



*Routledge Advances in Sociology*

# **SENSES IN CITIES**

## **EXPERIENCES OF URBAN SETTINGS**

Edited by  
Kelvin E.Y. Low and  
Devorah Kalekin-Fishman



ROUTLEDGE



# Senses in Cities

Urban landscapes are usually thought of first and foremost as engineered formations designed for functionality. It is quite clear, however, that cities and towns are sites of social structure, scenes of diversity, and hotbeds of transgressions. They are also sources of satisfying social relationships, settings for actions negotiated on an everyday basis, and opportunities for kinesthetic and aesthetic experiences. Within these processes, the senses mediate engagement with the optimism of urban growth, the comfort of urban traditions, and a consciousness of the diverse relationships that embellish urban living, but also with the repellent sights and sounds that invade zones of comfort.

This book examines how qualities of place and their sensuous reorganisation elucidate particular sociocultural expressions and practices in urban life. The collection illuminates how urban environments are distinguished, valued, or reconfigured with the senses as media for evaluating authentic spaces and places that endure and change over time.

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# **Senses in Cities**

Experiences of Urban Settings

**Edited by Kelvin E.Y. Low and  
Devorah Kalekin-Fishman**

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Kelvin E.Y. Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman  
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# Sensory urbanities

## Excursions in the city

*Kelvin E.Y. Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman*

### Introduction

It is well-known that urbanisation gives rise to unique types of culture created by a kaleidoscope of diversely positioned social groups. Still, the sociological literature on cities has tended to smooth over differences among cities in favour of generalised, betimes pseudo-historical, characterisations of pre-industrial (ritual, administrative, mercantile) cities, industrial cities (cf. Weber, 1947) down to the mass communications/world cities that have been identified as centres of managerial control since the final decades of the twentieth century (Castells, 1998; Sassen, 2006). Only in descriptions of colonial and post-colonial cities are there intimations of the recognition that urban centres harbour populations knotted together in variously patterned social structures, producing cultural configurations that are constantly changing. These are, however, often presented merely as schematic manipulations derived from the economy and the polity.

While urban landscapes and their material environments are usually conceptualised formally, first and foremost as built structures that relate to functionality in modern life, it is quite clear that cities and towns are sites of real, concrete experiences of social structure, scenes of diversity, and hotbeds of transgressions; but they are also sources of satisfying social relationships, settings for actions negotiated on an everyday basis, and opportunities for kinaesthetic experience. Within these processes of sociality, the senses relish the optimism of urban growth, the comfort of urban traditions, and a consciousness of the diverse relationships that embellish urban living. But they also contend with the repellent sights and sounds that invade zones of comfort. Sensory research offers a potential for in-depth understanding of the dynamism in the experience of urban life for groups divided, among others, by neighbourhood, by cultural knowledge, by vocation, and by opportunities for accessing resources in highly differentiated urbanscapes.

So long as urbanites need ‘to hear, to touch, to taste and need to gather these perceptions in a world’, as Lefebvre reminds us (1996, 147), then exploring city life at the scales of the sensory and experiential levels (Borer, 2013) is pertinent. Examinations of the mysteries of sensory experiences unveil

the qualities of dis-enchantment and re-enchantment in city life. Moving in line with a sensory turn in studies of the city (Adams and Guy, 2007), recent works that examine the relation between sensory experiences and urban life include Cowan and Steward (2007), Diaconu *et al.* (2011), DeFazio (2011), Degen (2014), and Henshaw (2014), to name a few. As an anthology of essays that illustrate engagements with the sensory spheres of city life in past times, Cowan and Steward's (2007) collection focuses on early modern and modern Europe and covers such cities as Venice, Paris, Berlin, and Munich. Each chapter examines a particular detached sense with the discussion anchored in a particular capital city. In general, the contributors stay within the five-sense Western model when analysing how the senses, space, and habitation operate conjunctionally. In a similar vein, Diaconu *et al.* (2011) draw attention to European cities such as Venice and Paris in their collection on *Senses and the City*. However, they address primarily the two sense modalities of smell and touch, given that they have been considered in Western culture as the 'lower senses'. Contributors specialise in such fields as anthropology, aesthetics, and art and design, where the collection relies mainly on analyses of secondary data, with a few chapters that examine primary data procured by the authors. In all, the chapters illustrate the materiality of odorous and tactile stimuli, and how they relate to the habitability of urban environments. This analytical direction would imply, and as raised in Degen's (2014) work, the intimate links between senses and the social life of the city. By paying attention to the spatial and social character of the senses through examples drawn from a range of cities in modern and postmodern contexts, Degen explores how different sense modalities frame everyday cultures and practices in urban life. Beyond exploring how place is constituted through one's sensory experiences, the book looks into another important theme, the influence or consequence of sensescapes and how they become involved in the structuring of urban planning. The core focus of our first collection, a co-edited volume on *Everyday Life in Asia: Social Perspectives on the Senses* (Kalekin-Fishman and Low, 2010) was on the everyday salience of the senses in different Asian cultural contexts. This was an attempt to manoeuvre beyond Western concepts, paradigms and societies by venturing into sensory orders that organise a variety of societies in Asia, with an additional view toward transnational dimensions of sensory enactments as well.

Departing from and expanding upon the above analytical directions, one may trace the beginnings of our edited collection here to the Second International Sociological Association (ISA) Forum that took place at the University of Buenos Aires in 2012. We had co-founded the thematic group, TG07 Senses and Society within the ISA in 2011, and the Forum in 2012 was the first major conference in which the group was participating. The goal was to expand extant sensory scholarship. After the conference, we sent out a separate call for papers on the broad theme of senses in urban contexts. In this frame, our research directions include but are not limited to such spheres of analysis as multisensory urbanism and diversity, sensory disciplining of the city and urban planning, sensory ambivalence, everyday materialities, and sensory overload, among others

(cf. Borer, 2013; Chandola, 2012; Guy, 2007). We eventually consolidated the collection of papers that is presented here.

In this volume, we present the work of scholars who write about highly varied urban environments on four continents. Although the contributors have been trained in different disciplines, they are all scholars who study the inflection of sensory experiences with a comprehensive understanding of the realisation of urban sociality through sensory experiences. On that basis, the collection aims to expand on extant works on the senses by focusing in depth on the variety of sensory orders and disorders that impact residents and sojourners in urban environments. Such a focus can demonstrate how sensory experiences relate to social structure, thereby enabling comparisons of urban environments as constructed achievements of sensory networks. The comparative potential underscores the complex interweaving of sensory experiences with diverse categories of analysis. Through different excursions into city life, however, we hope the collection will be able to draw out conclusions for advancing the sociological theorisation of the senses.

To these ends, the collection engages with the following queries:

- 1 What roles do the senses play in urban built-up spaces in different societies and cultures, and across them?
- 2 How do the sensorial alignments and articulations inform the construction of senses of 'self' and 'others'?
- 3 How are sensorial vocabularies evoked to instate a moral order which has implications for permitting or limiting access to spaces in the city?
- 4 How are urban spaces of habitation built, designed or regenerated sensorially?
- 5 How do sensory experiences combine to shape the practical and aesthetic character of physical environments?
- 6 How do practical considerations shape sensory experiences?

### **Sensory antecedents**

The focal amalgam locates our collection in 'the expanding field of sensory studies' (Howes, 2003). As Howes reminds us, the field opened out from axioms such as the following:

- a Perception is not solely a mental or physiological phenomenon. 'The perceptual is cultural and political' (Bull *et al.*, 2006: 5).
- b The limits of one's language are not the limits of one's world, pace Wittgenstein (1922), for the senses come before language and also extend beyond it.

In recent decades, moreover, the related work has demonstrated growing involvement with sociological principles. As Howes (2003) notes, sensory research is concerned with exciting sociological challenges, such as:



- 1 The senses intervene everywhere in characterising relationships between idea and object, mind and body, self and society, culture and environment.
- 2 No account of the senses in society can be complete without mention being made of the differentiation of sensory resources, for example, by gender, class, and ethnicity.
- 3 Each culture elaborates its own ways of understanding and using the senses. No one sensory model will fit all.
- 4 The senses collaborate, but they may also conflict. The unity of the senses should not be presupposed, *pace Merleau-Ponty (1962)*.

In addition to tallying with up-to-date developments in the field of sensory theorising and research, this book has several particular strengths. The chapters provide insights into urban life in cities on four continents (Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America), locales which have developed from widely different traditions, and ignited the interest and the imagination of researchers. By highlighting sensory experiences in such diverse urban environments, the authors provide materials that disclose the degree to which urban environments are similar despite widely different political and cultural contextualities, as well as the degree to which there are unbridgeable differences.

Furthermore, with contributions from researchers who have been trained in fields as varied as history, geography, anthropology, sociology, urban studies, architecture, and urban planning, and who have harnessed a range of research methodologies including interviews, sensory ethnography, sensescape walkabouts, and textual analysis, the volume makes two overarching theoretical statements. For one thing, the set of articles demonstrates how sociology is enriched by contact with a wide spectrum of sciences and the arts. For another, the combination of points of view that derive from such different disciplines, points to the exciting possibility that research based on views from the senses can be a gateway to transdisciplinary understandings in the strictest sense of the term, that is to say it can be an exemplar of how principles that are valid across several disciplines shed light on focal themes (Nicolescu, 2005). Finally, we are happy to be able to present a collection in which the works of highly experienced researchers appear along with contributions from graduate students who are developing new paths in sensory research.

### **Structure of the book**

Three chapters in the first part on ‘Sensory inequalities’ bring us to Bangkok, New Delhi, and Ho Chi Minh City and deliberate on the connection between sensory embodiment and unequal social relations. By proposing the notion of ‘climatic environmental bubble’, Cohen talks about heat as a sensory experience that sheds light on human well-being. Focusing on Bangkok inhabitants and how they adjust to the climactic conditions of their environment by the use of air-conditioning, the author probes the uneven thermal comfort conditions and sensory boundaries that cut across the different social classes. In the next chapter

on urban aesthetics and everyday urban life, Kalyan explores charisma of and in cities as aesthetic phenomena in New Delhi. The author relates three encounters – magic, violence, and politics – that occurred during the course of his ethnographic fieldwork and proposes that sense and deception reveal how social actors experience the urban vis-à-vis distance and proximity couched in unequal power relations. In the third chapter of this part, Earl documents lived experiences of urban social change in Ho Chi Minh City. Arguing that there exist different layers of a metropolitan sensorium among migrants and the new middle classes, she demonstrates how sensory experiences are shaped differentially by relative social positions. She anchors her analyses by referring to mixophilia and mixophobia toward interrogating urban class subjectivities.

In the second part on ‘Sensing urban space through movement’, the authors engage with urban spaces and how embodied experiences characterise the uses and meaningfulness of place. Bennett explores how embodied interaction occurs through sensory walkabouts in North-west England – what is known as Walking Days that are a tradition in Wigan and other north-western English towns. Where her respondents associate the senses of smell and taste with remembering that is anchored in space and everyday rhythms, a sense of belonging and identity is thus cultivated through such embodied commemorations. These commemorations, the author contends, are experienced not only through the traditional five senses but also through the haptic senses such as proprioception, equilibrioception (a sense of balance), and kinaesthesia. The next chapter by Acosta and Duval draws attention to the aural character of space. In their analysis, they point out how the movement of water in the Jane and David Walentas Fountain outside the Brooklyn Museum creates sonic events, making ‘visible’ an otherwise muted and overlooked sonic environment. Human movement into and out of the museum combines with the sinuous flow to create meaningful albeit easily overlooked urban encounters. They argue that through listening the body becomes a medium of placemaking in relation to sonic sensibilities. Using Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles as her case study, Boucher examines sensory interactions and posits that how one experiences urban built forms has to do with embodied interactions with other social actors. The author explores smells of danger and discomfort in the context of homelessness where the square is regarded as unsafe and dirty. Such a context is juxtaposed to the surrounding spaces that have been gentrified for the benefit of the middle/creative-classes (Florida, 2012).

If social categories are identified not only on the basis of socioeconomic factors but importantly include sensory ones, the following part on ‘Delineating sensescapes and boundaries’ shows us just how this is accomplished. Tan demarcates the corporealities of space between smokers and non-smokers in her chapter on aero-pollution in Singapore. She notes that there exist moral-sensuous subjectivities through which distance and proximity are continually negotiated. An interesting point that she raises elucidates the politics of olfaction and air-use. Additionally, smokers and their smoking habits tend to be frowned upon in moral terms, thereby revealing consequent demarcatory strategies that traverse

not only physical, spatial terms, but conduct and moral subjectivity as well. In Weidner's chapter on the sonic transgressions of fowl life in two Southern Californian cities, he similarly engages with the ambivalence or porosity of urban boundaries given that noise, not unlike smell, does not obey parameters of 'sensible' conduct. Perceived simultaneously as noisy and naturally harmonious, peacock sounds engender a blurring of such categories as domestic/wild, human/non-human, and native/non-native, as the author proposes. The chapter thereby sheds light, beyond anthropocentric emphases, on different sensory shades of animal-human soundscapes in city life that are culturally constructed. Another way to conceive delineated sensescapes is seen in Gomes' chapter where she employs 'sensetalks' and brings us to Bishopsgate in London to experience the multi-sensoriality of urban realms. Such an investigation of sensescapes is then related to the dynamics of attachment to place, as the author demonstrates in her research by studying sensory semantics of street users.

The final set of chapters in this volume address diversity in urban experience – how far can social cohesion unfold amid sensory stimuli and incursions? How does one explain the emergence and consequence of sensory-urban diversity? In her take on the notion of a creative city, Felton offers a discussion on how Brisbane, Australia's third most populated city, undergoes urban renewal vis-à-vis creative city discourses. Having gone through substantial urban redevelopment over the past two decades, Brisbane that was previously a suburban town now provides a surfeit of embodied experiences with its subtropical climate amid intensified cultural diversity. Urban transformation, however, is also met with a marked sense of anti-urbanism. Over a range of diverse urban sensory stimuli, Felton tells us, spatial conflicts and fractures emerge that therefore require protracted adjustment for city dwellers. From Brisbane we move next to Adelaide, where Duruz captures the sensory vibrancy of foodscapes in her study on food trucks. She queries the relevance and enrolment of urban vibrancy, and in tandem with Felton, notes that urban planning in Adelaide kick started based on tenets of creativity and innovation. In her chapter, the author questions the production and reception of vibrancy by asking who creates, and whose creativity is valued. Furthermore, she contends that mobile vending businesses such as food trucks lend themselves to the cultivation of sensory cosmopolitanism.

With a focus on multisensory urbanism, Win deliberates upon human-dog encounters in the city by paying attention to their different sense registers. In doing so, he maps out, from a companion species perspective, hybrid co-dwelling of the homeless and their dogs towards widening varied possibilities of what an urban environment may be. Kalekin-Fishman documents political uses of Middle Eastern soundscapes in the final chapter. She discusses two projects of collective action revolving around popular and classical music and demonstrates how traversing different urban sonic environs convey the connections and relations between people and places. These have to do with social membership and senses of belonging that therefore highlight how cultures of sounds are also cultures of sociality, inclusion and exclusion.

In the afterword, we reflect upon how the chapters all elucidate different aspects and components of urban planning that consciously include sensory experiences. How can we think of the regulation and control of varied sensory affordances? Whose sensory relevances are prioritised in the day-to-day use of urban spaces? It is our hope that the collection may shed further light not only on sociocultural analyses of the senses in space and place through different excursions in the city, but that the chapters here avail a future urban agenda on issues related to political outcomes, cultural opportunities, and social life at large.

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