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Preface: Smell learning environments

Kevin Thwaites

The standout quotation from these four excellent chapters for me is this: “One simply cannot turn up one’s nose these days about the role of scent in design” (Osman, Noppeney and Endrissat). In this respect, this section paints a vivid picture, not only of the importance of a resurgence of scent awareness to a fuller appreciation of the human capacity for creative expression and environmental understanding, but also of the potentially pivotal role that ‘smell study’ has in bridging our currently obstructive disciplinary barriers.

Writing as an educator and researcher in the built environment disciplinary sphere, it is hard to overstate the importance of this. An increasingly urbanizing world brings with it an urgent societal need to develop better understandings of the nature of human-environment relationships within complex, dynamic urban settings. However, the quest for a more humanistic city, as Henshaw points out, is currently hindered by a prevailing failure to recognize the intrinsic connectivity of bodily experience and thinking processes in human-environment relations. Learning in general, and architectural and urbanist learning in particular, remains limited by a separation of rational and emotional experience: essentially the outcome of a persistent Enlightenment philosophical tradition increasingly seen as inadequate for dealing with contemporary human-environment challenges.

The need for a shift in mindset capable of challenging the dominance of the visual and overcoming a professional loss of connection with the human body in design decision making is a theme set by Henshaw and recurrent in all the chapters in this section. A significant

dimension in such a mind-shift is said to require changes to the traditional patterns of learning and the environments in which learning takes place that can reintroduce, rather than exclude, emotional and corporeal forms of knowing. Henshaw illustrates, through examples of her own educational practice, how this might begin to be facilitated by means of introducing 'micro-smell sources' into the lecture theatre and through guided 'smell-walk' workshops which afford participating students 'a more experientially informed learning opportunity'. In this sense, making explicit the sense of smell in learning environments is associated with a release from the constraining impact of traditional rational forms of learning, enabling students instead to draw from more intuitive forms of knowledge. In so doing, they are then able to recover a full-bodied approach to learning that Henshaw believes is important to the delivery of more humanistic city design.

Osman, Noppeney and Endrissat then echo this point from the perspective of art and design education specifically. Like Henshaw, they also highlight the privileged position that the sense of vision (and sound) maintains in the art and design world, whilst pointing out that this is increasingly becoming out of step with recent trends in the culturalization of scent through its portrayals in literature and the establishment of sensory research centers. They argue that, if scent is becoming an increasingly significant part of culture, then the art and design disciplines and their educational foundations must embrace scent more explicitly in order to retain compatibility with contemporary culture. They advocate progress in the educational establishment in the form of new programs that can elevate scent education from its current technical and fragmented roots in the perfumery industries to that of a broader intellectual field of sensory studies.

What is interesting here, in relation to Henshaw's concerns about the obstructive impact of a prevailing duality in rational and emotional forms of learning and the extent to which this reflects our currently self-referential and discrete disciplinary infrastructure, is that scent has become more successfully embedded in academia via trans-disciplinary programs. This opens up the intriguing possibility that scent study, although hard to accommodate into traditional divisions of human knowledge, may possess unique qualities that allow it to transcend disciplines.

The trans-disciplinary potential of scent is also evident in the chapter by Norman and Pozzani who demonstrate through three case studies ways in which scent based educational provision can become operationalized in various aspects of art and design education. They show that, when students are encouraged to experience fragrance as an art form, unique forms of creative expression can emerge. Their work also highlights that when programs of olfactory study are offered they prove to be highly popular attracting broad ranging interest in studying and exploring scent as part of a palette of tools in the inspiration and generation of creative work. Again this takes a distinctly cross-disciplinary form, demonstrating the capacity of scent to act as a catalyst in drawing together different art and design fields into more unified forms of investigation and creative expression.

McBride and Nolan conclude the section by returning the focus of attention back to Henshaw's main concerns about the role of smell in the education and training of built environment professionals, contributing a pedagogically-oriented conceptual framework that can support them. It is pointed out that smell is particularly significant for built environment professionals concerned with the design and delivery of public spaces. In this context, it is argued, smell awareness becomes a matter of socio-cultural significance. This seems a

highly significant point which stems from the capacity of smells in the public realm to influence how individuals perceive and use it in relation to individual predisposition, social and cultural traditions and preferences. As other chapter authors have highlighted, however, design of public space is almost exclusively driven by visual factors, operationalized through use of two or three dimensional imaging techniques and tools depending on scale and context. Olfactory considerations rarely form part of the planning and design process of public realm, other than in situations where environmental odors are captured by specialized equipment. As McBride and Nolan point out, however, this cannot account for the subjective dimensions of smell which are inextricably linked with authentic lived experience and environmental context.

If, then, built environment professionals need a more explicit understanding of the olfactory dimensions of the environment in the interests of delivering socially inclusive public realm, how might that be understood in light of its inherent subjectivity? McBride and Nolan propose that this lies with taking a more ecological, embodied and humanistic approach to engage with principles and practices for designing with smell. It is suggested that this involves a five point pedagogically oriented framework of considerations for intersensory design. Overall this framework invites participants into a critical reflection of what influences attitudes and assumptions about smell in ourselves and others, followed by smell focused tasks that raise awareness of the possibility of smell as a mode of inquiry, the embodiment of sensory knowledge and its communication throughout the professional community. Taken as a whole, such a pedagogical framework of intersensory design, with its embodied, holistic and experiential emphasis, makes a highly significant point about the potency of smell awareness that takes it into wider philosophical territory, beyond its importance in the art and design world: “From a conceptual standpoint, these practices of

smell walking, mapping, making and enquiry also reflect an ‘ecologically’...situated orientation towards placemaking that moves beyond the visual.”

What emerges here, and indeed is evident to a greater or lesser extent in all the chapters in this section, is that those who study and explore smell in relation to spatial experience and creative expression seem to do so from an innate and common sense understanding that smell cannot be detached from the broad and holistic spectrum of human-environment relations. This stands in stark and significant opposition to the way in which much of the built human-environment realm is conceived, designed and made. As Henshaw points out, this is in large part a consequence of an Enlightenment philosophical position of rationalistic duality and separation. If, as would seem to be the strong implication throughout this section, new mind-sets are required, then the whole-body implications that are intrinsic to intersensory inquiry may very well be signaling the direction.

Perhaps, therefore, those of us looking for more holistic human oriented forms of place-making better able to integrate the spatial, social and ecological dimensions of human-environment relations, an increased awareness of the potency and cross-disciplinary nature of smellscape study, may well offer fertile ground for progress.