

MULTI-SENSORINESS and THE CITY

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The senses bring to mind sensuality; talking about the city of the senses recalls the *Realm of Passion*, the name of Nagisa Oshima's film, and through it sensual pleasure. I understand reference to the city of the senses to mean that the intention is primarily to emphasise the importance of the plurality of senses – and not just of sight. Thus the identity of the city depends on the dominant, strongest sense: we have characteristically cities of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and perhaps also taste, even though all the other aspects are also present in each city (see Jones 1960). Secondly, the city of the senses is the sensoriness and sensuality of the city: this emphasises the aspect and experiential value of immediate experience, in contrast and as an alternative to the meditative or intellectual experience of the city, though it is inevitably through reason that sensory stimuli acquire their form.

My theme is multi-sensoriness. Reference to multi-sensoriness emphasises the fact that sensory impressions can still be separated from each other, even though they affect each other and though their interconnectedness is important. They are not mixed to become a synthetic totality. Syntheticality is the next stage and degree. However, I regard multi-sensoriness and synthesis as being so closely parts of one and the same series that I refer to both. The examination progresses from the dominant senses to sensory totalities and thus from a sensory, sense-based examination to an ideo-sensory examination, in which knowledge participates and, in extreme cases, even supplants the senses.

Cities of a single sense

The significance of the different senses can be sought by determining which of them is most emphasised at any one time. Different cities appeal to different senses, and therefore we remember them on different bases – and not only entire

cities, but also their parts and districts. All the senses in no way act as strongly and at all times, and not in all situations. What is decisive is naturally the nature of the object, though the emphases and choices of the observer are also significant. One sense may become more important while another fades away. This defines the sense-identity of a city. Environmental works of art and architectonic attention attractors can momentarily alter the balance. These include works of light and sound, such as those in Joensuu, Finland, in which the trees are brightly lit in winter, and a cuckoo calls in the central park during other seasons than summer. I encountered a city park with artificial sounds in the summer of 1991, in the Spoleto art festival in Charleston, South Carolina, USA.

There is, however, one fixed point in the world of senses – sight. It is difficult to imagine a city, in which its visual form would not be important – the city is space and masses, a system of their relationships, and it is also colours. We perceive the city above all through the eyes. Even a blind person translates his observations into visible images – sees with his hands and feet, his whole body, touching, knocking, listening to echoes. A map of the city arises in his mind and he orients his observations in relation to the map in his mind. The other senses have then largely compensated for a lack of sight.

Venice is a city of water, and water can of course be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and felt. An essential element in my image of Venice is the sounds of water – the splashing of waves at the side of St. Mark's Square and the surging and plashing produced by the vessels in the canal. Another element is smell; in the early summer it is not bad, rather the opposite, a fresh, salty scent – but in late summer the odour of decomposition and death emerges. Venice is a pedestrians' city, and images of the feel of the surface become important – and of course the swaying, real and imaged, which starts in the boat and continues in the imagination after landing. What is also essential is all that Venice does *not* have – the sounds and stinks of cars, though of course motorboats produce them too. In the evening, however, the city becomes unusually silent allowing the quieter sounds of gondoliers and parties of diners to be heard. In perceptions too, there are the desirable and the undesirable, from which we can then make choices; elimination and correction takes place in the areas of all the senses.

A cold, damp windiness is linked to my image of maritime Helsinki. When I moved to Joensuu, I tried, perhaps instinctively, to see the good sides of my new home town and the bad in my old one, Helsinki, in which I felt that before

proper winter came there was an unbearably long chilly and rainy season; no longer summer, but not yet winter – and in spring no longer winter, but not yet for a long time summer. In the interior of the country and farther north there are generally clear seasons of more equal length – a cold winter and a warm summer, a bright spring and a fresh autumn. The cleanness of the snow and the brightness of the late winter dominate my image of Joensuu – and of course water here too. I live in Rantakatu (‘River Bank Street’) and when there is no ice the view from my window is like that from a palace onto the canals, changing every day and every moment.

In an aesthetic sense, a proper examination of a city demands well functioning senses. If some sense does not function, or if we are colour-blind, our image remains deficient, though it may not prevent us being able to deal with practical life. If some sense functions more sensitively than the others, it distorts our image toward it – and senses that function unreasonably well may become a burden that smothers other observations, as in the case of someone with an allergy, who notices even the slightest amount of pollen or animal dust. J. Douglas Porteous refers to the sensory sectors of the environment – not only to the visual environment, but also to the environment of sound – the *soundscape* – and the environment of smell – the *odourscape* (Porteous 1982). Different environments have different fixed points – a *landmark* becomes paired with a *soundmark*. A specialised field of acoustic ecology has even been developed.

I want to start from the idea that all parts of our senses must be at a normal level, if we are to be able to observe correctly the special features specific to a city. The statement that Venice is strongly a city of the ears and nose requires a comparison with the relevance of the other areas of sense, and also placing Venice in relation to what cities are like in general.

Of course we are not always in direct contact with the urban environment – we can sit in the miniature environment of a car or a metro train. We are then in a capsule – we immediately sense the state inside the capsule, but we know that things are different outside. This experience came to me strongly when I was in the South of the USA in Georgia and Texas – indoors air-conditioning always made conditions comfortably cool, outdoors I *knew* it was hot, even though my immediate sensory perception said otherwise. An image of sweaty heat is linked to the cities of Georgia, like Atlanta, but so is a memory of cool museums and malls. Indoor spaces are capsules like this and all of urban life may consist of

moving from the regulated climate of one artificial environment to another – when driving by car to the office, or to a shop or a gym – with no contact with urban nature, in which, at least for the time being, the rain still falls and the wind still blows, the sun shines and clouds appear in an unplanned way.

The multi-sensory city

Therefore, though the area of an individual sense may be emphasised, a city is always multi-sensory. The question is of the kind of totality that arises through the joint effect of the senses, and here too the whole is not simply the sum of its parts. Observation moves from details to broad views and to multi-sensory totalities; selection and elimination take place. Allen Carlson, the Canadian aesthetician, distinguishes an object, landscape, and environmental model when examining the environment. The object model refers to the examination of autonomous environmental units; they are detached and delimited like works of art, to become objects with their own laws. In the landscape model, totalities are examined, but only from a one-sided visual point of view. The third, environmental model, refers to examination of the totality with the aid of all of the senses (Carlson 1979).

This is the multi-sensoriness of the environment. All the senses are involved, but not separately, but so that the primary object of examination is a kind of symphonic work, in which the separate cities of smell, taste, hearing, and touch play together. Of course, our observations move from totalities to details, but the totality is, in the final resort, the context within which the details are examined. This is – or at least should be – the point of departure for planning too. The part is determined by the totality and in turn affects it. In art criticism, this mutual dependence of part and totality has been the dominant philosophy, but how can the design of a multi-sensory totality succeed with architects trained to think in terms of space and mass?

A point of departure for my proposed comprehensive model of thought is provided by the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total work of art, developed in 1850 by Richard Wagner in his book *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Art Work of the Future*). The background to it can be found already in the Baroque, for example, in church architecture, in which the experience includes not only architecture, paintings, and sculpture, but also, for instance, the scent of candles. The idea was that as the traditional forms of art are largely directed to a single sense, the

total work of art is intended for all the senses simultaneously. A work that acts through several senses is, as it were, richer – though naturally there is no guarantee that we could absorb the excess plentitude of stimuli, or that even a single sensory area might be enough to exceed our receptive capacity. In multi-sensoriness and multi-art forms Wagner also saw the art of the future.

The idea was developed in 1987 in Ljubljana, then in Yugoslavia, in a conference entitled *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The Pole Gregorz Dziamski, for example, presented an interpretation, according to which contemporary art has, in two ways, realised Wagner's idea – first of all by placing the receiver in the middle of a poly-sensory work and the work's world – such as is created, for instance, by various installations and spatial works, which include elements such as sound. Secondly, the receiver and his reaction has been made a centre, a 'work', which, as the subject, perceives the entire environment, without a separate surrounding work being actually made. The environment is a work created by his perceptions, the perceiver himself being strongly the maker (Dziamski 1987).

The idea of a total work of art is, of course, an art-derived way of examining the environment. We should therefore remember that the environment is not normally art, even though nowadays it is more or less made and more or less designed – in other words, an artefact. The architecture of our environment extends from interiors to buildings and bridges, from these to villages and cities, forests and fields, nature reserves and all of urban and regional planning.

Wagner's point of departure, though not his destination, was opera; the point of departure has also been regarded as theatre, and as such could equally be regarded as film or architecture, which as forms of art are all clearly, though each in its own way, multi-forms. A more contemporary, and in my opinion the best, model is provided by virtual reality, which is also beginning to be used as art. The visual presence is strongly three-dimensional; sounds and music accompany the virtual journey, and technologies for producing motion – and the tactile sensations relating to motion – are being continually developed. Virtual reality represents a multi-sensory simulation of reality. From a designer's point of view, it is a way to display and try out possibilities: what has been reviewed in artificial reality can then be realised in real reality. This is the next step, a great leap forward from the computer animation with which we are already familiar. With the aid of virtual models, it will be possible in the near future to test urban planning with multi-sensory means and with a sense of reality; in this way it will

be possible to imitate a genuine multi-disciplinary way of experiencing a city. When it then becomes time to meet the built reality, as I met the real Ruoholahti in Helsinki after seeing the Ruoholahti video, the result is a kind of *déjà-vu* experience – the voices of children in the yard, the canal opening out to the sea. The area formed an image like an aerial photograph, because I had already seen it as an aerial photograph. The sea view became conflated with a postcard drawing of Turku, in which the view was from the market square looking west: you could see the nearby buildings, but then farther away Åland, then Sweden and Norway behind it, then Iceland and Greenland, and finally North America on the horizon. This is every bit as real or unreal as the view to Lapland opening out from the General Post Office in Helsinki along the Central Park.

Virtual reality means – not quite yet, but certainly soon in the future – very strongly the interlocking of art and the environment and the elimination of their boundary. From the point of view of experience, the virtual and the real will in the future become indistinguishable by the senses – if so desired. The distinguishing factor will remain the *knowledge* of the reality of the one and the imaginarieness of the other.

Virtual reality creates a total sensory experience; it stimulates the experience of the environment: it is a matter of artificial reality, or, delusory reality. It provides a release from the everyday environment by creating an alternative environment, such as art has, of course, always done, but not in such a multi-sensory way. It undoubtedly recalls Wagner's idea of what a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is. It is even possible to see the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a science fiction fantasy, which predicted what was to come, and when the new technology finally came and began to influence the arts, it exceeded all fantasies. I quote Michael Heim's analysis from his book *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, from the chapter 'The Essence of VR':

By the time he finished *Parsifal*, his final opera, Wagner no longer considered his work to be opera. He did not want it called opera or music or theater or even 'art', and certainly not entertainment. By the time he finished his last work, Wagner realized he was trying to create another reality, one that would in turn transform ordinary reality. The term he came to use was 'a total work of art', by which he meant a seamless union of vision, sound, movement, and drama that would sweep the viewer to another world, not to escape but to be changed. Nor could the viewer be a mere spectator. Wagner created a specially designed building in Bayreuth, Germany, well off the beaten track, where the audience would have to assemble after a long jour

ney because he forbade the performance of *Parsifal* in any other building. [---] The Bayreuth theater would become the site for a solemn, nearly liturgical celebration. The mythmaker would create a counterreality, one reminiscent of the solemn mass of the Catholic church, which appeals to all the senses with its sights, sounds, touch, drama, even appealing to smell with incense and candles. The audiences at Bayreuth were to become pilgrims on a quest, immersed in an artificial reality. (Heim 1993: 124–125.)

Just as such totalities are created within the framework of an individual work of art – in installations, in the architecture, and elsewhere – they are also created in museums and exhibitions, in the sphere of groups of works. Germano Celant, the curator of the 47th Venice Biennial (1997) states that he created a camp from the works he selected, in which the works settle like a kaleidoscope images acquiring new shapes, depending on how one moves through the exhibition; the 10th Documenta in Kassel, held at the same time and made by the curator Catherine David, has also been compared to a total work of art. The question is thus of two art microcosmoses, Venice and Kassel, which are kinds of transfigured images and interpretations of the reality of the art of the world, or of the world of art.

A natural continuation would be to see the environment in this manner, most clearly of all when a city is characterised as the work of a single designer and thought of as a total work of art, as in the case of Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia, the Brazilian capital. In these too, the designer has, it is true, concentrated on creating a comprehensively *visual* environment, but when examining it the viewer or traveller can of course go farther in the direction of a total sensory environment. Imaginary cities of the mind, which are simultaneously poetic interpretations of real cities, perhaps also belong to this connection – Venice in Thomas Mann's novella *Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*), or as the original city of the fantasies in Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili* (*Invisible Cities*), Lübeck in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, Paris in Marcel Proust's series of novels, *À la recherche de temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*), Berlin in Alexander Döblin's novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, and subsequently in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's TV series based on it, or once again Berlin in Wim Wenders's film *Der Himmel über Berlin* (*Sky above Berlin*, 1987).

At other times too, more or less freely shaped and developed, in the vernacular, the city also belongs to the sphere of art, or at least to its margins, to the grey zone – town planning is one form of architecture. The question is thus of an important planning principle, which starts from the question of how we really

examine our environment. We are within that which we examine, we change the aspect of the examination, but we relate our examination to the totality. We continuously make our own work.

The question is not only of what the designer does and thinks; it is quite as much a question of how the examiner sees and interprets the relevance. Both of them, the designer and the examiner, create, in their own ways, the identity of the city. In it, we have a tendency to underestimate the senses other than sight. We regard sounds and scents, for instance, as being somehow temporary and incidental. Impermanent and rapidly vanishing they often are, but it is not, however, unimportant, – to others as well as to aesthetes like Patrick Süskind, the author of *Perfume (Das Parfüm, 1985)* – whether the air is clean, or the streets are safe. The possibility to influence these factors starts from the very first factors – where the city will be founded, how cities are attempted to be developed and expanded, for example, by concentrating administrative functions. Will public transport or private cars be favoured? Will allowance be made for cycling and for walking? These all affect the structure of the city, and they all affect how travellers will experience their city. The experience will be different if one walks, or if one cycles, or drives a car, or sits in a bus.

Our environment is full of the hidden influence of, and guiding of experience by the planners and their employers. Some things are made easy, some unavoidable, some particularly difficult. In this sense our environment – and its designer – guides and regulates, by its own means, our choices, including those that we consider to be purely our own. A distinction must therefore be made between the kind of potential that the city offers its observer and in the form in which each observer receives it.

From the point of view of the designer, the problem remains of how to design: what is worth trying to influence and what it is wisest to only accept. The designer – and also the environmental researcher – has a tendency, due to the emphasis of his training, to think of aestheticity from the viewpoint of the sense of sight, as volumes and masses. Hearing is introduced largely as a matter of health and comfort: we limit noise with speed limits, traffic arrangements, and noise barriers, by favouring certain forms of transport. Quietness, if not noiselessness, is the ideal, as it is possible to be of the opinion that there are sounds that are characteristic of the city: after all, the sound environment too is protected. As a pair with visual traditional landscapes there are also traditional

soundscapes and sound environments – the foghorns of ships, church bells on Sundays, clattering trains, squealing trams, roaring buses – mixed with natural sounds, the souging of the wind, or the pattering of rain.

From the sensory to the ideo-sensory city

The structure and state of the seen, visually perceived city is concrete; even the sounds are equally measurable and recognisable. They can also be *known*. Even the architect need not be sniffing or listening to the city he plans, instead his professional expertise should encompass the ability to sense it in the imagination, on the basis of his previous experience.

Concrete perception is even less sufficient for interpretation, for the search for significance. Knowledge also participates as a factor guiding and articulating observations, as do the interpretations made by other observers. From the city of the senses a move is made to the cities of information, knowledge, and comprehension, from the sensory city to the ideo-sensory city (cf. Jessop 1970).

The city is not a place for only quiet, concentrated examination. In itself it is kinetic and contains experiences that are kinaesthetic, doing and action, being together with others. Aesthetic significance is thus not only in passive examination, but also in being part and in taking part (cf. Berleant 1997). This emphasises the functionality of the city, which comprises not only smooth traffic flow, or the healthiness and safety of dwellings, but also the fact that the inhabitants have the possibility to realise themselves. It is possible to increase social activity, the possibilities for being together. Street events and pedestrian streets are one means for this; parks and squares are needed as places for recreation and assembly. Is this what Dziamski is referring to – the elimination of the external object by the observer becoming the work itself? The street or square is a provider of opportunities, but examined as such it provides practically nothing. It is only the presence of people that brings these spaces to life.

Orientability is also part of the kineticness and kinaestheticity of the city. Getting lost can sometimes be an exciting experience – especially in Venice, in which there is no need to fear getting lost very far or into dangerous areas. However, we normally expect it to be reasonably easy to form an overall image of a city, even though at the same time it has many different appearances. The possibility to form an overall image demands some kinds of fixed points, no matter whether they are buildings or clearly distinguished main streets.

Is the Ideo-city the ideal?

Could there be cities of only ideas? Such do in fact appear with surprising frequency in the political use of language, as personifications of power. Moscow and Washington are agents acting in international politics, which 'approve', 'threaten', 'reject', 'demand', 'propose'. Paris and Milan in turn 'dictate' fashion. Besides administrative, fashion, art, and cultural cities, we also have numerous school and university cities, headed by Oxford and Cambridge, with the legacy of the Soviet Union including even entire academic cities, there are bases of clerical and spiritual power, beginning with the Vatican and Mecca, there are business centres and business areas and streets within city centres, of which Wall Street being a concept in itself.

Does this kind of release of external appearance and sensoriness represent the highest degree of intellectualisation: to begin from cities of one sense, to proceed to cities of many senses and to such synthetic forms, to then proceed from these sensory cities to ideo-sensory cities and finally to arrive at – but simultaneously as if returning to a new one-sidedness – the sphere of purely intellectual beauty, at ideo-cities?

In my opinion, this is not the case. The sensory need not be intellectualised through some road of release from corporeality and sensuality. Both of them – sensory experience and comprehension – are essential, foundations at the same level. I could have begun according to some other model: on the one side cities of the senses, on the other cities of rational knowledge and comprehension. In their highest form, these meet in synthetic, ideo-sensory cities. The city of the senses would be one stage in the formation of the synthesis and one point of view of our abstracted city synthesis, one possible emphasis – but only one.

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Multisensoorsus ja linn

Kokkuvõte

Linna multisensoorsus osutab asjaolule, et me kogeme linna kõigi meeltega. Linn kui objekt on meie jaoks ühtaegu nii nähtav, kuuldav, haistetav, kombatav kui maitstav. Küsimus ei ole siiski niivõrd viies erinevas linnas, kui pigem ühe linna viies aspektis, tervikus, mis sõltuvalt sellest, kuidas me seda uurime, omandab lõputuid erinevaid dominante ja vorme. Selles mõttes jääb linn ka oma keerukuses siiski üheksainsaks linnaks, olles, Richard Wagneri terminit kasutades, *Gesamtkunstwerk* – totaalne kunstiteos.

Linn ei koosne siiski ainuüksi meelelistest kogemustest. Kõiki meie tähelepanekuid juhivad ühel või teisel viisil meie teadmised ja tõekspidamised; meeltega tajutav linn on lahutamatu seotud ideedest ja arusaamadest koosneva linnaga. Need aspektid üheskoos moodustavad meelte ja mõistmise kombinatsioonina ideo-sensoorse linna.