

The Future of the Communicative City and the Urban Sensorium

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Urban structures speak in many languages and through multiple senses. *Aisthetikos*, the Greek root for aesthetics, is the study of the human sensorium. Every terrain, each landscape, each climate and ecosystem require the subtle processing of the sensorium.

Ashley Jackson, a notable Yorkshire landscape painter wrote eloquently of dependence on three of the five senses noting that hearing provides inspiration in the countryside with the sound of the whistling wind, touch a form of communication associated with picking up blades of grass or a twig and learning from texture and shape of soil and rocks, and the smells of wildflowers, rain, grass, the sea which all communicate (Jackson).

As the senses of the countryside are a part of the artist's easel, so the sense ratios are functional and redefined in the urban landscape. The five senses of the city are uniquely defined and functional. We hear the traffic, we touch the structures and others, we encounter the scents of the shops and restaurants, we taste the offerings of outdoor vendors, we bump into the others. But the complex relationships of the senses to each other may be undergoing profound non-reversible change.

The pandemic is a universal plague ignoring traditional borders, but its power particularly impacts the teeming city. The radical shift of the sensorium is, hopefully, temporary, but perhaps also residually permanent with the concurrent disconnection of some senses from the total human sensorium. Certainly, we are grateful to be able to see and speak to the distant other, but unable to touch or smell the other. For some this may be a relief from obligatory responsibility, for others it is a necessity of imposed

distance, perhaps transformed into a permanent social acceptance mode of behavior. In the pandemic the senses are consistently tested resulting in modification such as the redefining of public space and social distancing. As we are forced into ever more mediated environments, what effect does the pandemic have on our sense of the city?

Nations are defined by their cities - by their density, variety, population, structures and commerce. A nation without cities is not a country. Geographical notions become irrelevant when distance is irrelevant. The points of connection, not the distance between them becomes important. The technology, upon which we now are dependent, transcends location. Place is replaced by connection with distance immaterial.

Each environment, each increment of technology alters the relationship of the senses to each other. Together the senses enable the mind to better understand its surroundings and in so doing construct rather than reflect reality.

In *The Eyes of the Skin* architect Juhani Pallasmaa contends that "modernist design at large has housed the intellect and the eye, but it has left the body and the other senses, as well as our memories, imagination and dreams, homeless." It is a total philosophy of planning that permeates Pallasmaa's work when he contends that the city and body define each other. Yet, during the pandemic, is the eye not one of the safest, least threatening senses?

Pallasmaa is not alone in seeking a fresh architectural approach. Thus, there has been a trend toward Sensorial Urbanism (Zardini, 2005).

...atmosphere, character, and sensorial qualities are becoming key factors in the definition of a place, even from an economic perspective.

All the more reason for us to demand that this attention be turned to public places, and to urban spaces in general. Is it possible to combine the different approaches to contemporary urbanism with a "sensorial urbanism," capable of offering a broader understanding of urban settings, interested in describing the character and atmosphere of places, and aiming to contribute to a new definition of public space? (Zardini, 2016, p. 150).

Connecting the tyranny of the camera with our general sensibilities is not new as we look to Sontag (2001), McLuhan (1964), Ong (Howes, 2005), and others leading us into the realm of sense ratios and their link to communication technology, but particularly Pallasmaa and the adherents of Sensorial Urbanism, apply shifting sensibilities to communicating structures and the role of the senses in an urban realm.

Pallasmaa approaches the realm of architecture and evaluates the efficacy of any structure and the degree to which our senses are addressed. Whether it is sight, hearing, smell, touch, and sound the idealized structure nurtures and address each of them. Has our sensory approach to the city changed with the mediatization of the city? Is it further altered by the pandemic? This preoccupation is reflected in Marshall McLuhan's concept of sense ratios, that all media are extensions expanding our perception of the world (McLuhan, 1964). In "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" Victor Hugo describes the impact of Gutenberg invention of movable type on the nature of worship as well as on the structure of churches (Hugo, 1998).

Mediated dyadic communication is a technological gift but not a substitute for non-mediated relationships. It is different and controlled in terms of angle, proximity, controlled environment, and motion. A mediated dyad requires attention to a view determined by each participant in terms of camera angle, quality of sound, and visual quality. It is a proxemically static

event in which space is controlled by the other. The actual space between the two is irrelevant.

The public environment becomes redefined, irrelevant for some, a potentially dangerous environment for others. Instead, we gravitate, or are compelled toward relationships without touch or smell, with vision prescribed by the camera, and sound altered in transmission. Social interaction is a matter of transaction. Place is a construct created by the participants.

Place in a mediated realm is to some extent irrelevant, as are most sources or addresses of connections, because the interaction with two or more individuals occurs in a non-place with each of the participants potentially existing in a construction of place. We don't necessarily know the location of the other. Is someone's mediated place an authentic place or is it wrong to assume someone is where they appear to be?

In a previous media environment, it was possible to ascertain location from a telephone number. This has become exceedingly difficult with the disconnection of number from place – particularly as mobile telephony replaced landlines. The assumption that an individual's location is linked to a telephone address is no longer valid.

But even the video connection of two or more individuals, be it via Zoom or Skype, involves a sense of place that is suspect with each individual's background potentially self-selected for the occasion. Does it make a difference? Can we cross-check modalities to ascertain place?

Prior to the pandemic the urban landscape had already begun to change in terms of identity and connection. The city had begun to assume newer and more current self identities: the smart city, the global city, The wired city, the sustainable city etc. Each self-defined by the extent of its absorption of

technology. It is not a new notion that the rise of technology, electronic technology to be precise, automatically redefines the senses.

We offer several axioms for your consideration:

- 1 each medium alters the urban sensorium
2. Each innovation alters our perception and relationship with the urban landscape and to each other.
3. The design of space and structure are determined, in part, by the hierarchy of senses – by the degree of their interaction.
4. The pandemic, or any radical interruption of the urban environment, alters human sense ratios.
5. The residuals of the pandemic extends beyond the malady.

The urban sensorium has always played a major role in defining the landscape – be it pastoral, suburban or urban. The communicative city is also a sensory city – defined by the nexus of ratios and municipal regulation. The next generation of the “smart city” may evolve into the “sensing city” as technology regulates and collects data on water, air quality, vehicular and pedestrian traffic, energy consumption, predict imminent earthquakes while surveilling the citizen. The city itself senses and communicates the nature of participation and interaction.

There are many ways in which the senses are regulated or governed. Nuisance laws and policies address noise, odors, light and touch. These laws and policies speak to everything from noise from speakers and light from a sports field to restaurant odors. The norms and standards may differ based on culture but sensory codes are widely embedded in diverse regulations

from property use laws to health codes. What health code revisions addressing Covid-19 threats will constrain urban sensory experiences?

Our position defines communication, particularly urban communication, as the process in which information is transformed and transported in a multimodal means from one site or sites to another (Drucker & Gumpert, 2018) The direct communication of information (including technological facilitated data) represents a small portion of how individuals process – how they sense others - in a complex of data necessary to maneuver and process one’s surroundings. To the obvious we add 1) the complex infrastructure that connects and facilitates functions – including all forms of transportation and data; 2) structures and physical environments that we inhabit and populate including public spaces that are inhabited and navigated; 3) the process of memory that permits and enables interaction and navigation; 4) and the regulatory and political labyrinth that governs the functions of the environment (Drucker & Gumpert, 2021). All of this involves the total and complex multi-sensory navigation of daily life.

The senses are fundamental yet neglected in understanding mediated urban life. In the age of the pandemic engaging the sensorium is dangerous to one’s health.

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