



HAL
open science

”About Senses in Cities: Experiences of Urban Settings”. Kelvin E.Y. Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman. Routledge Advances in Sociology, 2017
Camille Schmoll

► **To cite this version:**

Camille Schmoll. ”About Senses in Cities: Experiences of Urban Settings”. Kelvin E.Y. Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman. Routledge Advances in Sociology, 2017. Sociological Forum, 2018, pp.1126-1130. 10.1111/socf.12472 . hal-02375233

HAL Id: hal-02375233

<https://hal.science/hal-02375233v1>

Submitted on 4 Jan 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Camille SCHMOLL

“Exploring cities’ sensory social politics”, *Sociological Forum*, December 2018, 33(4), 1126-1130

This is a preliminary version

About Senses in Cities: Experiences of Urban Settings. Kelvin E.Y. Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman. Routledge Advances in Sociology, 2017

Sensations are central to one of best-known and most controversial quotes in recent French political history. Addressing a gathering of his political party during his 1991 presidential campaign, candidate Jacques Chirac declared: « *Si vous ajoutez à cela le bruit et l’odeur, eh bien le travailleur français sur le palier devient fou !* », claiming that what he called “the French worker” risks going mad from the noise and the smells of immigrant neighbours. Such an explicitly racist statement led to a scandalized outcry. Chirac was pointing to the intimate feeling of forced proximity with cultural difference that French workers might experience, and asserting that this discomfort should be banished through anti-immigrant urban policies. No question that he savvily put his finger on the overlapping issues of public policy and urban density, class and ethnicity, “getting along” and the obligation for people from different backgrounds to live side by side in the same French *banlieues*. In a sensorial (and sensational) fashion, he managed to raise questions that are of particular interest to scholars of the “relational politics of place” and “politics of propinquity” (Amin, 2004). Chirac somehow hit the nail on the head in stressing sensorial (dis)comfort as a highly political matter.

The last 20 years have witnessed a strong revival of sensory approaches in the social sciences and humanities, covering all the senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) in many disciplines. The field of sensory studies is now well established, with important journals such as *Senses and Society* and prominent book series. To give but one example of these recent achievements, David Howes, one of the leading scholars in sensory research, has recently assembled an impressive four-volume collection of key writings entitled *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources*, featuring 101 essays from leading scholars. Such a sensory turn in research is also to be connected to growing interest in material culture and non-representational theory.

Urban studies are no exception to this trend. Low and Kalekin-Fishman’s edited book *Senses in Cities* picks up and expands upon this tradition, starting from Lefebvre’s assertion that urbanites need “to hear, to touch, to taste and need to gather these perceptions in a world” (1996, 147). Of course, sensory approaches are not new to urban thinking. Even over a century ago, Georg Simmel described the metropolis as an overwhelming sensory experience, emphasizing “the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of internal and external stimuli.” However, the field of urban sensory research has developed considerably in recent years, starting with Cowan and Steward’s *The City and the Senses* (2007) and followed by Diaconu *et al.* (2011), Degen (2014) and numerous others. In the Francophone context, the one I know best, this sensory turn particularly developed in architecture and urban planning. Drawing on Jean-François Augoyard’s seminal work, an impressive research tradition has developed out of the CRESSON research center (Centre sur l’Espace Sonore et l’Environnement Urbain) in Grenoble and Nantes, which has merged disciplines ranging from acoustical engineering to architecture, geography and psychology to make remarkable contributions to the sensory study of the urban environment that draw attention to ordinary everyday sensescaples.

Low and Kalekin-Fishman's book *Senses in Cities* contributes greatly to interdisciplinary knowledge in urban sensory studies. The book emphasizes the realization of sociality through sensory experiences in different contexts (Asia, the Middle East, North America, Australia), explored via manifold methodological and disciplinary approaches. This multidimensional approach makes the book an especially wonderful contribution to the literature, especially for readers wishing to look beyond the so-called "Global North" upon which most books in sensory studies are focused.

The book brings important consideration to research methods. Those featured in the book range from "sensescape walkabouts" to "in-situ" interviews ("sensetalks") or sensory ethnographies. In some contributions to the volume, ethnographers are genuinely "enrolled" in the sensory situations they describe, consequently giving stimulating auto-ethnographic haptic, olfactory or acoustic analyses including the authors' own sensorial subjectivities. Moreover, the book's multisensorial accounts of urban realms help us to overcome the hegemony of sight in urban research, which Rohan Kalyan and Alexandra Gomes refer to as "ocularcentrism" and the "dominantly visual exploration of space" in their contributions to this book.

By highlighting different aspects of city life, the book raises several important questions: How do sensory experiences contribute to the ordering and reordering of urban moralscapes? What is the relationship between sensescapes, place-making and ordinary life in the city? In which terms, and to what extent, are senses a matter of power? How do senses inform politics of difference? There is no straightforward way to answer these questions, if only because the practical and aesthetic aspects of daily urban life are so entangled.

Cities are characterized by dense and heterogeneous sensory stimulation, with discernable patterns in the management and policing of the sensory and tensions between sensory encounters and avoidance strategies and rules. The book expands our view of the many subjectivities involved in everyday urban sensory life, thus helping to extend our understanding of urban sensorialities by introducing more cosmopolitan accounts. For instance, two chapters focus on human/non-human interactions and how relations with other species widen the scope of urban opportunities in terms of encounters and feelings. Hamish Win develops the human-dog walk and the construction of "autonomy-in-relation" through an exploration of the olfactive city. In a similar vein, Ned Weidner's chapter on peacock wars in Palos Verdes shows how sound can emotionally entangle differing bodies and species – intimately, experientially and politically. Both papers describe hybrid urban experiences blurring conventional lines separating the wild from the domestic and the human from the non-human. Other participants in urban life – the weather, for instance – are also studied, as heat, humidity, tropical rain, and the like are central to urban experience. Weather is considered an "actant" in this book, following Latour, and as such it makes a profound contribution to shaping how urbanites' relate to sensescapes.

Sensorial approaches are central to the understanding contemporary place-making in the city and residential experiences. We inhabit place through the senses, we domesticate it somehow by creating familiarity and a sense of comfort. Many of the book's essays focus on public space, which (at least in theory) is conceived of as a space to be appropriated by the multiplicities of the city. But because it acts as an interface, public space can also foster sensorial tensions, as is the case for homeless people. The multisensory reality of the city involves and produces multiple hierarchies, lending this book particular political relevance. *Senses in Cities* gives a sensory understanding of the experience of urban life for groups distinguished by gender, class, ethnicity, migration background, neighbourhood,

opportunities, and practices of mobility. Erik Cohen explores the unequal distribution of air conditioning according to class, migratory status, and gender. His description of the making of environmental bubbles in Bangkok demonstrates that access to a modified climate is highly classed. Thermal comfort is a class privilege, just as color-blindness is a privilege of the white. Similarly, Catherine Earl shows how the experience of mobility is structured according to class in Ho Chi Minh City. She elaborates on the car as an isolated “territory of the self,” a privileged space apart from invasive metropolitan sensescapes.

Senses are a matter of cohabitation and sociality, and a sensory approach is useful for rethinking the making of boundaries between insiders and outsiders, negative and positive subjects, and desirable and undesirable bodies (such as wild animals, the homeless, and strangers). Along these lines, the book explores the making of moral orders constantly defining what is “popular, sexy and posh” as opposed to creating tension, discomfort, disgust, and outrage. Choosing with whom you meld in the sensorial urbanscape is a privilege of the better-off, and cosmopolitan imaginaries are highly selective. Many of the authors in the book take a canonically Bourdieusian approach to analyzing the relationships between sensory embodiment, social distinction, and unequal social relations, while others use Foucauldian approaches to discipline in order to show how body politics can be a powerful force in provoking and/or avoiding encounters in urban space.

The book also looks at the relationship between urban change and urban policies that are embedded in the dominant paradigm of the “creative city.” Authors explore lived experiences of urban requalification in Adelaide, Brisbane and Los Angeles. Nathalie Boucher explores how gentrification contributes to the stigmatization of specific places such as Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles, in connection with dangerous and repulsive smells related to homelessness. Quite to the contrary, the rise of the food and gastronomic industries and the emergence of “foodie neighborhoods” have become important features of the “atmosphere” of the creative city. Rhetorics of vibrancy, attractiveness, and creativity are enmeshed with the aroma of good coffee and a food-truck vibe, just as the stench of urine is associated with the dirt, danger, and making of abject homelessness. In her study of Adelaide food trucks, Jean Duruz captures the sensory vividness of “foodscapes” in the making of specific forms of urban cosmopolitanism, finding that foodscapes are sites for forms of cosmopolitan taste and consumption, but also create tensions between different urban classes.

Jean Duruz’s chapter on food trucks can be put in relation with a very recent book - that is, Alex Rhys-Taylor’s *Food and Multiculture*, published in 2017, which likewise focuses on a sensory investigation of foodscapes. Rhys-Taylor embarks upon an ethnography of the senses – especially taste and smell – in East London, to develop a complex and nuanced view of how social formation, the senses and city-making are interrelated, ultimately showing how making the sensory city contributes to the production of boundaries between social groups in terms of class, race, and gender. At the same time, though, sensescapes actively produce novel subjectivities and transcultural affinities that work toward more cosmopolitan senses of place.

In sum, apart from a couple of chapters that resist integration into the book’s overarching themes (as is the case in most edited volumes), this book contributes richly to urban studies by developing the important field of sensory research in the city setting. It also has much to enrich other social science subfields, the human/animal nexus, mobility studies, superdiversity, and critiques of creative cities chief among them.

References

Amin, Ash 2004 "Regions Unbound: Towards a new politics of place" *Geografiska Annaler*, 86B, 1, 33-44

Cowan Alexander, Steward Jill, 2007, *The city and the senses. Urban Culture since 1500*, Aldershot, Ashgate

Degen, Monica, 2014, "The everyday city of the senses", in Paddison, R., McCann E. (eds), *Cities and Social Change: Encounters with contemporary Urbanism*, London, Sage, 92-111

Howes David (ed), *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources*, London, Bloomsbury Academic

Lefebvre Henri, 1996, *Writing on cities*, Oxford, Blackwell

Rhys-Taylor, Alex 2017, *Food and Multiculture, A sensory ethnography of East London*, London Bloomsbury Academic

Simmel, Georg 1950 'The metropolis and mental life', in, Woolf, K.H. (ed.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: The Free Press. pp. 409-424.