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Sense of the City

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As visitors first step into the latest exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), the senses are immediately aroused. We are drawn through a dark and narrow tunnel and, before our eyes can adjust, the sounds of a railway station, with trains pulling up to and leaving platforms and announcers calling out the next departures in various languages, immediately evoke the constant movement of city life. A small screen tells us that one minute we are in Cologne, the next in Lille, and thus, with eyes squinting and ears alert, begins a sensorial voyage through urban space. Questioning assumptions is the primary objective of "Sense of the City," curated by the CCA's recently appointed director, architect, and scholar Mirko Zardini, who wants to inspire visitors to think differently about how they experience their urban environment. Zardini reminds us that although the visual has always been privileged in urban dwellers' conception, design, and interaction with their milieu, cities also stimulate the other senses in a multitude of ways. A more pronounced appreciation of how we touch, hear, smell, and perhaps even taste the city, argues this exhibition, will not only lead us to a fuller, more balanced understanding of our habitat, but will also encourage us to formulate new claims for an environment planned with greater sensitivity to our fundamentally, though oft-neglected, corporeal relationship with urban space.

Noting that even our traditional breakdown of the senses into five categories is a western construction dating back to Aristotle, and that some researchers have detected up to seventeen different senses, the exhibition challenges even our most basic assumptions. To keep things manageable, the exhibition focuses on the familiar quintet, and because the point is to underscore its hegemony, sight is the first sense considered. But here the perspective is switched to what we don't see. The emphasis is on the nocturnal city, and black images of night-time cityscapes demonstrate the political and social implications of a widespread urban planning philosophy, which, in the 20th century, has erroneously equated more street lamps with greater personal safety. As an advertising poster for the Joe Torre Safe at Home Foundation makes devastatingly clear, however, a dim Manhattan back street can be a far safer place than a brightly lit but abusive private home.

The following room, particularly geared to Montrealers, explores the effect of snow on the urban system. Although the 19th-century Canadian metropolis was one of the first cities to seize the potential of marketing the winter to tourists, the utopian vision of post-war planning soon caught up, and Montreal, as with many of its northern counterparts, has sought to rid the urban environment of perceived nuisances such as snow and ice. The transcriptions of related municipal by-laws on the museum walls emphasize the point that bureaucratic regulations have sought to eliminate such perfectly natural aspects of the environment as darkness and cold, leading only to

Cover, New York: Noise Abatement Commission, 1930. New York: Academy Press, 1930

City Noise: the report of the commission appointed by Dr. Shirley W. Wynne, Commissioner of Health, to study noise in New York City and to develop means of abating it. Collection Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

unpreparedness and bafflement when disasters, like the ice storm of 1998, do strike.

Municipal administrations have also led a war against noise, and as we continue the visit, we are confronted with the "soundscape" of cities such as New York and Vancouver, the latter having been recorded by the composer Murray Schafer. Here again, the exhibition explains that the meaning of the urban landscape is more than visual, that despite policies promoting noise reduction, sounds are a defining aspect of the urban experience. With a little goodwill, the introductory caption sug-

gests, we might hear anew the “forgotten sounds of nature” and the “myriad languages that are increasingly spoken, shouted and whispered in our cities.”

The exhibition then takes up the question of how we touch the city's surface by highlighting the omnipresence of asphalt. We are invited to feel sticky asphalt samples as we learn about the material's composition and its role in the creation of the smooth, silent, and sanitized modern city. If asphalt is now associated with the presence of automobiles in cities, it was initially intended for pedestrian use, and landscapers around the world are finding innovative ways to bring it back to its original conception. The last room in the exhibition explores the elusive question of urban smells, and from glass vials, visitors can experience fabricated scents of urban realities, ranging from garbage to bakeries. As with other sources of sensory stimulation, modern cities have attempted to eliminate smells, and the filtered, conditioned, and artificially scented air piped into shopping centres acutely symbolizes this perpetual conflict between the city and the bodies of its inhabitants.

While this exhibition draws on the context of urban development since the late 19th century, its main goal is to suggest new ways of reflecting upon our current uses of the city and, in recommending that we embrace rather than seek to diminish our sensorial interaction with the urban environment, questions the directions in which cities are moving. This being said, “Sense of the City” raises a series of questions that urban historians might usefully consider, the most pressing of which might be how the senses have conditioned people's relationship to the city in the past. Following the lead of French historian Alain Corbin, whose works on the significance of church bells and sewage smells has opened this line of questioning, some historians have indeed begun to pay attention to such matters. As indicators of cultural meaning, smells and sounds evoke assumptions and transmit values about such historical concepts as gender roles, and class and ethnic belonging. How, might urban historians ask, have city spaces been understood, designed, appropriated, and transgressed in light of these cultural messages? Such an analysis does, to be sure, require somewhat of a leap of faith. Contemplating the meaning ascribed to sounds and smells implies an exploration of the most inherently fleeting and subjective elements of human experience and forces scholars to stray from the more objectively verifiable questions they might otherwise ask. Moreover, given the historical discipline's grounding in the written record, the question of sources for sensorial history also poses problems. Clearly, the smells and sounds of today's cities are not the same as in past epochs, thus making their identification an onerous task.

This obliges historians to work with discursive representations and, in the process, make judgements on what these elusive sensory stimulants might have meant, and to whom. Although the displays touch upon a variety of themes, certain aspects of urban life that undoubtedly arouse the senses—for example industrial production, sewage treatment, waste disposal, construction, air transport, the presence of animals, the creation of parks—receive little attention. Furthermore, while an initial reference is made to cultural and individual differences in the way senses function, the question of how sensory perception of the city might vary according to age, gender, ethnic, social, or occupational background could usefully be addressed. Finally, while the exhibition seeks to conceptualize the urban environment rather than tell the story of any particular place, the examples drawn upon are primarily, though not exclusively, of Western cities. How might the senses be stimulated differently in cities of the developing world and how has their experience been modified by the exportation of western planning methods? While it is clear that in this impressive exhibition, new conceptions and ideas about the city are privileged over exhaustiveness, I offer these questions simply in the hope of contributing to this reflection. Indeed, the CCA's “Sense of the City” offers both an original approach to thinking about the urban environment as well as a convincing critique of how it has been shaped and managed. From an urban history perspective, this exhibition presents significant challenges, but it is precisely because a consideration of the issues discussed in this exhibition can trigger new questions and require the use of different types of sources that historians might do well to get a feel, as it were, for the interaction between urban spaces and human senses.

Notes

1. See for instance, Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille : l'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIII^e–XIX^e siècles* (Paris, 1986), Alain Corbin, *Les cloches de la terre : paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1994).
2. Some prominent examples include Peter Bailey, “Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise,” *Body and Society* 2 (1996), Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma : the cultural history of smell* (London ; New York, 1994), David Garrioch, “Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns,” *Urban History* 30 (2003), Joy Parr, “Notes for a more sensuous history of twentieth-century Canada: The timely, the tacit and the material body,” *Canadian Historical Review* 82 (2001). Scholars will also note the imminent launch (Spring 2006) of a new multidisciplinary journal entitled *The Senses and Society*. It is to be hoped that historians will also contribute to this forum.

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