes. While no simple dichotomy is implied, in Pilsen, order was implemented through a surveillance logic that instigated conflicts and created an atmosphere of frustration, while in Prague, the benevolence and mutuality of people in the camp led to a relaxed atmosphere. The article introduces the notion of ‘governed by atmospheres’ and argues that it opens space for a more complex and nuanced examination of the unintended outcomes of particular policies and politics in homelessness governance.

Keywords

affective atmospheres, encampments, everyday benevolence, homelessness governance, informality

Urban Studies

1–16

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DOI: 10.1177/00420980221149313

journals.sagepub.com/home/usj



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摘要

本文通过强调情感氛围的作用，探讨了作为治理的一部分的无家可归者营地的运营。新冠疫情和封锁的实施见证了捷克各城市在无家可归者治理方面所采取的前所未有的措施。在城市宣布进入紧急状态后，作为应对措施，一些城市建立了临时的无家可归者营地。通过访谈和观察，本文揭示了城市中的此类措施在性质和结果上都存在显著差异。我们选取了两个紧急营地（一个在区域中心城市比尔森，另一个在首都布拉格）作为案例，对两个紧急营地的运营所面临的社会物质和情感方面的复杂情况进行了多次比较，在此基础上，本文认为情感氛围在他们的实际运营和感知结果中起着至关重要的作用。尽管不能简单地将两者一分为二，但在比尔森，秩序是通过煽动冲突并营造沮丧氛围的监视逻辑来实施的，而在布拉格，营地中人们的仁慈和互助营造了轻松的氛围。本文介绍了“用氛围来治理”的概念，并认为该概念开辟了更为广阔的空间，使人们能够对无家可归者治理中特定政策和政治的意外结果进行更复杂、更细致的审视。

关键词

情感氛围、营地、日常慈善、无家可归者治理、非正规性

Received October 2021; accepted December 2022

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and imposed lockdowns have introduced unprecedented measures into homelessness governance in Czech cities. In reaction to the spread of COVID-19, on the basis of Constitutional Act No. 110/1998 Coll. on the security of the Czech Republic, a state of emergency was announced in this country on 12 March 2020. It set forth a series of restrictions, such as the prohibition of free movement and restrictions in public places, which directly affected all citizens, including homeless individuals. As a response to the declaration of the state of emergency, some Czech cities resolved to set up temporary homeless encampments. However, despite the common governmental and social-spatial processes, particular encampments differed significantly in their character as well as their outcomes. For this reason, we decided to conduct a repeated instances comparison (see Montero and Baiocchi, 2022) of two formal encampments – one in the regional city of

Pilsen and the other in the capital city of Prague – to shed light on how the same form of governmental regulation (i.e. formally established rules) was, in these two different contexts, negotiated and practised. In other words, rather than examining public discourse and the motivations of the urban authorities (see Parsell et al., 2023), our focus here is to reveal how the rules of both encampments, the application of which is supervised by formal institutions, are realised in (in)formal everyday practice (Lombard, 2019; McFarlane, 2012).

In Pilsen, the encampment was established six weeks after the emergency declaration. It was coordinated by the Councillor for Security (Social Democratic Party), together with the Department of Security and the Department of Crime Prevention and Crisis Management of the City of Pilsen. By assigning the matter to the Security Department, the entire situation was framed – and the forms of the solution determined – in the manner of a security problem. Apart from the city, local NGOs

and the Municipal Police (MPP) were involved in operating the sites. Because of long-standing tensions between city officials, NGOs and the police in Pilsen, the participation of all actors in the measures led to conceptual ambiguities and exacerbated their disputes. The situation was also complicated by the repeated presence of journalists, especially from the well-known local website *Krimi.cz*, who framed the situation in anti-homeless rhetoric. All of these factors contributed to all-round frustration.

In Prague, the encampment was set up two weeks after the emergency declaration and, importantly, just a day after winter shelters (*zimní opatření*) were dissolved. The Councillor for Housing (Czech Pirate Party) assumed authority over the action. The encampment in Troja was one of several measures, including a second encampment in *Čišeřská louka* and the use of six hotels/hostels, that were gradually established in co-operation with the city's relevant departments, the Centre of Social Services for Prague (*Centrum sociálních služeb Praha*, the city's organisation for providing social services), a private actor and local NGOs. Despite initial uncertainty stemming from a lack of experience, but also from rapidly changing government measures, the implementation and outcomes of both encampments were perceived by the people involved as relatively successful (some of the hotels remained in operation until 2022). Therefore, despite being an expression of the same welfare state of the European type in which state institutions, including municipalities, co-operate with civic organisations in delivering social services, the operation of the encampments, overseen by individual NGOs in both cities, differed fundamentally – not only in how it was implemented on a daily basis but also how it ended up. That both cases were surrounded by very strong, although different, emotions raises two questions: How does affect as a certain

arrangement of emotions and moods (co-)influence the operation of homeless encampments? And what role does affect play in homelessness governance?

To inquire into these questions, we answer a recent call for more complex engagement with 'tent cities' (most often involving the role of urban poverty management), homeless resistance and political agency in general (Herring, 2014; Sparks, 2017; Speer, 2017, 2018; Vašát, 2021b), and look at our material through the notion of affective atmospheres (Anderson, 2009; Bissell, 2010; Duff, 2010; Lancione, 2017; Shaw, 2014; Wall, 2019). As the study of affect and affective atmospheres is still not quite common in homelessness scholarship (for an exception, see Lancione, 2017) – where, in the case of homelessness governance, it is even more pertinent – encampments represent an ideal environment for such an endeavour. Being a reaction to the pandemic situation, which is a kind of crisis (McFarlane, 2012), it provides a unique laboratory for revealing the diverse roles of situations, interactions and affects. With this in mind, we show that while in Pilsen they ruled through a surveillance logic that instigated conflicts and an atmosphere of frustration, in Prague mutuality and everyday benevolence led to a relaxed atmosphere in the camp. Affective atmospheres thus played a key role in both the perceived outcomes and the practical functioning of both encampments. As they interrelate with the wider socio-political space of the city, we further argue that the multiple relations between atmospheres and informality reveal that the camps were governed by atmospheres – that is, within atmospheres – and that affect can be a vital aspect of homelessness governance. Thus, against this backdrop, and echoing the widening geography of informality studies beyond the Global South (Devlin, 2019; Haid and Hilbrandt, 2019), both of our cases contribute to a

symmetrical reading of the informality in the homeless encampments and offer a nuanced account that complements current critical scholarship on governance and homelessness (Clarke and Parsell, 2020; Hennigan and Speer, 2019).

The article is divided into six parts. The following section traces the circumstances and importance of affective atmospheres and informality in homelessness governance. The third section introduces the research design, including details of our two individual projects, and briefly discusses the cases, primarily the principles of a repeated instances comparison. The two empirical sections which follow provide an in-depth singular description of the encampments, along with their socio-material and affective aspects. In particular, they deal with the rules and their (in)formal (non)enforcement. Finally, after formulating the role of affective atmospheres in both encampments, the article concludes by touching upon wider debate within urban studies on the punitivity/care of NGOs in homelessness governance.

Affective atmospheres and informality in homeless encampments

The issue of homelessness governance and its conceptualisation has been marked by many important changes over the last few decades (see Clarke and Parsell, 2020): from discussions on the influence of revanchism in urban politics (Lawton, 2018; MacLeod, 2002), to the extent of care institutions as a sort of counterforce to revanchism (Cloe et al., 2010; DeVerteuil, 2006), to the blurred character of both policing homeless people (Johnsen and Fitzpatrick, 2010; Stuart, 2014) and spaces of care for them (Clarke and Parsell, 2020; Hennigan and Speer, 2019). Corresponding to their unprecedented rise in cities with the advent of the new millennium, we also witness the rising

importance of various homeless encampments in these discussions. In these depictions, encampments (i.e. areas with improvised dwellings), built informally (and often illegally) mostly on public land, represent a unique environment that involves heterogeneous functions, which, consequently, have ambivalent impacts (Herring, 2014). Most often, emphasis is placed on the dual character of encampments, including not only spatial control as a popular strategy of urban/local governments, but also the encampment as a safe space and a preferred choice made by the homeless people themselves (Herring, 2014; Speer, 2017).

The phenomenon of homeless encampments is most often associated with cities in the United States, especially those on the West Coast. Although not a recent phenomenon, and despite the general opinion that they are linked with economic recession, Herring and Lutz (2015; see also Speer, 2018) argue that this contemporary form of homelessness governance is the result of a specific urban policy in American cities – a policy that is based on both punitive measures in individual cities and the disciplining nature of care institutions. A crucial element of governing encampments has always been the issue of informality. In this regard, Herring (2014) introduced the inspiring two-dimensional analytics of ‘homeless seclusion’. Based on the extent to which camps are managed by the state or NGO institutions (institutionalisation/informality), and the extent to which campers can run their camps themselves (control/autonomy), Herring describes and analyses four types of seclusion: co-optation, accommodation, contestation and toleration.

Relying on recent scholarship spanning geographical contexts that emphasises the fluid and complex character of urban informality (Boudreau and Davis, 2017; Devlin, 2019; McFarlane, 2012), we claim that the extent of (in)formality may not only

change over time but is mainly negotiated and enforced in the everyday practice of governing. In a similar sense, for example, Sparks (2017), through in-depth fieldwork, described how the residents of Tent City 3, an encampment with a sort of ‘quasi-formal legal status’, developed an informal form of citizenship that can be summarised as ‘being a good camper’. While there was a ‘code of conduct’ to manage the everyday functioning of the camp, its enforcement in particular situations was rather a matter of ‘constant negotiability’. In addition, ‘it also functionally reproduced the norms of tent city citizenship, while leaving open space for negotiability, context, and change’ (Sparks, 2017: 99). Here, however, we redirect our attention from subaltern informality, regarded as thematically prevalent for the Global North (Haid and Hilbrandt, 2019), to NGOs and their governing. By examining the rules put into practice in the encampments, we will show not only that informality is a *modus operandi* – and therefore intentional, not a by-product of malfunctioning processes – and an integral part of fulfilling the formal rules of the order, but also that the informal aspects of encampment management can be a defining element of the perceived success of the formal arrangement as a whole.

Homeless camps can also be sites for resistance, home making and/or diverse political agencies or agendas. In an important account, Speer (2017) depicted camps in Fresno as places of community, care and appropriation. Speer documented that the search for a domestic space is in conflict with the current American home notion associated with family and private property, which is, to a certain extent, also stressed and reproduced by housing projects. Such encampments, including various occupied or makeshift structures, then represent alternative socio-materialities that are experienced

and practised by their inhabitants as the home (Lancione, 2019; Vašát, 2021b).

Informed by accounts of affective atmospheres, we go beyond the focus on individual meanings or political forms to examine how affects are collectively experienced and unfold socio-materially in encampments. Representing a more general array of emotions and moods (Thrift, 2004), affect has the potential to be felt and thus to initiate action (Duff, 2010). Therefore, as arising in a particular space (Bissell, 2010), we see homeless encampments as atmospheres; that is, as ‘placed assemblages’ (Shaw, 2014) of diverse bodies, practices, materialities, discourses, or emotions. Such atmospheres have two key features for this study. First, they are typical for their ambivalent character of capability to affect. As pointed out by Anderson (2009: 80), they ‘are singular affective qualities that emanate from but exceed the assembling of bodies’. This means that, while they are continuously arising from their arrangements of components, they always transcend those arrangements and form a sort of autonomous entity. Secondly, atmospheres are co-produced through practice (Shaw, 2014; Volinz, 2021; Wall, 2019). As aptly stated by Shaw (2014: 89), atmospheres ‘emerge from bodies, they are connected to activities of those bodies’. Such ‘bodies’, however, can be both humans as well as more-than-humans, such as material objects or physical settings (Ash, 2013; Lancione, 2017). This all then implies that atmospheres are constantly changing (Lancione, 2017), are sometimes uniquely deployed (Volinz, 2021) and can be also influenced to change (Wall, 2019).

Similar to Lancione (2017), who, in recounting the riveting story of 20 Roma families in Bucharest and their resistance to eviction, wanted to rethink resistance by incorporating into the account atmospheres and more-than-humans, we too examine

how the (in)formal operation of encampments is entangled in atmospheres.

Repeated instances of operating homeless emergency encampments

The arguments presented in this study are based on two individual research projects in the cities of Pilsen and Prague. The research on the encampment in Pilsen was part of the project ‘Homelessness: Is there an acceptable solution? If so, how?’ (*Bezdomovectví: Lze nějak přijatelně řešit? Případně jak?*), which was undertaken from November 2020 to June 2021. Semi-structured interviews with the affected groups (homeless people, opinion makers, politicians and NGOs) reflected the experiences of these actors with the establishment and implementation of the camp during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this period, the team interviewed 44 actors in Pilsen. Specifically, for this part of the research, we interviewed 15 homeless people and 21 politicians and social workers. The research on the encampment in Prague was part of the project ‘Analysis of the situation of homelessness in Prague’ (*Analýza situace bezdomovectví v Praze*), researched from July to September 2020. The research took place in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, albeit in the calmer summer months. This made it possible to create a number of exceptional measures in Prague, which the research team decided to include in the research by mapping their functioning. In particular, there were four other functioning hostels at that time. As part of this phase of the project, the co-author of this text conducted 24 interviews with clients, hostel/camp staff, city officials, a politician/councillor and a private sector representative providing accommodation. This text then builds primarily on, and discusses, six of these interviews: with two clients, the councillor,

his adviser and two employees of the camp in Troja.

The Daily Tent Centre (DTC, *Stanové denní centrum*) and the Quarantine Centre for the Homeless (*Karanténní centrum pro bezdomovce*) were opened in Pilsen from 27 April to 20 May 2020. The DTC was intended to function primarily as a temporary replacement for services for ‘homeless people’, and its operations during the state of emergency or vis-à-vis related anti-epidemic measures were realistically limited. The maximum capacity of the service was set at 50 accommodated persons, and a total of 32 employees of non-profit organisations took part in direct work with clients. The encampment in Prague was established in the city district of Prague 8 on 26 March and operated until 28 April (the other, in *Císařská louka*, opened approximately a week earlier). In the same location, just over the fence, the Deputy Mayor for Security of the capital, the City of Prague, independently set up a facility for the quarantine of homeless people – one area was for those who had been ordered to quarantine, and another area was for patients confirmed to have contracted the disease. It accommodated approximately 75 clients (55 men and 15 women), and the site was administered by four employees of Caritas Czech Republic. They worked in 12-hour shifts – with some of the organisation’s own staff deciding on their assignment to the city – along with Red Cross volunteers.

Our analysis relies on a type of repeated instances comparison (Montero and Baiocchi, 2022; Robinson, 2016, 2018). Both our cases of encampments represent *instances* that ‘can be embraced, not as stopping points for conceptualisation but as starting points for the kinds of modest universals – ideas, concepts – which can open themselves to necessary difference’ (Robinson, 2018: 228). This assumption then brings two imperatives to our research

design. Firstly, rather than focusing on particular cities or the perspectives of individual actors, we looked at the *processes* (Montero and Baiocchi, 2022); that is to say, we investigated the operating of the camps. So, we mention two specific social situations, both of which capture a conflict in a given camp. Around these conflicts, then, we provide a thick description of material and infrastructural background, the rules of the camps, daily routines and prevailing affects. Secondly, rather than seeing our instances as examples of some pre-given category or forces, we treat them as interrelated outcomes in a broader virtual field – the field of globalised homelessness governance – that all share certain ‘genetic’ information (Robinson, 2016). Both situations, as well as the socio-material–affective arrangements, do not represent a *different* example of the governing of a camp, but rather a *variation* of the same process. Thus, through thinking with the virtual as ‘all the possibilities for the production and understanding (determination) of specific urban outcomes’ (Robinson, 2016: 15), in the conclusion we attempt to formulate a modest conceptualisation of the capability of affects and informality to co-act that we call ‘governed by atmospheres’.

Atmosphere of frustration: Anger, conflicts and surveillance in the Folmavská camp

Somehow, the rules for the tent city were written (which, according to the law, had to be written somehow). For example, that alcohol is not allowed to be drunk, or that drugs cannot be brought there. At the same time, the on-site workers there were told, ‘It’s okay, it’s just on paper. It [alcohol] can be drunk there; drunk people can go there’. But the police didn’t have the information here. So, they were strict ... when such a drunk man came and wanted to go inside, the city police didn’t let

him in. We came there and said, ‘Why don’t you let them in? We have clearly agreed on the rules of how they will work’. So, we picked up [the] man from the ground, brought him drunk into a tent to lie down and sleep. They [the police] did not want us to have him inside. So, we took him, we took him through those gates, they didn’t stop us, we put him there. And then there was the terrible conflict that we were undermining the authority of the city police And I said, ‘But wait. There’s an agreement that alcohol is simply not zero tolerance here’. And that’s what they said, ‘But that’s not true. We clearly have an order written here that we must abide by’, and there was conflict at that moment, because under these conditions we would be much more rebellious if there was zero tolerance. But they were simply told something other than what was told to us. So, there was a communication breakdown somewhere. (NGO, 6 January 2021, Pilsen)

The camp was located in the industrial sector of the city, in the area of the former barracks on Folmavská street in Borská pole. There were four mobile toilets, two waste containers, a sink with cold running water, three resting places (three tables and six benches), five poles for tying up dogs with a lead, a clothesline, an army tent with electricity, an electric kettle and another two tables and four benches for sitting. Electricity was provided in the army tent, which served as a leisure area and kitchenette. The complex also included a building which was modified to provide 18 rooms for people who had been ordered to quarantine. In the area reserved for quarantine, hot showers and an army tent with two tables and four benches were provided opposite the DTC. The building had a storage room containing the materials necessary to accommodate quarantined people (fold-up beds, sleeping bags, blankets and mess tins). One room in the quarantine building was equipped with electricity for health professionals and social workers. Electricity, water

and heating were not provided in the client rooms. The facilities for the workers were in the form of a building unit with electricity, a refrigerator, heating, an electric kettle, a table and four chairs. The quarantine area and the tent centre were separated by fences. There were lockable metal gates between the rooms. Because none of the people diagnosed with COVID-19 were deployed in the quarantine area during the lockdown, DTC residents were gradually allowed to use hot showers in the quarantine area. An entrance to the complex was created from one of the adjacent streets and guarded by the city police throughout the day. Contrary to the original plan, the DTC eventually housed a variety of people, ranging from people with addictions, to 'homeless people', to people who had lost their accommodation in commercial dormitories (*ubytovny*) due to pandemic restrictions.

Operating rules (*Provozní řád*) were originally created for the quarantine area and consisted of 10 basic points; it was their upholding that became the defining subject of controversy. It was assumed that users could no longer leave the premises after being admitted to the centre. They were expected to follow hygiene rules (i.e. use protective equipment such as masks, gloves and hand disinfectant). Smoking was banned, except in designated places, as was alcohol consumption. While the actual rules of operation were created by representatives of non-profit organisations, which were authorised to do so by the municipality, it was the police who focused on compliance and enforcement of the operating rules and who generally ensured public order at the site, including client registration, management and arrivals/departures. As invoked by the situation described in the quote above, the police considered the operating rules to be binding for both sectors. On the contrary, some NGO workers from the beginning counted on a rather informal interpretation

of the rules, with regard to the two types of premises. Clients then defined themselves as opposing the operating rules by ignoring them. Alerted to the actions of clients on the DTC premises by citizens who worked at neighbouring companies, representatives of the Municipal Police thus complained and pointed out that the operating rules were being violated repeatedly by clients who brought alcohol into the designated area and used drugs (marijuana) in the DTC area. Mutual disputes led the police to ostentatiously assert their position (for example, they took the muzzle off a dog while guarding the premises), while they expected increasingly rigid adherence to the rules and, conversely, the formalisation of acts for form's sake. On the other hand, some NGOs again insisted upon their position through assertive treatment of the police (i.e. by declaring non-compliance with the rules and defending clients bringing alcohol to the premises), while other NGOs even withdrew from the DTC, labelling them 'mental fascists who do not recognise others' and complaining that 'it is difficult to negotiate' with them (NGO, 1 December 2020, Pilsen). There were also conflicts between clients, most often between people who used alcohol and drugs, or partner quarrels that, paradoxically, in time turned residents in favour of the police, who invoked increased compliance with the operating rules from other clients present.

Supported by the principle of surveillance, the daily regime consisted of a series of clearly defined routines. Social workers worked in four shifts; 9:00–11:00, 10:30–14:30, 14:00–17:30 and 17:00–20:00. These overlapped due to the transfer of information between workers. Humanitarian aid, addictology and social services were always offered and provided on weekdays from 9:00 to 20:00. Accommodated persons could use the food service once a day, always from 10:00 to 11:00 or 15:00 to 16:00. The centre

was regularly disinfected in a self-governed way – four times a day, clients disinfected common areas (toilets, sinks, taps, handles, etc.). Since no one was housed in the quarantine building, the clients of the centre were allowed to shower once a day, always between 12:00 and 18:00. Initially, two employees were present at any given time, which, due to the increase in accommodated clients, proved to be insufficient. As a result, social workers were only able to provide humanitarian aid. Therefore, social work had to be curtailed or addressed only marginally on the spot, and clients were referred to existing services. The night-rest period was from 22:00 to 06:00.

Mutual misunderstandings, abuses of individuals' social roles and the general formality of the camp led to the emergence of an atmosphere of frustration within the place. The camp was affected by a long-standing latent dispute and anger over who should bear the primary burden of resolving the homelessness situation and how to politically grasp it. As some city officials viewed the situation as financing the NGOs, they held those organisations responsible for the solution. The NGOs, on the other hand, pointed out that although their clients included homeless people who used one or more of their services (for problems with, for example, drug addiction and prostitution), their primary target was not homelessness. As a result, the police talked about the degradation of their mission as city police officers:

He was standing two metres away from me, told me a code, and went? He just gave me random numbers. Completely misguided. And should I have put it in the ledger? I was completely ashamed because I wasn't doing my job as a police officer. I was actually a doorman who recorded some numbers. (Police, 8 December 2020, Pilsen)

Social workers, on the other hand, mentioned the monotony of their work, which

was limited to providing humanitarian aid: 'And we are there as humanitarian workers, rather than as social workers. We issued packages of food, hygiene, clothing, provided the most basic things, and of course it was very bureaucratized' (NGO, 5 January 2021, Pilsen). Although the gravity of the pandemic situation was acknowledged by the importance attached to the role of improvisation, the camp was saturated with people frustrated at being stuck with the formal surveillance-based operation of the place, while infrastructural aspects, such as the fences between the individual areas and lockable metal gates, continuously exacerbated the situation.

Relaxed atmosphere: Nervousness, mutuality and benevolence in the Trója camp

I had a really bad day one day, right? Everything happened there. In the morning, the men were fighting there. I didn't even know who started it. There were so many of them in the fight, so I thought, 'I'll try to work it out there somehow, and if not, I'll call the police straight away'. Everyone was in a crowd, and there were others sitting there, so I thought, 'It's a time bomb before everyone joins [in]'. So, she [the client] went here and there and started to deal with it – as if. To my surprise, they were torn apart, which was really nice [because] no one had to come. Then it was decided that someone was supposed to have syringes and that someone was stepping on them. Then we were just finishing one person because [there] was a lot of banging around the tent. There was a young lady who was drugged, and as she was drugged she had a problem with her partner. She started shouting at him somehow, and he hit her. The guys around saw it; some wanted to stand up for her, some him, because some liked her, some him. She didn't even take part there anymore Well, the young lady was supposed to have taken some things. It wasn't so easy because it

was all very vulgar And then in the afternoon, there were other guys fighting again, so I went to see them. And I probably looked kind of done in because some gentleman started yelling at them, telling them stop, that I must have had enough of that ... and that they should be happy to be there at all. And it was such that I stopped and just watched, and they really broke away from each other, and suddenly there was no problem. (NGO, 10 August 2020, Prague)

The camp in Prague was established in an unused, grassy, fenced-in area of the Trója neighbourhood. The site was in close proximity to a concrete plant and a busy main road leading to/from the Prague Blanka Tunnel. Several cells in the complex contained, respectively, stored food, microwave ovens, a refrigerator, free items (i.e. clothes, towels and hygiene products), treatment facilities and a toilet (and a disinfection station), separate men's and women's showers and urinals and toilets. Next to the cells, a military tent was erected in which there were wooden benches and tables for approximately 30 people. Inside were a hair dryer and a table where a Red Cross volunteer gave out tea and coffee. Books and, after three weeks of operation, a ping-pong table were also available. The workers had their own caravan with a refrigerator and a mobile toilet, which, however, was also used by the clients themselves (there was only one men's toilet, which led to queues). The clients accommodated here were as expected – people from the street, except for the sick and otherwise handicapped, who mostly travelled to a hostel/hotel: 'I was there one day, then a social worker came there, saw that I was on crutches, so she arranged that hotel for me' (client, 21 June 2021, Prague).

The rules of the camp were created by the workers themselves, on the spot, and people were acquainted with them upon arrival. The rules themselves, which were nowhere explicitly formulated, included basic

principles such as the prohibition of alcohol and drugs, the need to follow the daily schedule and no aggression or vulgarity towards workers. The clients knew from their experience of the shelter's winter measures that 'some rules work ... but they are a bit more relaxed. I would say that it doesn't matter if you're quite drunk, that it's still being dealt with more benevolently, yeah' (NGO, 10 August 2020, Prague). Thanks to this, but also due to the exceptional nature of the overall situation, the workers continued to act compassionately and creatively with the rules. Such benevolence came into play mainly with addiction and substance use, but also in the case of moving to and from the camp. The staff told the clients that they weren't keeping them there but that it would be good if they left only once during the day to arrange everything they needed. However, as one employee pointed out, 'it was a kind of informal rule, which, after an agreement, could be stretched a bit. We had people there who still functioned as workmen, and it was like they told us and we didn't even demand contracts from them' (NGO, 10 August 2020, Prague). The police had to come to the site a few times, mostly due to heated disputes arising from quarantine or the activities of mostly younger drug users: 'they shouted there, for example, until the morning they shouted there, and many times a person could not even sleep' (client, 29 July 2021, Prague). Otherwise, for smaller disputes, including the application of rules, such as that which the passage at the beginning of this section describes, the matters were usually resolved without the police.

The daily regime was penetrated by mutuality and run by a series of rather loosely conceived routines. Breakfast was served between 06:00 and 09:00, depending on when the clients got up. This shift relieved the night service, and the shift

change lasted 10–15 minutes. After 08:00, the cleaning of the common areas began. Around 10:00 or 11:00, the food for the day arrived. The delivery brought in lunches and dinners, which were stored in refrigerators. Lunch began at 12:00, with the food being heated up by both staff and Red Cross volunteers (there were two microwaves in the tent and one in the staff cell). Clients could take food anywhere. After lunch, the facility was cleaned again. Throughout the day, clients took showers (the showers were open from 06:00 to 10:00). Between 18:00 and 19:30, dinner was served, followed by cleaning again, including cleaning of the showers and toilets. Throughout the day, clients could also visit staff to solve various problems, such as a leaking tent or the need for new clothes or shaving razors. Despite various dysfunctional or problematic aspects of camp life, there was a certain social reciprocity:

That afternoon, some went to bed, some went to buy a cigarette or whatever, and for the first time, some read, or we were with them and played ping pong. What was nice was that there were those Red Cross volunteers who sometimes practised stretching with them, that it was sometimes quite funny. Or we had coffee and sat down next to them and talked; it was a time when nothing extraordinary happened. (NGO, 10 August 2020, Prague)

At the same time, as the passage above again reveals, the clients also co-operated in the running of the city (e.g. helped to clean up voluntarily) or tried to resolve situations (e.g. conflicts). Twice a week, they were allowed to be treated by the Medics on the Street (*Medici na ulici*), which is a student association of future health professionals. At 22:00, the workers walked through the premises and locked the showers.

After only a few weeks, the unique interconnection of mutuality between people, the fluidity of the spaces and the relatively

good facilities led to a relaxed atmosphere. Although the place was in the hands of experienced workers, none of them had had direct experience with this type of arrangement. At first, everyone in the city felt a little insecure and nervous. Similarly, the clients were not sure how it would all work. Moreover, not everything always worked as it should or was positively received. Workers and clients struggled with poor-quality tents, which leaked in the rain. Related to this was the absence of a dry room. For some clients, mostly the elderly, the tents did not suit them: '[I]t was cold, and it was harmful to me. Also, when it's cold, my legs hurt more' (client, 21 June 2021, Prague). However, the pandemic emerged in Prague at a time when a number of changes in the area of homelessness governance were already taking place in the city. The mayor and the Councillor for Housing, both from the Czech Pirate Party, together with the ruling coalition, began a socio-political turnaround involving the emergence of social housing, an emphasis on data and knowledge and other progressive measures, such as the City Rental Agency. Due to these amicable political conditions, and inspired by the winter measures, the workers were able to introduce the politics of everyday benevolence and the informal micropolitics of governance, which they applied to various spheres of daily operations. This proved to be a crucial component of the atmosphere. In addition to specific infrastructural and socio-material characteristics of the city – workers shared their mobile toilet with their clients or gave it to them; the gate to the city was more or less passable during the day; and the city offered some enjoyment – the place was saturated with satisfaction due to the unique work experience of the workers and the ability to 'switch off' and calm down, away from the destructive environment of the street.

Conclusion: Governed by atmospheres

In this article, we examined the complicated relations between affective atmospheres and homelessness governance through two repeated instances of homeless emergency encampments. We started with the immediate perceived outcomes of both cases and traced the socio-material, affective and political arrangements involved in operating both places. In Pilsen, both NGOs and the police were more or less forced to participate in the DTC, and while they counted on a rather informal interpretation of the rules at the beginning, the police eventually considered the operating rules to be formally binding for both parts of the complex, which was exacerbated by various surveillance aspects of materiality. The result was a lasting and pervasive atmosphere of frustration and a situation in which virtually everyone, with the exception of a few clients, wished to end their participation in running the DTC (paradoxically, when the DTC was dissolved, everyone – police, politicians and NGOs – spoke in unison about their surprise that something they thought was working so well had come to an end). In contrast, in Prague, some NGO workers asked for work on the administration of the camp, while other actors who worked in the area, such as Medics on the Street and the Red Cross, co-operated on a voluntary basis. More loosely formulated and applied rules, including the partially passable borders of the city, created a relaxed atmosphere in the camp, which included mutuality and planted the seeds of local citizenship: clients participated voluntarily in cleaning, and they resolved some conflict situations themselves. The outcome of this atmosphere was that the place was perceived by the people involved as relatively successful.

However, rather than saying that atmospheres can be or were governed in the very functioning of the encampments – which is

probably more common in the scholarship on governance/policing and atmospheres (Volinz, 2021; Wall, 2019) – based on our findings we argue that the camps were *governed by atmospheres*. In other words, ‘rather than being inert, background, or ephemeral phenomena’ (Bissell, 2010: 272), the atmospheres determined the ways in which people existed in both places, even ‘before one investigates [their] value as a space[s] of and for practice’ (Duff, 2010: 891). Whilst emerging from the specific relations of diverse components in an assemblage/atmosphere, the notion of being governed by atmospheres refers to the potential of affect to shape the functioning of various domains of homelessness governance through its unique agency in atmospheres. We claim that affect is always out there, possessing the potential to be vital but never a fully determining force. As such, while it can acquire various socio-material–affective expressions, it can result in only a few possible outcomes (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral). Putting the emphasis on distributive agency in homelessness governance through this concept, we attempt to step beyond purely institutionally rational reasoning and discourse and to open space for a more complex and nuanced examination of the (unintended) outcomes of particular policies and politics. In the case of the studied encampments, to be specific, the atmospheres greatly shaped the way in which the homeless encampments were operated: in both cities, a specific mode of governance (see Tucker and Devlin, 2019) appeared in the form of everyday benevolence as pragmatically controlled informality, the extent of which is significantly contextually negotiated with regard to individual tasks within the daily routine (see Sparks, 2017). However, what is crucial here is that it was applied only in Prague. Yet to understand these subtle nuances, one has to once again focus on the specific circumstances of rules and daily routines.

Informality is a common part of the management of various aspects of cities, and the same holds true for operating homeless encampments. Our instances then teach us that the negotiation and practice of this informality are to a certain extent affected by atmospheres. According to Bissell (2010: 2713), atmospheres work as a propensity; that is, as ‘a pull or a charge that might emerge in a particular space which might (or might not) generate particular events and actions, feelings and emotions’. Thus, as in Prague, some NGO workers in Pilsen did not understand the operating rules as being strictly binding because their way of working was based on many years of experience with people drinking heavily. They were aware of the dysfunction of high-threshold conditions (ergo, the requirement of alcohol-free/drug-free zones). Unlike Prague, though, the overall socio-material and affective setting of the atmosphere in Pilsen simply did not allow for the development and application of everyday benevolence. As pointed out by Duff (2010: 885), ‘good: encounters involve the transfer of power from the affecting body to the affected body and so invest that body with joy and an increase in its power of acting’. Therefore, mirrored also in the grammar of both expressions, in the case of Pilsen the *atmosphere of frustration* emerged as heavy, unpleasant and with no capability to change, while in Prague, on the other hand, the *relaxed atmosphere* came into play as light, pleasant and potentially dynamic. Precisely this variation resulted in everyday benevolence remaining in the form of virtuality in Pilsen, as the daily administration of the camp was framed rather by the principle of surveillance. There are certainly a number of other forms through which affect and affective atmospheres are enfolded in the functioning of camps. But, while far from simply celebrating informality in homeless encampments, we do believe that the relation to the domain of informality is crucial and deserves our attention.

The atmospheres of both encampments were, though, interrelated through ontologically different modes with local political and urban conditions in homelessness governance. The managerial and socio-material aspects were discursive and practical manifestations of the dominant urban politics of a given city. In Pilsen, competence over this was assumed by the city security department, and the entire situation was framed by the city from the beginning as a security problem. This did not happen by accident. The Pilsen administration had long been close to revanchism, including an emphasis on repression and discipline against homelessness and poverty (Váně, 2020; Vašát, 2012). After all, this also influenced many aspects of the functioning of the site. In addition to the socio-material aspects, it was embodied in purely infrastructural aspects: for example, that hot water was actually available as a by-product of a non-functioning quarantine centre, and that there was no hot water in the camp itself; that the DTC provided almost no leisure activities; that clients had to clean up themselves; and that the operation of the tent city was supervised by the police, who essentially became an extended arm of revanchist governance in Pilsen. However, these circumstances had their own specific affective layer, although it operated in a different way. As working through imbrications that emerge ‘from the interpolation of bodily capacities’ (Lancione, 2017: 6), affect, we argue, stands as a component of the assemblage/atmosphere of the camps that has the potential to be shared by the assemblages of homelessness governance and, possibly, by other assemblages in both cities. In the paragraph describing the situation of conflict, the NGO worker states: ‘under these conditions we would be much more rebellious if there was zero tolerance’. Here, the worker, when expecting a revanchist approach from the police, refers to the struggles with the

city authorities and *ipso facto* to the anger and dissatisfaction penetrating homelessness governance in Pilsen. In Prague, although revanchist tendencies in homelessness governance are dampened by the current progressive administration, which emphasises housing as a right and includes benevolence as a dominant mode of governance, it was not so different a few years ago. So, if there was for some people no pleasant affect par excellence in the city, there were definitely no negative ones, which is why the workers could experience a 'healthy nervousness' and simply focus on their job in the way they wanted. Therefore, both of these experiences imply that affect has the power to shape the ways in which a given policy measure and political decision are fulfilled. Affective atmospheres are then inherently political (Lancione, 2017) and their importance and unique agency in homelessness governance need to be acknowledged. Despite a number of 'differences' between the two established camps and the cities in general, there is nevertheless no dichotomy, but rather elements of governance, politics or affect which may occur in different variations and intensities in many other cities.

The immanent connections between affect and informality enabled the contours of one more key issue to arise: the complex and ambivalent role of the NGOs in homelessness governance. As Vašát (2021a) pointed out, individual repressive and disciplining measures in Czech cities are an expression of the mixing of revanchism with NIMBYism, as an expression of stigmatisation, which ultimately manifested in the conflict with people from adjacent companies around the Pilsen camp. Despite this, NGOs in Czech cities often participate in punitiveness themselves, either out of coercion, as was the case with Pilsen, or because they are often close in profile. In this sense, we offer findings on the interconnectedness of punitive and care/

supportive elements that are similar to those from American, British and Australian cities, where rather than opposing tendencies, these are blurred (Hennigan and Speer, 2019) or ambiguous circumstances (Clarke and Parsell, 2020). However, the example of the rebellious role of NGOs in Pilsen reveals another important aspect: NGOs can fundamentally define themselves against revanchism. Although this leads to conflicts in the short term, in the long run it indicates the creative potential of the non-profit sector against neoliberal tendencies (Clarke and Parsell, 2020; Cloke et al., 2017), and this is the case not only for housing-oriented NGOs (see Clarke and Parsell, 2020) but also those that strive at the lowest threshold, such as drop-in centres, shelters and soup kitchens.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers at *Urban Studies* for their insightful comments on an early draft. Both authors are grateful to all respondents for their help in the research.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Jan Váně would like to acknowledge support from the Faculty of Philosophy and Arts, University of West Bohemia (SGS-2021-013). Petr Vašát's work on this article was funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 101032970. For valuable time for thinking about and working on the article, he also thanks the Weatherhead Scholars Program at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

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