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Smellscape Design and Monitoring

Jean-Paul Thibaud

Is there such a thing as a "smellscape", and if so, is it possible to design and monitor it? By asking this question, we are required to specify what we understand by "smellscape" and to reconsider the very idea of "design". The four chapters presented in this part offer diverse responses and describe numerous case studies related to smellscape design.

One could imagine that an olfactory environment is simple to decipher and monitor: on the one hand an environment that "smells good" and need to be promoted, and on the other hand, one that "smells bad" and should be prohibited. After reading the articles, the question is more complex and certainly more interesting and subtle.

To start with, it is important to notice that odor alone is never sufficient to evaluate and characterize a smellscape. At least three additional aspects should be fully considered. First, we have to acknowledge the fact that the sensibility to odors depends very much on individuals and groups. Not only the olfactory sense is more or less developed depending on people, but the appreciation of an odor can be very diverse, even opposite sometimes. Hence, a smellscape involves not only odors but also the experience of odors and the relationship we have with them. Secondly, one need also consider the role of context: an odor can be pleasant or unpleasant depending on its concentration and its combination with other odors, depending also on the place, the time and the activity during which it is experienced. Thirdly, smellscape cannot be dissociated from the other senses such as vision, sound, taste and touch. Hence, a smellscape involves an experienced situation as a whole, it has to be considered from an intersensorial perspective.

Moreover, designing a smellscape brings stimulating issues and involves new questions related to the field of design. Let me mention and emphasize five of them.

First: integrating cultural know-how. At first glance, smellscape design seems to be a new kind of activity, a contemporary project which stems from the growing interest towards the senses. After reading these chapters, it becomes obvious that such an idea is incorrect. Not only do we learn that odourisation has been more or less appreciated depending on cultures, but also certain ancient traditions have developed a whole set of practices regarding the world of smells. Korea, China or Japan immediately come to mind, but other traditions could also be mentioned. What is interesting here is that such cultures invented material devices and promoted specific know-how, be it for example burning incense or using fragrances in gardening. It is also worth noting that the use of smell is often closely related to rituals and religious ceremonies. Hence, smellscape is part of a cultural heritage that crosses the boundaries between materiality and spirituality.

Second: paying attention to the background. Composing with odors leads to integrate very carefully the question of attention as well as that of background levels.

Often taken for granted or supplanted by other sensory phenomena, the world of smell tends to be forgotten in everyday life. It is mostly noticed when it becomes a public problem and involves a form of nuisance or disturbance. But what happens when such is not the case? Smelling is not only passive – a mere reception of an olfactory environment – but also active. It relies on the act of breathing, inhaling and exhaling, and this activity can be enhanced, become intentional and be traced back to consciousness. One of the challenges of designers is to produce a smellscape that will be fully experienced. A whole vocabulary is used to account for the threshold of smell and the sensitivity to odors. The smell environment is described and acted upon in terms of detection, concentration, dilution, and dispersion. Hence, smellscape design opens new categories within the field of design and highlights the importance of sensory background in the experience of an environment.

Third: producing all sort of effects. When designing a smellscape, one does not intend to only create a pleasant and comfortable environment but may also aim at producing more specific effects. Such effects can be very diverse, tending to reduce stress or calm people, to produce a sense of sacredness, to purify the air and the surroundings, to mark the space and foster urban identity, to attract visitors or passers-by, to trigger memories and past experiences (one could add to encourage shopping and consumption). Well-being is of course at the core of this activity, but odors may also concern the fields of health and therapy, architecture and urban planning, sociability and religion, business and marketing. Thus, the aesthetic dimension of smellscape has to be articulated with its pragmatic and praxiological dimensions. The reason why there is a need to design a smellscape and the various consequences of such a project, can raise political issues, as well as ethical ones, since odors can be effective without a fully conscious perceiver.

Fourth: composing with the elements. Natural elements seem to be the primary means by which designers create and monitor smellscapes. Flowers, trees and all sorts of green spaces diffuse specific odors and contribute to composing an olfactory environment. For instance, orange trees and other fragrant plants have the ability to pervade a place with odors. Also, water plays an important role in the diffusion and transmission of aromas. Waterscapes produce several effects and involve diverse modes of action that are important in order to monitor a smellscape: running water may accelerate ventilation, increase air humidity, and bring a sense of freshness. Last but not least, air is the medium *par excellence* of the propagation of odors. This is maybe one of the most difficult problems encountered by designers: how to master air movements and airflows that are very labile, unstable and transient by nature? We have just seen that water can be very useful, but the built environment is also to be considered. Urban forms rely on different types of boundaries or semi-closed spaces that can confine odors and limit their dispersion. They also involve corridors and streetscapes that can orient and channel air movements. Thus, the monitoring of odors need to understand the complex interaction between the materiality of a built space and the atmospheric dimension of a smellscape.

Fifth: designing in accordance with the weather. Because smellscape relies basically on air and elements, weather is a key feature of this of kind of design. Humidity,

temperature and wind, rain or dryness, affect the nature and the experience of an olfactory environment. One of the most stimulating lessons to learn from smellscape design is that it cannot be identical anywhere and anytime. One will not design the same way in a place subject to a tropical climate, a continental, mild or polar one. The weather conditions are not the same, neither is the flora or the sensitivity to seasonal cycles. To be sure, geographical situations and seasonal change determine largely what will be possible to do in terms of design and planning. This statement has three important implications. First, designing a smellscape means designing space-time. These two dimensions – space and time – are inseparable since the olfactory resources of a place depend very much on the weather and the season. Second, I am referring to a temporality that is cyclical and not linear. Smellscape is not only subject to variation and transformation, but also to a periodic return according to the same process (one season after the other). Third, entering the era of the Anthropocene, smellscape design has certainly a role to play in order to sensitize inhabitants to climate change. Because it is so fundamentally embedded in natural conditions, smellscape design could help raise awareness by creating new olfactory experiences significant of our time period.

Finally, smellscape design is at the crossroads of numerous issues related to the contemporary environment. In between quality of life and sensory marketing, health concerns and ecological challenges, it is particularly effective even though it is discreet, or may be because of its discreetness. Moreover, dealing fundamentally with ambient and atmospheric phenomena, diffuse and invisible components, smellscape design leads to a fresh questioning of what design is all about: a way of immersing in life, pervading bodies and places, and enhancing everyday sensory experience.