

The Urban Sensorium

Sense of the City/Sensations Urbaines,
curated by Mirko Zardini, at the Canadian
Centre for Architecture, 1920 rue Baile,
Montreal, October 26, 2005 to September 10,
2006.

Making sense of the city

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This wonderful exhibition provides a fascinating introduction to the new realms of urban existence currently being discovered by researchers of the senses. And, rather like the senses that are its focus, it is an exhibition that stimulates and makes us curious in equal measure.

Divided into five sections (corresponding to broadly accepted notions regarding the number of senses we have), the exhibition presents ways in which sight, smell, sound, touch and perception of temperature are experienced as part of our everyday lives in the city.

After an introduction, in which our senses are contextualized within the much wider realm of animal and insect senses, the visitor to the exhibition proceeds (if she or he turns right – which, I am told, most museum visitors do) to encounter the first realm: that of sight. This is presented by an examination of the effects of night on the city. For example, do street lights cut down violence? Jane Jacobs is

quoted as saying they don't. Her views are largely ignored, however, by utility corporations, planners and architects who harp on the value of urban electrification. Light fetishism of this sort makes us miss a great deal, as some amazing photographs of buildings at night suggest. Darkness forces us to experience the city in new ways and to open up unused parts of our perception to the full range of urban experience. This finding is an obvious one to the blind, and this part of the exhibition also includes Braille and tactile city maps as a way of promoting wider reflection on this issue.

The second set of displays, the "seasonal city," is concerned with our perception of temperature and deals (not surprisingly for Montreal in the winter) with ice, snow and cold. Photographs of skaters and ice palaces contrast with video clips of snow removal to show that the challenges of winter in an urban milieu are balanced by the joy of different recreational activities. Interestingly, the way in which snow dampens noise levels and increases the reflection of city lights also nicely illustrates how a range of our senses, rather than only one, can be engaged by the various phenomena of the urban "sensorium."

Temperature is followed by sound, a portion of the exhibition that relies mainly on the work of Canadian composer, R. Murray Schafer. Over a number of years now, he has endeavored to record the sounds of the city, and visitors can compare his 1973 Vancouver "soundscape" with those of a sample of other cities. This work is supplemented by researchers who have mapped the decibel levels across Zurich, and Minneapolis-St Paul. It very much seems that noise levels are increasing and have become a pervasive part of modern urban existence. It also seems that we don't mind – at least, the current use of the iPod to carry noise around with us seems to suggest this (although "sound" and "noise" are very much value judgments, as the exhibition makes clear).

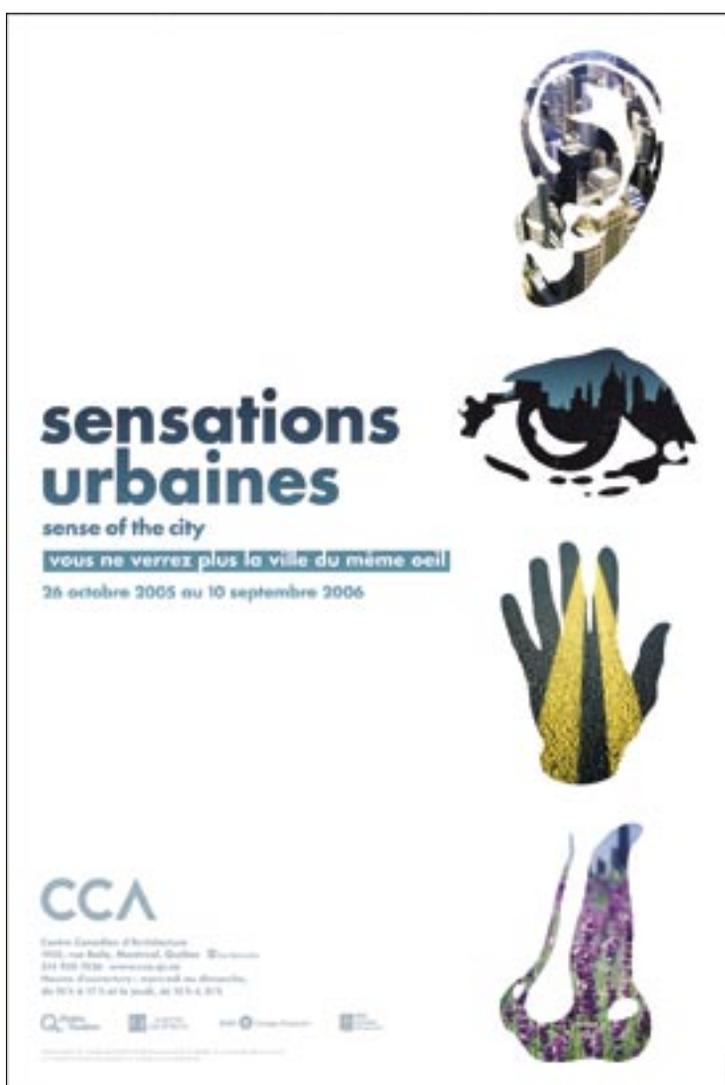
The fourth part of the exhibition deals with asphalt as an example of how the surfaces of the city are covered. Once dusty and rugged boardwalks and rutted muddy roads are now smoothed over and covered with blacktop to create an anodyne world of neat parking lots (nicely parodied in some recent urban projects, as photos exhibited here indicate).

The final stop on the sensorial tour presents the world of smell. The visitor is invited to open vials in order to sniff various odors (such as bread, grass and rain) and to consider how air conditioning has dulled our experience of the atmosphere. By way of contrast, a view of an Italian hotel seemingly built of walls of flowers offers a prospect of some amazing new realm of experience.

What that new realm might be, we can only guess, but some working conclusions can certainly be gleaned from the exhibition, and from some of its subtexts. First, it very much appears that our recent urban experience has been one that has been almost completely shaped and conditioned by our sense of sight. For example, our cities and houses may be "planned," but attention is given mainly

to the visual aesthetics of a design. The feel of a surface, the sound emitted by its materials, or the smell of its activities are relegated to the backburner. It seems to me to be entirely symptomatic of this approach that the very disciplines of geography, urban planning and architectural studies have become almost entirely visual activities.

Why have we lost our senses? Clues provided by the exhibition clearly point to the processes of modernization, and to the passion we have to divorce ourselves from nature. This desire (itself perhaps a result of an Enlightenment separation between humans and the rest of nature) is one that modern technologies have only encouraged us to develop – often to our considerable disadvantage. Photos of



Poster for the exhibition
Sense of the City
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“bubbles” erected over entire cities are emblematic of this trend – we want to be sealed off from the rough edges of the world and to live in an urban cocoon. Snow clearance provides another example – cities like Montreal now clear snow throughout the winter so that everyone can get to work as usual. But why should we expect this? Why do we try to use technology to “smooth away” an entire season? What hubris is this?

But maybe technology isn’t all that bad? Certainly, a third and final reflection on this exhibition is that, exciting as it was, we probably don’t want to go back to a Dickensian world of urban life. Unnavigable streets piled high with snow in the winter are one thing, but streets covered with horse dung are a hygiene risk. Smog may be very evocative of Sherlock Holmes, but to an asthmatic it can be life-threatening. Modernity and health concerns have therefore combined to produce an erosion of the senses in the re-shaping of our urban experience, but it is probably only a sentimentalist who would wish to restore that picture.

However this picture is ultimately viewed, the rediscovery of the world of the senses is an exciting story, and it is one that this exhibition expertly tells. Neither overly academic nor annoyingly superficial, it is an exhibition that wears its learning lightly and leaves us with a host of challenging questions. To have done this in such a relatively small space is both a tribute to the exhibition curators and to the power of the topic itself – for it is one that is both very simple and deeply transformative at the same time. The same comments apply to the book that accompanies the exhibition (Mirko Zardini (ed.), *Sense of the City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism*: The Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2005). It usefully reproduces everything shown in the exhibition itself, and includes a series of specially-commissioned essays that will be welcomed by those who have had their appetites whetted by the exhibition and want to know more. Most of us probably give little thought to how we sense the city, but those who have seen this exhibition will never experience it in the same way again.

Prière de ne pas toucher

Michael Carroll

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The exhibition *Sense of the City*, curated by CCA director Mirko Zardini, opened at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in the Fall 2005 and closes in September 2006. The exhibition proposes a sensorial urbanism that challenges traditional urban design practices that privilege vision over the other senses, thus editing out a whole spectrum of experiences and limiting both the designer’s and citizen’s holistic sense of the city.

Sense of the City, designed by the architects of Atelier In Situ and the graphic designers of Orange Tango, starts with an elongated and slightly tapered, blacked-out corridor that features residual sounds of the city – a kind of visual palette cleanser for what’s ahead. There is lots of text on the walls throughout the exhibit and one of the first

snippets is the self-critical question: “Could you make a museum exhibit for the way of life in your city or town?” Well, yes and possibly no. However, *Sense of the City* promises to offer abundant clues for all those ambitious do-it-yourselfers.

The subdued “welcome room” of the exhibit offers graphic punch with large silhouettes of critters with advanced sensorial capabilities compared to us limited humans. Just think how a giant rat with a hearing range between 1,000 and 40,000 Hz, or an ant that can detect miniscule earth movements, experiences the world – we can only respond by becoming more aware of our own animalistic selves – hopefully encompassing senses well beyond the traditional Aristotelian five of sight, taste, touch, smell and hearing.

Heading to the right, clockwise around the central front room, the remaining five rooms of the CCA have been divided up to tackle and ponder the contemporary aspects of the post-industrial city. Each room, *nocturnal city*, *seasonal city*, *sounds of the city*, *surface of the city* and *air of the city*, is aligned, more or less, with one or two of the five senses with the exception of taste.

Nocturnal city focuses on sight by limiting it. Colonized by the eye, the darkness of night becomes a safer place – as Jane Jacobs has pointed out, eyes are more important than light when it comes to safety. Whether visually impaired or not, museum patrons are asked to touch an audio tactile guide of the city of Bologna, a Braille map of New York’s subway system and maybe even the rubberized surface of the black plinth on which these items are displayed. *Seasonal city* focuses on snow and ice and their possibly numbing effects as we deny their existence in most of our Nordic cities. Images of the pavilions designed for *The Snow Show* held in 2004 in Lapland and sepia pictures of Montreal ice palaces, of around the late nineteenth century, offer ideas on how to embrace ice as a way of building a more festive future. *Sounds of the city* is an insular room furnished with low, rounded ottomans and headphones that conveys, among other things, Vancouver/New York soundscapes. It also features a drawer filled with lavender, an olfactory cue for the design of a two-meter-high acoustic wall along a highway in France generously covered with lavender. *Surface of the city* focuses on asphalt and visitors are encouraged to touch a tray of polymer modified asphalt or (despite the Duchampian *prière de ne pas toucher*) a crumbling hunk of asphalt. As well, asphalt’s smooth ubiquitous character and its aesthetic potential are considered in a series of contemporary design projects, juxtaposing some earlier images of dirt and cobblestone streets also displayed in the room. *Air of the city* explores the homogenizing effect of air conditioners and is dominated by Ivan Ilich’s pronouncement: “Increasingly the whole world has come to smell alike...” Exhibits include images and documentation of Gordon Matta-Clark’s *Fresh Air Cart* performance piece and his photograph, *Pipes*, taken in 1971, that is cunningly displayed within the cavity of the museum’s wall. Once again we are encouraged to engage our

senses by smelling tall laboratory beakers mounted on a plinth and filled with such simulated smells as subway detergent, garbage or grass.

As an exhibition, *Sense of the City* does offer a whiff of possible futures of a sensorial urbanism. Considerable academic weight is made with the addition of the exhibition's lecture series, special events and most importantly the catalog, *Sense of the City: An Alternative Approach to Urbanism*, published by the CCA and Lars Müller Publishers that features such delicious titles as: "The Idea of Winteriness: Embracing Ice and Snow," "The Deodorized City: Battling Urban Stench in the Nineteenth Century" and "Sensory Stirrings."

Sense of the City is an ambitious project with real possibilities to shift the minds of urban planners, architects and artists as they consider the past, the present and the future of our increasingly urbanized environments. However, *Sense of the City*, despite its good intentions, falls short of its full potential because it is too tasteful, too polite and too intellectual to deal with the hugely divergent and possibly offensive nature of our cities. Museums do not like things to be messy or fuzzy – however, fortunately for us, cities are both. Cities are interesting because of the collision between very different things: the permanent and the temporal, the tasteful and the garish, the sacred and the profane. How can we program or propagate the accidental – without short circuiting it? How can an exhibition capture within the confines of the museum, an immersive urban atmosphere with all its multisensory complexity? Maybe a sensorial urbanism cannot be dissected – it can only exist within the space of contamination. Maybe somewhere between this sound, that smell and a multitude of other factors exists the essence of what is New York, Paris or New Delhi – forever elusive and mysterious, very far from the white rooms of any museum. As an alternative scenario, the street itself might be sensorial urbanism's next stop with all its profound fecundity with no *prière de ne pas toucher* in sight.