SENSE OF THE CITY
AN ALTERNATE APPROACH TO URBANISM

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CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE
LARS MÜLLER PUBLISHERS
Increasingly the whole world has come to smell alike: gasoline, detergents, plumbing, and junk foods coalesce into the catholic smog of our age.

Ivan Illich, 1985
E CITY
LONDON, THE BIG SMOKE, 5TH TO 10TH DECEMBER 1952

As it turned out, one of my tours of duty coincided almost exactly with the great smog, 5th to 10th December. As we now know, but did not at the time, the borough of Westminster in which we were situated was the part of London where the fog was most dense. As for my personal recollection of the smog itself, at its worst it had the effect of completely disorientating me in a part of London I knew well, so that I lost my way on a minor errand from the Middlesex Hospital to Oxford Street, 400 yards away. To get my bearings and to discover where I was, I had to creep on the pavement along the walls of the buildings, to the next corner, to read the name of the street. I do not recall any smell, but I do remember an eerie silence as there was little or no traffic. Visibility was less than three yards, and it was bitterly cold.

Donald Ascheuer, 2002.
coincided almost December.

... as the part of my personal work for London...

...where I was...
LONDON, 5 December 1952
Don Price: Morning traffic at Blackfriars, almost at a standstill because of the blanket of smog.

LONDON, 8 December 1952
Monty Fresco: A man guiding a London bus through thick fog with a flaring torch.
LONDON, 24 November 1954
John Pratt, an assistant at the Fuel Research Station's Air Pollution section, with a filter taken from an air conditioning plant in London. After just one night’s use, it was discoloured by the impurities and smog in the air.

LONDON, 6 January 1956
A policeman wearing a mask as protection against the severe smog which virtually blacked out the capital. Visibility was reduced to a maximum of five yards.
1956

A mask was fitted as protection against which virtually blacked out the capital.

Reduced to a maximum of five yards.
AIR OF THE CITY

As a concentration of activities and people, the contemporary city also comprises a concentration of odours, even if they are no longer comparable to those of medieval, Renaissance, or 18th-century cities. On the one hand, we find “a new mix of gasoline, detergents, plumbing, and junk food,” and on the other, the odours of the refuse that often, in the bidonville, the slum, and the favela, accumulates in open-air dumps, dotted with fires sending up plumes of foul smoke.

Smells that are now universal and specific smells, produced by particular activities, sources of energy, aromas and spices, plants, flowers, animals, and garbage overlay one another, forming landscapes of smell that are invisible, but nonetheless present and real. Dogs are much better able to recognize these smellscapes than humans.

After trying to eliminate dirt and garbage from the ground, municipalities set out to rid the air of odours and impurities. We have renounced the utopian idea of a socially, politically, and economically perfect city, but not the promise of a perfectly clean and sanitized environment with pure air for breathing. Where we have succeeded, for example with air conditioning systems for large indoor communal spaces, the lack of any olfactory interest has been so profoundly disappointing that we have reintroduced artificial odours, like the ones to be found in our shopping malls.
Very often, however, we have purified the air only of its visible pollution, soot and smog, leaving intact airborne chemical substances that escape our notice precisely because they are not only invisible but also odourless. So we worry about our health, consulting reports on the quality of the air. At the same time, dust, the obsession of the modern city, has not gone away. No longer perceptible, it is present in a more insidious form, so fine that it is invisible to the eye.

Thus, among the many kinds of well-being to which we aspire, we cannot forget our physical well-being, but neither should we neglect our mental health or the health of our senses, such as the pleasure we take in a particular scent or odour.

No one may keep running for more than four (4) minutes the motor of a vehicle parked outdoors, save when the motor is used to carry out work outside the vehicle, or when the outside temperature is lower than \(-10^\circ C\).

City of Montreal, By-law No. 44: Air Purification, Section 3.07 (20 December 1979).
This antipollution performance took place on 9 September 1972 in the Wall Street district, and one week later at 42nd Street and Vanderbilt Avenue. Matta-Clark constructed a small vehicle equipped with an oxygen tank and masks so that passersby could be offered a mix of 79% nitrogen and 21% oxygen.
August 22, 1972

Mr. Gordon Matta
28 East 4th Street
New York, N.Y.

Dear Gordon:

In answer to your questions:

1) Pure oxygen, to some people with impaired respiratory function, can, even in hospital, be fatal as it can "turn off" their anoxia respiratory drive. By offering this indiscriminately to the general public you would be practicing medicine without a license and liable to all sorts of legal actions.

2) In view of #1, #2 does not pertain.

3) We spoke of the very real dangers of cross-contamination with organisms such as Serratia marcescens, Proteus, Pseudomonas, etc., and the methods to prevent this. Very expensive.

Better forget this project and try to clean the air around us.

Very sincerely yours,

Richard B. Duane, Jr., M.D.

RBD/dah

Letter from Dr. Richard B. Duane to Gordon Matta-Clark, dated 22 August 1972, regarding Matta-Clark's plan to offer the public oxygen.
BAD ODOURS

The Régie autonome des transports parisiens (RATP) was faced with the problem of bad odours. In 1993, an odour nuisance treatment team was set up. Once the most obtrusively bad odours were eliminated, the metro was to camouflage the rest with a good smell: improving the underground transportation environment became a top priority. The technical department responsible for cleaning the metro introduced a fragrance evocative of the “smell of clean” into the solution used to clean the floors of the metro system's underground stations and terminals: 640,000 square metres in all. The fragrance enhanced the sense of cleanliness by improving the overall perception of the environment.

Roger Henri Guérard, 2004
Improving the environment. Each department introduced the "Clean" fragrance into the metro terminals.
Most people have used the medicinal-smelling artificial vanilla flavoring for so long that they have no idea what real vanilla extract tastes and smells like.

Diane Ackerman, 1995

Different artificial scents: Subway, Lavender, Tile, Natural Gas, Bakery, Garbage, and Asphalt; Symrise, 2005
KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) is but one example of the smell of food being vented into the air, often by specialized diffusing technology, to travel far beyond its source, following people, meeting them unawares, flaring their nostrils even when out of sight of the scent’s origin. Circulating through the streets, occupying a neighborhood, lurking around corners in the mall and other indoor marketplaces, these odours are out for a stroll, trolling for potential customers to entice.

Jim Drobnick, 2004

Stills from the industry on Parade film collection, 1951
First air conditioned shopping center: Southdale Regional Shopping Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Diane Ackerman, 1995
The streets of nineteenth-century London were full of poor girls selling small bouquets of violets and lavender.... Violets contain ionone, which short-circuits our sense of smell. The flower continues to exude its fragrance, but we lose the ability to smell it.

Diane Ackerman, 1995
All smell is, if it be intense, immediate disease.

Edwin Chadwick, 1849
BUENOS AIRES, 2002

Ferdinanda Scianna (Magnum): In a slaughterhouse.
THE DEODORIZED CITY:
BATTING URBAN STENCH IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
Constance Classen

Charles Dickens was once described by his office clerk as "a man who lived a lot by his nose. He always seemed to be smelling things." One of the things Dickens learned by his nose was that in nineteenth-century London, rain had none of the fragrant, revitalizing characteristics it had in the countryside. As he described it in his novel *Little Dorrit*: "In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every droop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul male smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, disstained, wretched addition to the gutter." The reasons why urban showers only led to foul odours had been detailed a century earlier by Jonathan Swift in a poem entitled "A Description of a City Shower":

Now from all parts the stinking brands (gutters) flow
And bear their trophies with them as they go:
Fifth of all bear and cattle seem to sell
What street they hailed from, by their sight and smell...
Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
Drowned puppies, stinking swine, all drenched in mud,
Dead cats and turnips-caps come tumbling down the flood.

The malodorous filthiness of the streets of London—and indeed of most cities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—was caused by numerous factors. One was the irregular collection of garbage, or, as it was euphemistically termed—"dust." The result was that streets often provided the most convenient place to dispose of household rubbish. Streets were also often used as public toilets and cesspools. Indeed the custom of emptying chamber pots from bedroom windows into the street below resulted in many an unwary passerby receiving an unpleasant soaking. Another contributor to urban filth was the abundant presence within the city of slaughterhouses and related trades, "such as gut-spinning, tallow-melting, bladder-blowing, and paunch-cleansing," as one nineteenth-century report put it. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, almost anyone could set up a slaughterhouse almost anywhere in London, and a considerable amount of the resulting offal ended up in the surrounding streets. Furthermore, in order to arrive at the slaughterhouses, herds of animals were driven through the city. These animals, together with the thousands of cows kept in city stables and the thousands of horses used for pulling cabs and carriages, contributed a potent reek of manure to the urban smellscape.
Not surprisingly, therefore, the only refreshment to the state of small afforded by a city shower in Dickens’ day was that it might wash away some of the accumulated filth on the streets. However, this was but a temporary solution to urban stench, not only because the streets quickly refilled with waste, but also because their malodorous contents were washed into nearby rivers, which consequently became little more than open sewers in their passage through cities. A London newspaper declared in 1855: “Wherever we go, whatsoever we eat or drink within the circle of London, we find tainted with the Thames... No one having eyes, nose, or taste, can look upon the Thames and not be convinced that its waters are, year by year, and day by day, getting fouler and more pestilential.”

Stinking streets and sewers were by no means purely a modern urban blight. As far back as 1357, King Edward had remarked that “When passing along the water of the Thames we have beheld dung and other filth accumulated in diverse places in the said City upon the bank of the river aforesaid and also perceived the filth and other abominable stench arriving therefrom.” The problem was greatly intensified in modernity by the enormous increase in the population of cities. Particularly ominous was the absence of any organized sewage system. Most houses in the mid-nineteenth century had cesspools, some of which had grown so large over the years that they could almost be called cess-states. Traditionally, the night-soil, as they were called, had emptied cesspools and sold the contents to farmers as manure. But as cities grew larger, farms grew more inaccessible. Moreover, in the mid-nineteenth century, guano from South America became available to farmers as a cheap fertilizer. In consequence, many urban cesspools were mostly emptied and ended up leaking into the surrounding ground and even into the houses themselves. (In fact, cesspools were often built to leak, so as to facilitate emptying less often.) The problem was exacerbated in working-class districts by overcrowding. In these districts, houses meant to accommodate one family, housed one or more pet rooms, not excluding the kitchen. Nineteenth-century medical officers and sanitary reformers who toured such neighborhoods described hellish scenes of overflowing cesspools, mountains of manure, and heaps of garbage. One official wrote: “In pursuit of my duties, from time to time, I have visited many places where filth was lying scattered about the rooms, vaults, cellars, areas, and yards, so thick, and so deep, that it was hardly possible to move for it. I have also seen in such places human beings living and sleeping in [cellar] rooms with filth from overflowing cesspools spouting through and running down the walls and over the floor.”

The stench produced by these appalling conditions was intensified by the customary lack of ventilation. Many tenement houses were built back-to-back, and certain streets of workers’ housing in
London could only be reached by underground tunnels, as they were completely closed by surrounding houses. Furthermore, a tax on windows led to the construction of housing with as few windows as possible. Although the tax was repealed in 1851, the windowless buildings to which it had given rise remained, no house and seal in the unfortunate poor for many long years afterwards. A physician, describing one such abode in 1843, noted that “The horrible stench which polliated the place seemed to be closed in hermetically; not a breath of fresh air reached them— all was abominable.”

The filthy, malodorous conditions of many English boarding houses were matched by those abroad. Honore de Balzac’s 1835 account of the stench of a Parisian boarding house is often taken as indicative of his unusual sensitivity to smell (like Dickens, Balzac also “lived a lot by his nose”): “It smells stuffy, congealed, stuffy; it is chilly, clammy to breathe, permeates one’s clothing; it leaves the stale perfume of a room where people have been eating; it stinks of backstairs, scullery, workhouse.” Nonetheless, compared to the realities of many of the lodgings of the poor, Balzac’s description might rather be read as a delicate understatement of the case.

If it had been only the poor who suffered from urban stench, perhaps little would have been done to ameliorate the situation. Despite the belief of many reformers that clean water, fresh air, and Christianity could purify the poor, body and soul, it was widely believed that dirt, immorality, and poverty were a natural and inevitable combination. A nineteenth-century philosopher even went so far as to conclude that the working classes tolerated malodors because they had a disliking sense of smell. “Among the lower orders, bad smells are little heeded; in fact, “no one have they, but they smell not”; and the result is, a continuance to live in an atmosphere laden with poisonous odours, whereas anyone with the least power of smells retained through such odour, as they would anything else that is vile or pernicious.” As if to prove the point, many of the efforts to clean the urban environment were met with public slain. This was partly because waste constituted the livelihood of many workers, such as cesspool cleaners, street sweepers, and rag pickers, and partly because the poor feared—with good reason—that when a neighborhood was cleaned off filth, they would be the next to be evicted.

While particularly bad in the working-class districts, the accumulation of waste and its resultant stench was a city-wide problem from which no one was immune. In an attempt to ameliorate the problem, more houses in London were connected to sewers that emptied into the Thames. This transposition, however, led one sanitary reformer to assert that “the Thames is now made a great cesspool instead of each person having one of his own.”

Many angrily denounced the dumping of sewage into rivers, not on the grounds of pollution, but because they thought it a waste of
a valuable resource. In a letter to the Times, a London alderman decried “the gradual but sure exhaustion of the soil of Great Britain by our new sanitary arrangements, which permit the excrement (really the food) of fifteen million people, who inhabit our towns and cities, to flow wastefully into our rivers.” In France, Victor Hugo similarly condemned the loss of productivity entailed in letting manure be carried away to the sea:

These heaps of garbage at the corners of the stone blocks, these mounds of odor jolting through the streets at night, these hoard scavengers’ carts, these fetid streams of subterranean slime which the pavement hides from you, do you know what all this is? It is the flowering meadow ... it is perfumed hay, it is golden corn, it is bread on your table, it is warm blood in your veins, it is health, it is joy, it is life. It was also occasionally perfumed, as farms that were manured with sewage grew, along with vegetables, aromatic plants used in perfumery. Indeed, the corks for perfume bottles were often salvaged from the innumerable bottle corks found floating in the sewers. While Hugo and others lamented a vast fertile resource being washed away to the sea, the greater problem for most cities was precisely that the sewage dumped into their rivers was not taken far enough away. As a London paper claimed in 1855: “The abominations, the corruptions we pour into the Thames are not, as some falsely say, carried away into the sea. The sea rejects the loathsome tribute, and brings it back again with every flow. Here, in the heart of the doomed city, it accumulates and destroys.”

In the hot, dry summer of 1858, the reek of the Thames was so strong that it drove legislators from Parliament, holding handkerchiefs to their noses. While many Victorians preferred not to discuss the indelicate subject of focal stench, the Great Stink, as it was called, overcame their reticence. The City Press reported “gentility is at an end—it stinks; and whose once inhales the stink can never forget it and can count himself lucky if he live to remember it.” Here we find expressed the widespread belief that foul odours were not only unpleasant, they were dangerous to one’s health. It was this association with stench and filth, rather than concerns over repugnant odours or squalid living conditions, which would provide the main impetus to the nineteenth-century sanitary reform movement.

Incredible as it might seem to most city dwellers today, in the early nineteenth century, drinking water often came straight from nearby rivers—the same rivers that were known as open sewers. The companies that piped in the water conveniently took it from that section of the river that passed through the city, which also happened
to be the most polluted part of the river. No method of filtration was used. Fool as such water might seem today, most urban dwellers were only too happy to get their share of it. Water was not piped to houses, and usually there was only one standpipe of water per street—and that might only run for an hour a day. Little wonder that working classes of London were known as the Great Unwashed.

All water came from wells, but the provided by these was in many cases no pure than that which came from the river. City wells were often shallow and received the drainage from the surrounding soil, which, as often as not, saturated with the leaked contents of cesspools and other waste products. With good reason, the well water of London was said to smell like sewer water. When water was unavailable from pipe or well or rain barrel, the last resource for housewives was to dip buckets into the mucky ditches in the street.

It took many years and many deaths, but gradually people realized that there was a link between the quality of their drinking water and the frequency and virulence of cholera epidemics in the nineteenth century. A first step was taken in London in 1852, when water companies using the Thames were ordered to remove their intake pipes from the city and to filter the water they supplied. The next steps were to construct an adequate sewage system, establish an efficient means of garbage disposal, and regulate the operation of noxious industries such as slaughterhouses. Since many private interests were involved, these steps were not taken easily. Obliging homeowners to connect their houses to a sewage system, for example, was said to infringe on their property rights. Restricting the operations of businesses was considered to interfere with the right of free enterprise. Dr. John Simon noted in a report he made to the London Commissioners of Sewers in 1854: "When your orders are addressed to some owner of objectionable property which is a constant source of nuisance, or disease, or death; when you would force one person to refrain from tainting the general atmosphere with the results of an offensive occupation ... you will be reminded of the 'right of property' and of 'an Englishman's inviolable claim to do as he will with his own.'" Dr. Simon pleaded that "the factory chimney that eclipses the light of heaven with unbroken clouds of smoke, the [fallow] making house that nauseates an entire parish, the slaughterhouse that forms round itself a circle of dangerous disease—these surely are not private but public affairs." Such pleas, however, were often overridden by the seemingly more powerful argument that employment and economic growth must take precedence over "niceties" of cleanliness.

The arguments that raged over sanitary reform in nineteenth-century England were also debated in other countries, most notably France. Already in the eighteenth century, the foul odours of Paris
could be perceived at a considerable distance from the city. On a visit to France, the great English sanitary reformer Edwin Chadwick tried to convince Napoleon III that combatting urban stench was a task worthy of an emperor: "They say that Augustus found Rome a city of brick, and left it a city of marble. If your Majesty, finding Paris fair above, will leave it sweet below, you will more than rival the first emperor of Rome." 26

The proposal perhaps appealed to Napoleon III, as he did indeed support the construction of a comprehensive sewage system for Paris. As well as being attracted by visions of imperial glory, the emperor probably also was worried by Chadwick's argument that cleaning up the city would help calm the social unrest that had resulted in riots and revolts. Identified as the pox were with dirt and stench, the suppression of the latter metaphorically entailed the suppression of the former. One French reformer declared, for instance, that "Prostitutes are just as inevitable in an urban district as are sewers, dumps, and refuse heaps. The authorities should take the same approach to each." 27 The old, dysfunctional Parisian sewers had been described by Victor Hugo in Les Misérables as an underground haunt of both lowlife and revolutionaries. The new sewage system, under the charge of Baron Haussmann, the same official who had created the French capital's wide boulevards, was to be efficient and state regulated. The cleanliness of the new underground system mirrored the orderliness of the newly-designed city above. So respectable did the sewers become that public tours were offered. Ventilation and the rapid movement of water ensured that malodour was kept to a minimum, and the Parisian sewer went from being a dark den of subversion to being a bourgeois spectacle. (Present-day tourists to Paris may also descend into the "Sewer Museum." ) Victor Hugo observed in 1862: "Today, the sewer is clean, cold, upright, proper... One can almost see clearly in it. The snare is well-behaved." 28

As originally designed by Haussmann, the Parisian sewers carried only street and household waste. Later in the nineteenth century, another system was constructed to carry human waste. At the same time, French engineers experimented with different ways of treating or recycling sewage, so that by the end of the nineteenth century, untreated sewage was no longer being dumped in the Seine. The streets of Paris were further sanitized by regulations requiring residents to place their garbage in cans, which were regularly emptied by municipal garbage collectors. (The name of the man who created the new law concerning garbage collection, Poubelle, became the French word for garbage can.)

A similar sequence of events occurred in London and other major cities in Europe and elsewhere. Networks of sewers were constructed underground. Zoning regulations placed slaughterhouses, garbage
dumps, and cemeteries outside of cities. As for the overcrowding of the working classes, which in many cities had led to notoriously filthy slums, this was eased by the spread of railroads. Whereas previously, workers had been obliged to live near their workplace, no matter how loathsome the available accommodations, cheap railroad fares meant they could seek better lodging further away and commute. While it would certainly contribute its share to the pollution of the environment, the automobile, invented in the late nineteenth century, would ensure that horses and their manure disappeared from city streets.

The deodorization of the modern city was a slow, difficult process, and did not proceed everywhere at the same pace. Old habits of dumping garbage and waste into the streets persisted well into the twentieth century. In her recollections of a working-class childhood in early-twentieth-century Paris, Madeleine Henry describes chamber pots being emptied out of windows, as though a sanitary revolution had never taken place.

Even in the twenty-first century, urban sanitation is hardly a fait accompli. While the street is no longer the customary receptacle for household refuse, littering remains a problem in cities today. Certainly the "awful stinks" described by Dickens in some of his work, which left people "blinking, wheezing and choking," have hardly disappeared from the cityscape. Nor can one rely on late-nineteenth-century sewer systems to dispose of urban waste indefinitely. In fact, the inadequacy of the Victorian sewer system in present-day London means that raw sewage is once again regularly being pumped into the Thames. Since in London the same sewers carry both rainwater and human waste, heavy rainfalls cause hundreds of thousands of tons of untreated sewage to overflow into the river. One such overflow in August of 2004 killed some 10,000 fish, which could be seen floating on the tide outside the House of Commons. It cannot, therefore, be assumed that the scenes of urban filth described by writers such as Dickens and Swift are safely buried in the past. Another "Great Stink" may be just around the corner.
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The perception of the city as a place that must be constantly washed is of recent origin. It appears at the time of the Enlightenment.... The city is suddenly perceived as an evil-smelling space. For the first time in history, the utopia of the odorless city appears.
SMELLSCAPES

Whether natural, related to the local flora and fauna, or artificial, in the sense of revealing the presence and activities of man, odour constitutes an essential component of the character of a place. There really are smellscapes. The moment you get off the airplane, Korea smells of kimchi (pickled cabbage with garlic and hot pepper), Tahiti smells of its indigenous gardenias, Dakar smells of dried fish: for natives or frequent visitors, this guarantees an emotional response of the “Proustian experience” variety; for newcomers, it results in a more or less pleasant shock because of its unfamiliarity. Almost everything still remains to be understood in this area... A whole segment of a society’s imaginative world is revealed in the odour of its environment.

Jean-Robert Pitte, 1999
We have trouble representing odours in space, essentially because they are invisible. Only the visual data of architecture can be represented. Since space, where we live, consists of air, light, humidity, temperature, and smells—all of which are invisible, transparent things—it cannot be drawn.

In short, we represent only the materiality of things, that which is solid and visible, and space is not material. We draw the boundaries of space, the walls, but not space itself, the living environment in the centre. If we consider space to be a true living environment and all of its components to be important, then we should represent smells and sounds, air temperature and humidity.

Marc Crumello, 2004
In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of moldering wood and rat droppings... The stench of sulfur rose from the chimneys, the stench of caustic eyes from the tanneries, and from the slaughterhouses came the stench of congealed blood. People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes... The rivers stank, the marketplaces stank, it stank beneath the bridges and in the palaces.

Patrick Geddes, 1906

The body’s spatial requirements were to be determined by measurement of exhalations. And the necessary spacings were to be governed by the forms of sensory intolerance we have already noted. Conversely, over the next few decades, this creation of distance was to entail increasing specialization; eventually, it was assumed, it would eliminate the confusion of smells that often reigned in both public and private space.

Alain Corbin, 1985

Richard Bryant: Air conditioning vents of the St designed by James Stirling and Michael Wilford
The stench of the tanneries, blood. People stank, it stank, there were to be of exhalations. Here to be sory intolerance inversely, over tion of distance alization; it would be."
On one trip in the late fall of 1902, Carrier had to wait for a train in Pittsburgh. It was evening, the temperature was in the low thirties, and the railway platform was wrapped in a dense fog. As Carrier paced back and forth, waiting for his train, he began thinking about fog. As he thought he got the "flash of genius," as patent experts put it, that eventually resulted in " dewpoint control," which became the fundamental basis of the entire air conditioning industry. . . . Carrier's "Apparatus for Treating Air" was the world's first spray-type air conditioning equipment. It was designed to humidify or dehumidify air, heating water for the first and cooling it for the second. The use of spray water for humidifying was readily accepted, but Carrier's idea of dehumidifying air by using water was so revolutionary that it was greeted with incredulity and, in some cases, with ridicule. . . . Willis Carrier had many dreams for the industry he founded. Some of these seemed almost fantastic at the time. Most of his dreams came true, however—and during his lifetime. A few—like the air conditioned streets he once prophesied and the air conditioning of whole cities from a central plant—have not come yet.

Margaret Ingels, 1952

Air Conditioning, Refrigeration, Heating
Carrier Corporation, 1938

Margaret Ingels, Willis Haviland Carrier: Father of Air Conditioning. Garden City, Country Life Press, 1952
for a train in Pittsburgh. and the railway platform forth, waiting for his train, as of genius," as patent trol," which became the fun-
.. Carrier's "Apparatus for ing equipment. It was the first and cooling it for readily accepted, but so revolutionary that it was le.
...
Willis Carrier had seemed almost fantastic at during his lifetime. A jew-
air conditioning of whole...
Several air conditioning units (ionizers and purifiers) are placed together here on a platform to suggest a scale model of a bird's eye view of a modernist city. Plugged in, the appliances are reminiscent of the type of buildings notorious for being hermetically sealed and having controlled-air interiors. The constant buzz of the units serves as a grating reminder of the contradiction between the noise-cleansing and climate-polluting effects of the equipment.
Le Corbusier’s proposition to maintain a temperature of 18°C in buildings in all parts of the world [is] irrespective of local need or preference.

Reyner Banham, 1969
The Biofilter Wall is a 9-by-17-metre vertical living wall in the University's central atrium. Using its respiratory properties, this living wall cools the building air in summer and warms it in winter. The polluted indoor air is drawn through benign plant-covered surfaces and is cleaned through the biofilter.

GUELPH, Ontario, 2005

The Indoor Air Biofilter, by Air Quality Solutions at the University of Guelph-Humber.
The Biofilter Wall is a 9-by-17-metre vertical wall built in the University's central atrium. Using the plants' natural respiratory properties, this living wall is designed to cool the building air in summer and act as a humidifier in winter. The polluted indoor air is drawn through benign plant-covered surfaces, and is cleansed as it goes through the biofilter.
The primary building material is water. Water is pumped from the lake, filtered and then shot as a fine mist through a dense array of high-pressure nozzles; the resulting fog is an interplay of natural and man-made forces. A “smart weather system” reads the temperature, humidity, and wind speed/direction, processing the data in a computer that regulates the water pressure to the 31,500 fog-creating nozzles, continually adjusting to the changing climate conditions.

Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio, 2002
water.

is then shot as if high-pressure water in a computer system and wind.
The green wall is 18 metres high and 1.5 metres deep. It is organized into three layers on PVC and felt, and is built on a steel structure attached to the facade. The wall allows for the distribution of water, accommodates the growth of roots, and includes about twenty plants per square metre.
Following pages: PARIS, 31 December 2003
Philippe Rahm and Jean-Gilles Dérouard
Soirées nomades, Odorama, Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain
Paradise now!
Creation of the smell of paradise: Christopher Sheldrake, with Christine Nagel
Mental, physical, and sensory well-being is required.
Cedric Price: "A Lung for Midtown Manhattan."
TOGETHER GROWTH OCCUPANCY A CHANGE THE FUTURE QUALITY THEIR provided MINDTOWN.' AND WITH, ON ESTABLISHING OPPORTUNITY CIVIC.,.._,.,.. _MUST NEW AND IDEAL BY ITSC HEATING, WORKING, LIVING TEST THE TIMING IS CRITICAL - THE OPPORTUNITY IS UNIQUE AND WILL OCCUR ONCE ONLY A STRATEGY FOR CITIES WILL BE ESTABLISHED
MIDTOWN MANHATTAN

A SLEEVE WITH SIGHTS

technology is the answer, but WHAT was the question?

Cedric Price

CEDRIC PRICE ARCHITECTS, LONDON
ARCHITECTURE OF THE SENSES
David Howes

An intense new focus on the cultural life of the senses in rewaving
the human sciences and crossing over into other disciplines, includ-
ing architecture and urban studies. This revolution in the study of
perception highlights the fact that the senses are constructed and
used differently in different societies and periods. The perceptual is
cultural and political, and not simply (as psychologists and neuro-
scientists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurolog-
ical mechanisms located in the individual subject.

The sociability of the senses and sensations is brought out well in
the following quote from Constance Classen's "Foundations for an
Anthropology of the Senses," which introduces the key notion of
the "sensory model" as a cultural and historical formation:

"When we examine the meanings associated with various sensory fac-
culties and sensations in different cultures we find a cornucopia
of potent sensory symbolisms. Sight may be linked to reason or to witch-
craft, taste may be used as a metaphor for aesthetic discrimination or
for sexual experience, an odour may signify sanctity or sin, political
power or social exclusion. Together, these sensory meanings and val-
ues form the sensory model espoused by a society, according to which
the members of that society 'make sense' of the world, or translate
sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular 'worldview.' There
will likely be challenges to this model from within the society, per-
sons and groups who differ on certain sensory values, yet this model
will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or revised."

The emergence of sensory studies, as this dynamic new area of
inquiry could be called, has come at the end of a long series of turns
in the human sciences. For instance, in addition to the openings
described in the text "Sensory Strivings," (p. 332) there was the linguis-
tic turn of the 1960s and 70s inspired by Saussurean linguistics (and
Wittgenstein's notion of language games) that gave us the idea of cul-
ture as "structured like a language" or "text" and of knowledge as a
function of "discourse." This was followed by the pictorial turn of the
1980s, which emphasized the role of visual imagery in human com-
unication—particularly in our "civilization of the image"—and gave
rise to the ever-expanding field of visual culture studies. The 1990s
witnessed two new developments: the corporeal turn, which intro-
duced the notion of "embodiment" as a paradigm for cultural analysis,
and the material turn, which directed attention to the physical infra-
structure of the social world, giving birth to material culture studies.

While these different turns represent important shifts in models
of interpretation, the emergent focus on the cultural life of the
senses is more in the nature of a revolution. That is, the sensorial
Geography of the Senses
In Landscapes of the Mind, geographer J. Douglas Porteous notes that: "Notwithstanding the holistic nature of environmental experience, few researchers have attempted to interpret it in a holistic [or multisensory] manner." He is critical of the planning literature that pays lip service to the notion of the multisensoriality of the urban landscape, but then quickly descends into a discussion of merely visual aesthetics, and he is particularly critical of the trend towards satellite-generated data produced by remote-sensing. Porteous himself advocates a return to a "ground-truthing" mode of exploration for geoscientists and travelers alike, which he calls "intimate-sensing."

Remote sensing is clean, cold, detached, grey. Intimate sensing, especially in the Third World, is complex, difficult, and often filthy. The world is found to be usually rather than neat. But intimate sensing is rich, warm, involved. . . and the rewards involve dimensions other than the intellectual.

Porteous discloses, in intimate detail, how our sense of space and the character of place are conditioned by the diverse deliverances and interplay of the senses. Different senses produce different takes on the same space, and while auditory and olfactory perception are discontinuous and fragmented in character, tactile perception is aggregative, and visual perception is detached and summative. Breaking up the idea of landscape into a multiplicity of sound, smell (and other sensory as well as imaginary) scapes, Porteous presents an analysis of the acoustic ambience of the city of Vancouver, and a redolent (if stereotypical) description of the "peculiar smell" of India: "half-corrupt, half-aromatic, a mixture of dung, sweat, beet, dust, rotting vegetation, [oil] and spices."
Lansdscapes of the Mind is indeed rich in "non-intellectual rewards," though Homer's account remains open to criticism for the way in which it essentializes the senses by failing to inquire into how the sensorium is constructed in the sensorial cultures of the geographic areas on which it is based. For example, while the observer who walks down a swampy Bangkock slum lane will find his nostrils assailed by the stench of rotting refuse, local residents find meaning in such effluvia, because they understand the cyclical, rather than purely spatial, terms. That is, those inhabitants who have migrated to the city from rural areas relate to the garbage and to its smells in terms deriving from the olfactory cycle in the rural environment, where "the odious smell of refuse, through ecological recycling, . . . becomes the pleasant smell of the life-giving fertilizer."

The Senses in History
Sensory history seeks to enliven the dry bones of history and put us in touch with the past through the analysis of the sensory practices and ideologies that produced the distinctive sensibilities of different historical periods. For example, one leading study reconstructs the acoustic world of Elizabethan England, another explores the varieties of haptic experience in Renaissance culture, while a third, entitled The Senses and the Fragrant, gives us a whiff of pre- and post-revolutionary France.

One of the most prominent themes of this literature is the separation of sight from the other senses in the sensory model of modernity. In premodernity, the senses were considered as a set, and each sense was correlated to a different element: sight to fire and light, hearing to air, smell to vapour, taste to water, and touch to earth. All of the senses, like all of the elements, were integral to the epistemology and ontology of the universe. This elemental understanding of the architecture of the senses came undone during the Enlightenment, when the association of vision with reason became entrenched, and the progressive rationalization of society became identified with the increasing visualization of society and space.

In Seeing Like a State, social theorist James Scott exposes how modern statecraft depends on rendering complex living realities "legible" through the use of cadastral maps and miniature models of towns and cities. These maps and models have the effect of simplifying and remaking that which they represent in the interest of large-scale social engineering. Formal, geometric simplicity and functional separation and efficiency (i.e., zoned spaces) would become the new standard for urban design, marginalizing all of the spontaneous ways in which actual human subjects create order and make sense of the city. It is one of the grand ironies of modernity that the grand plans rarely achieved their intended effects, and often
contributed to disorder instead of curbing it. This is because the
"tunnel vision" of the modern state is no substitute for the "eyes
on the street" of neighbourhood residents, as Jane Jacobs exposed
in her well-known treatise, The Death and Life of Great American
Cities. \(^{10}\) Multiple or cross-uses of spaces, rather than single-purpose zones,
represent a far more effective means of promoting informal social
order because of the "foot traffic" they generate and consistent
opportunities for monitoring the conduct of one's fellow citizens,
not to mention enjoying their company. Jacobs achieved her
insights by sensing the city as a pedestrian would, rather than seeing
it from an airplane as God and the planners are wont to do.

According to Scott, the paradigm case of modernizing vision
imposing its logic on the organization of urban space is Brasilia,
the administrative city par excellence. With its great voids between
superquadras, and strictly geometric and egalitarian facades, Brasilia
realized the "formal order and functional segregation [envisioned by
its planners] ... as the cost of a sensorily impoverished and monotonous
environment." \(^{11}\) First-generation residents of this model city
coined the term Brasilia, meaning roughly Brasil(is) city, to connote
their traumatic reaction to—and rejection of—the placelessness and
non-anonymity of life in the capital city.

Many of the themes in Scott's Seeing Like a State are echoed and
amplified in Flesh and Stone by Richard Sennett, another academic at
odds with the sensory order of modernity. Sennett sets out to write
"a history of the city told through people's bodily experience ...\nfrom ancient Athens to modern New York." He laments "the sensory
derprivation which seems to come most modern buildings; the
dullness, the monotony, and the tactile sterility which afflicts
the urban environment." \(^{12}\) Sennett lays the blame for this condition on
the phenomenon of urban sprawl, which gives rise to the dispersal
of the population to the discontinuous geography of suburbia, and
the way in which modern "technologies of motion," such as cars and
highways, elevators, and movie theaters, function like shrouds or
cocoons—transporting us effortlessly from point to point, while at
the same time insulating our bodies from physical stimuli. Sennett
detects a pervasive fear of touch behind these developments which,
by giving us "freedom from resistance," only serve to increase our
passivity and diminish our capacity for empathy or meaningful
engagement in public life (the domain of alterity). Sennett holds up
the example of ancient Athens, where life was lived out of doors,
at least by men, and nakedness was not uncommon in public (as the
Olympic games, in the public baths), as a culture that honoured
the dignity and diversity of bodies. "What will make modern people
more aware of each other, more physically responsive?" Sennett
asks. \(^{13}\) No determinate answer is forthcoming from the guided walk
he takes us on from Athens, via medieval Paris, Renaissance Venice,
This potentially senses and "street object," but the implication is that only a revolution in the senses will bring about the desired revolution in society.

In the work of social theorists such as Scott and Sennett, social critique and architectural critique begin with sensory critique. The senses become the sentinels of theoricians of society and space. This sensualization of theory, which resists the traditional identification of theorizing with "gazing upon" (in Greek, theorin) some object, opens up many avenues for sensing the city in bold and potentially liberating new ways. In the next section, we shall explore how refiguring the senses is not an exclusive preserve of academics, but a vital dimension of everyday practice.

**Street Sense: Sensory Ethnography and the City**

Statue Square in Central Hong Kong, with its looming bank towers, is a monument to the vibrant business culture of one of Asia's "miracle" economies. On a Sunday, however, when Central is empty of business people and closed to traffic, it acquires a very different atmosphere, as upwards of 100,000 Filipino domestic workers flock to the city core and transform it into a space of leisure and pleasure with a distinctive Filipino flavour. As urban ethnographer Lisa Law relates in "Home Cooking," melodic cries of "peque, peque, pesosooo!" ring out from informal currency-exchangers; there are long, shimmering lines at public telephones as the women take turns phoning home; beauticians set up shop on the sidewalks to offer manicures and hairdressing; groups of friends pose for photographs and read out letters from distant loved ones; the smell of cloves cigarettes scents the air; and, the open ground floor of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank becomes crowded with women seated on straw mats eating pinakbet or adobo. Such food represent "exotic" cuisine in the eyes of the Chinese, but it is food that exudes the aromas and textures of "home" for the Filipinas themselves, who eat it with their hands instead of chopsticks, because this is said to enhance its flavour. Central Hong Kong becomes the spectacles known as "Little Manila" for a day—a conscious invention of home-away-from-home for those who, as live-in domestic workers, are forced to abide by Chinese cultural conventions for the rest of the week.

This "domestication," as it were, of public space by the domestic workforce is denounced on aesthetic and hygienic grounds by the members of the dominant society in letters to local newspapers. They would prefer their servants to remain out of sight (and smell), and not interfere with the image Hong Kong wishes to project of itself as a global financial centre, all the while ignoring the role that migrant workers, and not just bankers, have played in Hong Kong's commercial success. This conflict within Hong Kong society, over the sensuous (re)construction of space by the migrant workers.
during their leisure hours, testifies to the politics of deferring (dominant/subaltern) sensory strategies for making sense of the same place, and calls attention to the multicultural tensions embedded in the city's urban fabric.

Lisa Law observes that "the senses are often assumed to be an intrinsic property of the body—a natural and unmediated aspect of human being," whereas her analysis of the "production of an alternative sensum" in the case of Central/Little Manilla suggests that "the senses are far from innocent; the senses are a situated practice that can shed light on the way bodies experience different spaces of culture." The senses are political. This point is further illustrated by another landmark work in the new urban anthropology, Christoph Neidhart's fascinating study of the senses under and after Socialism in Russia's Carnival: The Smell, Sight, and Sounds of Revolution. Neidhart begins by tracing the visible fallout of the transition from a centrally-planned to a market economy in Post-Soviet society. Under Socialism, Russian architecture was reduced to "the assembly of prefabricated concrete elements organized by the ministry of construction": Soviet cities looked grey and facelifted, except for the red banners with the heroic portraits of Marx and Lenin that adorned public buildings; and there were no apparent fashion trends, since everyone aspired to the same standard of "cloth-coat proletarian respectability" and individualism was viewed with suspicion. In the wake of the carnival-revolution of 1991 led by Boris Yeltsin, images of Western models (Claudia Schiffer, the Marlboro Man) have replaced those of Marx and Lenin; "newly-erected buildings display a great and often confusing variety of styles"; and street uniforms have been exchanged for suits and printed dresses. Not only the look, but the fit and texture of Russian clothing has changed dramatically as a result of the influx of Western imports: shoes that do not pinch and are waterproof instead of soaking up water, and summer shirts of cotton instead of Soviet polyester, which is said to have had the suppleness of a shower curtain. Just as Russian apparel has "come a long way" in the Post-Soviet era, so have the self-perceptions of those who wear it, according to Neidhart.

A new olfactory regime has also taken shape. "Soviet streets smelled of diesel and dust, Soviet houses of cabbage and chlorine, ... staircases were musty and reeked of garbage and cat urine," whereas in Post-Soviet society, many industrial plants have shut down, leading to a corresponding diminution in air pollution, and numerous Western-style home and cosmetic products, including deodorants and perfumes, have come on the market, with the result that many people no longer give off the smell of their homes. In the sphere of cuisine, the burgeoning number of restaurants boasting Western-style menus with a clear order of dishes (there was
no temporal order to the traditional Russian way of dining) has spelled the end of the longstanding equation of sausage and vodka with well-being; indeed, according to Neidhart, "by eating foreign food, Russians [have] learned to accept and even like the diversity of the world."19

It is in the domain of sound that the most extreme manifestations of the transition have registered. "The Soviet power wanted to reach its subjects anywhere, anytime, and so created a system of loudspeakers and radios."20 The fixed-wire radios in Soviet hotel rooms could be turned down, but not off, and were limited to state-sponsored channels that broadcast news of what ought to happen (in the eyes of the State), not what was happening. The radios were even nursed to be two-way systems, so that the state could eavesdrop on its citizens. Acoustic privacy was at a minimum. In the Post-Soviet era, the state monopoly over the sound waves has been broken, and formerly underground sounds, such as jazz and rock, can be heard anywhere, anytime, and at a volume that drowns out the voice of the state. Nor is there any longer the same reverence about conversing openly with foreigners in hotel rooms, or elsewhere.

The answer to the question with which Neidhart opens his sensory ethnography of contemporary life in the former USSR: "Is [Russian] democracy visible?" would thus appear to be a resounding yes. The senses are indeed "subjected to new and very different sensations," and "the increasing plurality in appearances" would seem to indicate that the transition is irreversible.21 Nevertheless, there is evidence of countertendencies to the unilinear progression towards a greater diversity and refinement of sensations that Neidhart sketches, such as the rise of Ostalgie in the former German Democratic Republic, namely, people preferring Soviet-made goods to western imports because of their "cruder" sensory qualities and identity-confirming characteristics (an identity now lost).22 The sensory revolution since the fall of the Wall is not over yet.

Architecture of the Senses
How might the insights (incidents, sounds, etc.) of the emergent fields of sensory geography, sensory history, and sensory ethnography be employed by architects and urban planners? How might the architecture of the senses—i.e., the study of the cultural construction of the sensorium in different times and places—help inspire an architecture for the senses? It bears noting that in the 1960s architects and urban planners were already sensitized to this issue, if only partially, by the works of Marshall McLuhan and E. T. Hall, who introduced the notions of "sensorium" and "prosencephalics," respectively.23 It is only in recent years, however, that the theorization of an architecture of and for the senses has begun to receive serious attention, thanks to a growing stream of works in sensory architecture, and the
staging of exhibitions, such as the current one, on the sensory qualities of the material world and their social significance.

The sensorial revolution in architecture is apparent in even the most visualist of treatises, such as Witold Rybczynski’s *The End of Architecture* which, for all its emphasis on artrial impressions, on “style,” nevertheless acknowledges that: “Although architecture is often defined in terms of abstractions such as space, light and volume, buildings are above all physical artifacts. The experience of architecture is palpable: the grain of wood, the veined surface of marble, the cold precision of steel, the textured pattern of brick.” In other words (my own words), the essence of a building lies in the articulation of its materials and in the atmosphere it condenses in its substance, and this is something that no picture can convey, as Rybczynski also insists, which is another point at odds with the whole visualist thrust of his thesis on style as being the thing in architecture.

Juhani Pallasmaa goes further in *The Eyes of the Skin*. He proclaims that: “Architecture is the art of reconciliation between ourselves and the world, and this mediation takes place through the senses”—all of the senses, playing off and into each other. He holds up the work of his Finnish countryman Alvar Aalto as an example of what he calls “sensory realism,” on account of the richness of its texture and acoustics, and as a precursor of the current aspiration for a “haptic architecture.” Haptic architecture, as anticipated by Aalto and theorized by Pallasmaa, aspires to plasticity, tactility, and intimacy in a bold rebuke to Modernist architecture’s striving for clarity, transparency, and weightlessness. The opacity and solidity of Aalto’s sensuous structures would likely appeal to Richard Sennett’s sensibilities, on account of the resistance they afford.

In *Sensory Design*, Joy Monique Malnar and Frank Vodvarka argue “for an architecture that views the sensory response and memory of human beings as critical functions of the building, and thus vital to the design process.” A house should be “constructed of sensation and memory” and not merely function as “a machine for living” (in Le Corbusier’s famous phrase). Their book is a compendium of sensory research in aid of an architecture for the senses, and puts forward many inspired (and inspiring) schematics and tools (such as the *Cave Automatic Virtual Environment*, which enables a “multisensory understanding of spatial design”) that can be used to design ends. There is, however, at least one very serious problem with Malnar and Vodvarka’s attempt to recuperate the senses for architectural practice: In their effort to develop tools for calculating and predicting sensory response, they occasionally lose track of the dual meaning inherent in what it means to “sense” something—be that something a building or another living being. Sensing involves a fusion of sensation and signification, of stimulus and meaning. Technologies
such as CAVE may enable an understanding of the former, but it takes an ethnographer to grasp the latter. Furthermore, tools such as CAVE occlude the role of some senses in the production of architectural experience, while extending the roles of others (e.g., sight over smell, kinesthesia over texture), and thus serve to perpetuate certain sensory and social hierarchies.

This is where, it seems to me, the new urban anthropology of the senses, with its emphasis on discerning the meanings and politics of perception, has a key role to play in taking the sensorial revolution in architecture a step further. By foregrounding the role of all the senses as mediators of experience, and exploring how different people bring their senses to bear upon the urban environment in culturally conditioned—yet always strategic—ways, sensory ethnography provides a vibrant means for architects and planners to enhance their sense of the polysensoriality of the city and imagine how to design or redesign it in sensuously fitting and stimulating new ways.
1. Thus, the senses mediate between body and body, idea and notion, self and environment. The senses are everywhere.


4. Porteous, 27.

5. Boileau, 19.

6. Erik Caseus, "The Broken Cycle: Breaking a Myth of Sex (Lem)," Journal 53 (1988), 27-39. This cycle being broken in the urban environment, the rights of sleep and die naturally pleasant to the bare residents, but not in the xenophobic offshore.


9. These two works from the changing moment of the senses is Western memory. On the lens of the alternate, such as water one from with, 291st the white of Providence (Philadelphia, 1988). McCullough, The Spirit of Angelic Cosmology: Religion and the Aesthetic Imagination (London: Routledge, 1998).


11. Ibid., 126.


13. Rabinow, 17.


16. Christian Schmitt, Religion and Rituals (Philadelphia, 1995), and Sounds of Sensation (New York: Sensation and Sensible, 1996), 23. Other examples of this new genre, which is grounded in the methodology of "lymphatic sensation" for using the senses as a key through red in analysis and action, are contained in which include Robert Desjarlais, Statick Stains: Sensory and Sensible among the Mundurucu (Philadelphia, University Press, 1995).


18. Ibid., 44.

19. Ibid., 29.

20. Ibid., 20.

21. Ibid., 17.

22. Ibid., 19.

23. Ibid., 19.

24. Ibid., 23.

25. Ibid., 25.

26. Ibid., 27.

27. Ibid., 29.

28. Ibid., 31.

29. Ibid., 33.

30. Ibid., 35.

31. Ibid., 37.

32. Ibid., 39.

33. Ibid., 41.

34. Ibid., 43.

35. Ibid., 45.

36. Ibid., 47.

37. Ibid., 49.

38. Ibid., 51.

39. Ibid., 53.

40. Ibid., 55.

41. Ibid., 57.

42. Ibid., 59.

43. Ibid., 61.

44. Ibid., 63.

45. Ibid., 65.

46. Ibid., 67.

47. Ibid., 69.

48. Ibid., 71.

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51. Ibid., 77.

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56. Ibid., 87.

57. Ibid., 89.

58. Ibid., 91.

59. Ibid., 93.

60. Ibid., 95.

61. Ibid., 97.

62. Ibid., 99.

63. Ibid., 101.

64. Ibid., 103.

65. Ibid., 105.

66. Ibid., 107.

67. Ibid., 109.

68. Ibid., 111.

69. Ibid., 113.

70. Ibid., 115.

71. Ibid., 117.

72. Ibid., 119.

73. Ibid., 121.

74. Ibid., 123.

75. Ibid., 125.

76. Ibid., 127.

77. Ibid., 129.

78. Ibid., 131.

79. Ibid., 133.

80. Ibid., 135.
SENSORY STIRRINGS

The sensorial revolution in the human sciences is a relatively recent phenomenon, coming at the end of a long series of turns—linguistic, pictorial, corporeal, material—as discussed in “Architecture of the Senses.” The genealogy of this revolution would not be complete, however, without noting various openings towards the senses in the work of certain leading figures of twentieth-century thought, both social and philosophical. These precursors to the full-bodied, multisensory approach to the study of the human condition (which may be called “sensory studies” for short) include the historians Lucien Febvre and Norbert Elias, the philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the sociologist Georg Simmel.

In 1942, Febvre proposed that a series of fascinating studies could be done on the “sensory underpinnings of thought” in different periods. His own contribution was to sketch how sixteenth-century Europe placed less emphasis on sight and more emphasis on the other senses than did twentieth-century Europe. The historian of manners, Norbert Elias, was another prominent forerunner to the history of sensibilities. In The Civilizing Process, based on a study of diverse codes of etiquette, he documented how, in the transition from the middle ages to modernity, physical impulses were curbed and directed inwards, resulting in an “interiorization of the emotions” and progressive individuation of society, as people came to touch themselves, each other, and their food (with the introduction of eating utensils) in an increasingly circumspect manner.

The 1940s also witnessed an important sensory opening in philosophy with the publication of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception. Merleau-Ponty challenged the separation of mind from body, and of sight from the other senses as posited by René Descartes. He asserted that it is the flesh that sees (not the soul, as in Descartes), and that all the senses are imbricated in the act of perceiving. While Merleau-Ponty may thus be credited with restoring the body (in all its sensory dimensions) to the philosophy of consciousness, one of the things he failed to consider is how that body is gendered. Irigaray called him on this point, insisting that gender affects perception, and that women, for example, take pleasure more from touching than from looking. Irigaray’s position has itself attracted criticism, however, for its essentialism—that is, for its failure to attend to the changing social meaning of practices of touching and looking (and gender itself) down through history.

In The Savage Mind (a book dedicated to the memory of Merleau-Ponty), Lévi-Strauss introduced the notion of a “science of the concrete,” grounded in the apprehension and classification of things according to their “tangible qualities” of colour, odour, sound, and so forth, in contrast to the suprasensible understanding of the
workings of the universe in terms of mass and velocity that is characteristic of the modern physical sciences. His work had the effect of dispelling the idea of native thought as essentially "biologized" in character, and also foregrounded the intricate "sensory codes" of myth (as in the famous section entitled "Fugue of the Five Senses" in volume 1 of Mythologiques). For all his attention to the sensible, Lévi-Strauss nevertheless remained an intellectual, subordinating his study of the sensory power of myth to tracing the operations of "mind" ("esprit") and ignoring the political dimensions of perception.

Finally, in Sociologie, Simmel briefly analyzed the changing role of the senses of smell, sound, and sight in modern life. He observed how olfactory antipathies police racial and class divisions, and also noted how advancing urbanization had brought about a decline in vocal communication (e.g., the exchange of greetings) and a rise in visual interaction (e.g., the exchange of glances, or—equally significant—averted gazes). This shift in the balance of the senses had profound implications for the constitution of the modern subject, according to Simmel, since the increased emphasis on purely visual interaction produces feelings of isolation and alienation.

All of the above-mentioned stirrings in the direction of a full-bodied, multisensory approach to the study of the human condition represent important overtures to the field of sensory studies, which is in turn responsible for highlighting the multiple social and political respects in which the senses, as carriers of culture, mediate our experience of the world around us.

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