Heterotopic Proliferation and Poly-physiognomy of Contemporary Urban Space

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Abstract

The modern city, especially the contemporary urban space, is reviewed through the prism of the senses, rendering a unique perspective of the new urban spatial experience. Urban architecture in tandem with urban sociology examine and bisect the new multisensory urban fabric, ideal or pragmatic. Laconically, this paper examines the manifestations of today's poly-physiognomic, heterotopic and *sensual* urban space. The emphasis is on a new perception of the contemporary sensual urban space, which finally deserves a closer reading and treatment, as it fosters a new understanding of the underlying sociological processes at work with broader implications.

Key words: Augmented space; heterotopia; instant architecture/installations; phantasmagorias; sensory city

The New Urban Senso-Spatial Experience

Architecture is no longer what it was. Hence the city and its associated urban space, is no longer what it was. Attempting to clarify this, let us emphasise that when mentioning 'architecture' most conjure up images of a profession dealing with the design and building of structures and their respective exterior environments. This is indeed the classic or traditional perception or definition of architecture. However, since the latter part of the 20th C., two other manifestations of architecture have surfaced: *Instant Archi-* *tecture* and *Installations or Ephemeral Architecture*.

In the 21st C. rapid urban development in China and India necessitated the adoption of new modular construction techniques, allowing for the erection of a ten-storey building in less than forty eight hours, while the completion of the project is essentially realised shortly thereafter. Hotels, office buildings and apartment blocks, surface like mushrooms, astonishing people who left on vacation and returned a week later to suddenly confront a new urban form, i.e. a new urban space formation, in their neighbourhood. The ramifications are tremendous; not unlike a Lego game or the IKEA approach to architecture, the product (edifice) appears – *planted* maybe a better word – surprisingly fast. There is no time to get accustomed to the new form, no adjustment period. *Instant Architecture* is indispensable in countries experiencing monsoons (as in India or Thailand) or, where construction schedules necessitate fast completion of a project (Fast-track execution). The approach is rather simple in its conception: Most of the structure is manufactured in a factory and transported to the project site. At the site, after the necessary joining of the individual modules and necessary plumbing and electrical connections, the final touches are put on fixtures and finishes. Specifically, *Broad*, a Chinese manufacturing concern, expects to be able to erect a skyscraper in a weekend. Chris Beanland considers the approach as 'Toy Town', astutely observing that *Instant Architecture* has invaded our collective consciousness. [1]

On the other hand, *installations*, constitute a new

hybrid experience, a genre at the twilight zone between architecture and art, in which the object ("structure", sculpture, etc.), the space it is in along with all its objects, and the observer, comprise an entity. It is an interactive experience, where the observer becomes an indispensable part of the art object.[2] Consequently, space assumes content, rather than simply acting as a container of forms or objects. Installations, by definition, have a rather short life: They are dismantled by the creator or the observers (as we shall see below), or moved elsewhere. As they are ephemeral, for some they constitute a 'lesser' art form.

In a rather interesting installation project by Sara McDuffee and Jessica Schulte in Detroit, Michigan (2000), titled '99 pieces of clothes', clothes were donated by students and hang on the pylons of a bridge, under which the homeless lived. Eventually, the clothes began to disappear as the homeless removed them in order to keep warm (Detroit has rather low temperatures in the winter). The specific project had a dynamic dimension while it also made a *de facto* sociological statement. What was viewed as artistic expression by the haves, had simply a utilitarian purpose for the have nots.

In another installation project by Danish street artist TEJN, a hastily assembled metal statue is handcuffed to a barred window while reaching for a chained bolt cutter lying on the sidewalk. In a satirical statement, the graffiti in the background and the barred window, perhaps equate urban life with crime (See 'Figure 1' below). Installation works, in contrast to art in a 'sterile' museum or gallery environment, are always provocative, inviting the observer to touch and feel them. The relationship is more casual and at the same time more sensual, compared to mainstream or 'classic' art. Again, this is another reason some consider them a 'lesser' art form.

Sotiris N. Chtouris (2009) supports that artefacts such as sculpture or constructions in public space, often act as catalysts for communication and socialisation while also accumulating positive *Social Cultural Capital*.[3] Without the limitations of traditional architecture, these experimental approaches are designed for a specific site as well as for a specific period of time: influencing both the reading and experience of the specific public space, which has an active or integral role as seen, while posing provocative or existential questions that traditional architecture often

Figure 1.
(Source: Wikimedia Commons: 'Reaching for Freedom' by TEJN, 2014)

fails to ask. *Ephemeral Architecture*, as its name implies, is indeed temporary architecture. Other examples are encountered in exhibits in Fairs or trade shows, vacant or incomplete buildings that get a face-lift for major civic events, and the like. As an example, in the case of the Athens 2004 Olympics, some large abandoned buildings that were centrally located but were considered an eye sore got a new temporary façade by employing a painted fabric over their structure; the fabric depicted or rendered the particular building in its finished form, or even in its previous historic form.

Lev Manovich (2002) identified the concept of *Augmented Space* as the physical space which is layered with dynamically changing information, usually in the form of multimedia, often accessible to every user. Examples of this are whole walls of buildings covered with projection or monitor screens, even electrical advertising signs, bombarding the city dweller with information or data. Such is the case in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Seoul, or Times Square in New York, where the pedestrians or the drivers are overwhelmed by information. In the new digital age, is this considered as aesthetic pollution or is there an overreliance of contemporary urban aesthetics on sensory overload?

In juxtaposition to utopia, *heterotopias* exist as real spaces but represent a parallel space or refer to another space, hence the name: 'Hetero' (in Greek) Space or other space (Foucault, 1984). Historically, the Piazza Navona or the Colosseum in Rome, can be considered as heterotopias. In the case of the Colosseum or Flavian amphitheater (circa 80 AD), the gigantic edifice as its name implies, accommodating 87.000 spectators, served many functions. It was the backstage for parades, became a wrestling ring, a hunting ground, a place for executions, a stage for the reenactment of famous battles, or was flooded and converted into a small lake for mock naval combat. The Colosseum catered to the public relations needs of the emperor and at the same time entertained the masses essentially keeping them under control. A marvel of architecture and engineering, the structure ultimately became a symbol of imperial Rome. However, today when most of the world's population resides in urban areas, there seems to be an unwarranted emphasis on heterotopias; they are overprescribed by designers. New nostalgic or romantic housing developments (as in the Victorian fashion) in the United States, 'cutesy' downtown redevelopment schemes, the spread of thematic malls and the like, present an alternative reality, a make-believe world (Widely popular Disneyland or Disneyworld may be the quintessence of heterotopia). [4]

Nathan Glazer (2007) in a very astute analysis, pointed out that the *Modern Movement* architects of the 1960s, disillusioned with their failure to effectively handle a social agenda, did a hundred and eighty degree turn, focusing on what they undisputedly know best - Design. As a consequence, today's spaces designed by *starchitects*, imbued with elements of sensationalism, surprise or orientation, with an emphasis on escaping reality through *heterotopias*, should come as no surprise. This new aesthetic approach views 'real' architecture as idiosyncratic art, ultimately becoming a monument to its designer. Thus, urban space produced today logically becomes idiosyncratic, adhering to this new architectural creed. Avant-garde architect Peter Eisenman qualifies this viewpoint in an interview: 'I don't think that architecture is about solving human problems at all. Psychologists solve human problems, sociologists solve human problems; economists solve human problems. We are none of those things. We do culturally necessary projects to me, which have a value to the culture in general, but what should the architect do in society? I don't believe the architect should do anything, frankly'. [5] This cynical statement would have appeared as bizarre a few years ago, when the Modern Movement architects were enthused and idealistic, aiming to change the world through a new social architecture. Le Corbusier has been abandoned, only to be occasionally revisited for his nostalgic aesthetics.

Is the modern city, especially the contemporary urban space, inadequate to assume its new role or the new spatial realities, without resorting to the escape or the pseudo-esthesis that heterotopias offer? Are heterotopias really necessary in order to make modern cities exciting? Is it a modern means of crowd control, not unlike at the Colosseum? It appears as a rather schizophrenic or surreal situation. Specifically, we witness here the dominance of the fantastic picture, i.e. of the sense of sight.

Steve Pile (2005) focused on *Phantasmagorias*, as he observed other aspects of the city identified with the urban subculture that cannot be ignored. Examples of this are voodoo in New Orleans or New York, or vampires in London and Singapore (Especially relative to the connection of sex with death). Pile considers these as equally *real* cities versus the sterile preconception of the 'real' city. [6] They represent the unknown or strange, hence are fearful. [7] In an analogy, *Instant Architecture* and *Installations or Ephemeral Architecture*, are as 'real' as conventional architecture.

Richard Sennett (1994) observed that space today acts as a conduit of movement, rather than allowing us to stop and socialise as in the past, in effect losing its *sensory* engagement. Space is designed without proper attention to the 'stop and use' aspect, which defines the experience of actually *living* a space.

The images of crowds on the streets of New York City and Tokyo moving fast through urban space are familiar to all of us. At times space is intentionally designed as inhospitable, out of concern for 'safety', as the post 9-11 tromo-hysteria dictates. It is not then unusual for squares or other public spaces to be provided with a minimum or no foliage at all (rendering the smart surveillance cameras more effective) or no seating, to discourage staying in the public space. One wonders though, why would someone wish to visit a public space that he considers – by his own judgement or being manipulated to consider – unsafe?

Sennett (1996) considers contemporary public space as being without cohesion, promoting a more passive approach towards the urban context; being *sensory monotonous*, for instance, it does not engage the tactile sense. As a result, we are not fully experiencing 'space'. Let us interject here how the American Institute of Architects (A.I.A.) classifies *space*. In a 2014 exhibition of the New York Center of Architecture, 'space' was classified into three categories: Congregation, Circulation and Contemplation. It is immediately apparent that the spaces Sennett refers to, obviously emphasise 'circulation', at the expense of the social aspects or qualities inherent in the other two categories. Fast food, fast track, fast lane… fast city?

Long ago, Martin Heidegger (1927) recognised the role our *senses* play in the perception of place and space, which is especially true in reference to urban architecture. Furthermore, for architects the measure of design is man and his *senses*. Peter Zumthor noted that for Heidegger our thought, however abstract it may seem, is immediately connected with our experience of place. This in part is explained by the fact that man exists in places, it is from places where he forms his relations with people, or simply, that he lives in the world. Therefore, the process of thinking is not abstract, but cooperates with the pictures of place; has constituent parts that have to do with the *senses*. Man manipulates the pictures of places and spaces he has access to, which he remembers. In other words, thinking travels through a certain space containing traces of place and architecture. [8]

We should be reminded that historically the experience of the city was a multi-sensual one, these experiences being both intellectual as well as physical in nature. In effect, the senses can act as a vehicle for exploring the urban context. From the stench in 16th C. Venice, the smell of beer for the lower classes in mid-19th C. Munich (the prevalence of breweries and taverns differentiated this city contributing to its present day growth), to the street noises celebrating the liberation of Paris in music and dance. Additionally, gastronomy has been a major influence in shaping the identity of Paris (restaurants) as well as Vienna (cafes).[9] In an interesting compilation of papers on urban *sensescapes*, examples are presented focusing on touch and smell, traditionally considered 'lower senses', thus unworthy. Although prevalent in primitive societies, these senses have been suppressed in the modern world. [10] While Victoria Henshaw takes us on a journey of urban *smellscapes*, an olfactory perception of the urban environment, emphasising smellwalking, which is a form of sensewalking (She defines *Smellscape* as 'The total smell landscape, including individual odours, odours that have mixed, and the overall background odour'). [11] However, the picture, i.e., *vision* (*sight*), the king of the senses, traditionally dominates in the modern world; the picture or the image in general, is glorified in our century.

Furthermore, on a similar note, ethnographer Sarah Pink (2007) correlates the 'slow movement' (i.e.

living slow in an accelerated world) with the idea of the *sensory city*.[12] For slowing down we are better able to perceive the context of the urban environment in its totality, essentially fully partaking in the experience: To see, to hear, to touch, to smell, or to taste, the real city. Without any shortcuts or mediators, we 'take in' the city as it is.

In evaluating contemporary urban space relative to the senses, undoubtedly, a few questions arise. Do cities glorified, like New York, Boston or Paris, really serve as examples of a contrived or romantic *topophilia*? Or do they really stand out on their own merit, because of certain inherent qualities, rendering them unique and attractive? If so, what are these?

What is a most desirable version of the city? We may surmise that this is the city that fully addresses and engages all of our senses; which is what every real, vibrant city, should strive for, specifically, appealing to the senses of the dweller as well as the visitor. Sensing the urban area through touch (art installations), through sight (architecture and landscape), through hearing (water fountains or music), through smell and taste (Restaurants, cafes and street vendors). A sensual city is an exciting, livable city, offering Quality of Life (Q.O.L.). There is no shortage of such examples, from certain neighborhoods in New York City mentioned above, Boston, Paris, or the smaller South Lake Union in Seattle, Washington. However, the modern city Richard Sennett (1994) makes reference to, which precludes the tactile sense, is certainly not a 'sensual' city. L.A., an iconic city studied extensively by both sociologists and architects, for the most part, is also not a 'sensual' city (Highways fragment the urban space as fast movement dominates, while there is no definite downtown).

New York City may appear inhospitable and large in scale, overwhelming the pedestrian by skyscrapers. However, there are plenty of special, little, accessible places, or even whole neighborhoods that many relate to. Places they visit to socialise, sip a cup of coffee, or even relax alone. Central Park is an oversized park with many amenities and happenings; there is also Soho, Astoria, Little Italy, or Chinatown, all equated with the human scale of New York. The smell of hot-dogs from the street vendor who will unhesitatingly

joke with us, the art objects installed in little known public spaces, the guy performing his solo sax in the subway and the like, all add a note of distinction or allure making it a desirable city to be in, regardless of the harsh weather or the hectic business pace. Paris, like New York City, has many street happenings taking place, offering chance social encounters: near the Centre Georges Pompidou, or the Place d' Opera. Specifically, a stroll in the neighborhood adjacent to the Centre Georges Pompidou will titillate the senses: The aroma of freshly baked croissants and coffee lingering in the air, watching the events of street performers, admiring a humble or subtle version of French architecture, the sound of passersby and children playing, or, even touching the many handmade jewels or trinkets sold by street vendors, all contribute to a memorable urban experience. A similar sensual civic experience can be expected in many neighborhoods of Athens, Greece. A bakery here and there, the traditional coffee shops, small scale family-owned stores exhibiting their goods on the sidewalk, farmers' markets regularly on the streets, the sound of the tramways, free concerts at the squares, the sidewalk kiosks and the like, seem as a stance against the uniformity of globalisation.

William J. Mitchell (2000) presented the idea of *e-topia* - an electronically interconnected global world; the virtual city where people work smarter, not harder. It is the new form of cities in the digital era [13] It should be apparent that the e-topia antagonises the real or 'sensual' city. Experiencing the city through the web, whether it is a virtual visit to city hall, or paying the bill at the water department via e-banking, is a far cry from actually walking the city and fully experiencing the urban area, with its pluses and minuses (with reference to the latter, the automobile horns, traffic or air pollution). Followers of e-topia are digiphiles who are mostly young, or people who have fully embraced the suburb with the associated mall and the country club, where a visit to the crime-ridden 'dirty' city, is to be avoided if possible. The city may have overtaken the suburb, however, suburbs are still perceived as 'safer' places offering a better quality of life (Q.O.L.).

Conclusion

The tripartite 'Architecture-Instant Architecture-Ephemeral Architecture/Installations' in juxtaposition with the ideas of *Heterotopia* (Foucault, 1984), *Phantasmagorias* (Pile, 2005) and *Augmented Space* (Manovich, 2002), attempt to illuminate the new urban spatial experience, especially with reference to the sensory dimension. This relationship, i.e. the various interactions, are depicted in Figure 2 below. The role of the *senses* in the contemporary urban experience, idealised or pragmatic, was the focus of this paper; from the standpoint of urban sociology as well as urban architecture. The above unique framework renders a new perception of urban space. Only a holistic, multi-perspective approach, should be applied, in properly evaluating the reading of the contemporary *multi-sensory* urban space: The sensual urban character of space and place with an emphasis on understanding the structuring or organisation of the new urban landscape and fabric; in other words, the multiple manifestations of today's poly-physiognomic, heterotopic and *sensual* urban space.

Notes

[1] Chris Beanland, "The age of instant architecture: Can a block of flats built in 48 hours really be safe?", *The Independent*, Wednesday, February 6, 2013, Architecture. http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/architecture/the-age-of-instant-architecture-can-a-block-of-flats-built-in-48-hours-really-be-safe-8483928.html (October 28, 2015).
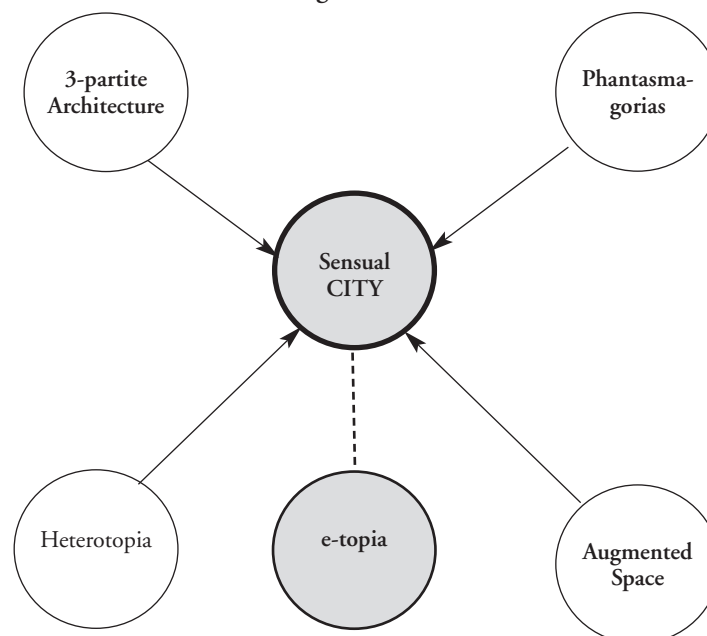[2] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art. A Critical History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 6
[3] A definition of the term is proposed by Sotiris N. Chtouris (2008): In essence it denotes a form of Social Capital mainly structured via common cultural symbols and references, occurring within a specific spatial frame. The collective cultural practice as expressed in the built environment.
[4] As Foucault observed, a mirror or a ship, are definite examples of heterotopias.
[5] David Basulto – ArchDaily. Interview in the site: http://www.greekarchitects.gr/tv.php?category=291&video=475#first_division (October 22, 2011).
[6] Steve Pile, *Real Cities* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), p. 172.

Figure 2.

[7] A definition of the term is presented by the Merriam – Webster Dictionary: "A confusing or strange scene that is like a dream because it is always changing in an odd way... A constantly shifting complex succession of things seen or imagined". http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phantasmagoria (October 9, 2015). *Phantasm* (in Greek): ghost.

[8] Peter Zumthor, *Peter Zumthor Works – Buildings and Projects 1979-1997*. (Basel: Birkhäuser – Publishers for Architecture, 1999), p. 7. Zumthor was the recipient of the 2009 Pritzker Prize, considered the highest recognition of architectural excellence.

[9] Alexander Cowan, et al., editors. *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture Since 1500* (Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate Publishing, 2007).

[10] Madalina Diaconu, et al., editors, *Senses and the City: An interdisciplinary approach to urban sensescapes* (Vienna: LIT Verlag, 2011).

[11] Victoria Henshaw, *Urban smellscapes. Understanding and designing city smell environments* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 225.

[12] Pink, S. 'Sensing Cittàslow: slow living and the constitution of the sensory city', *Sense and Society* 2(1), 2007: 59-77. Also: Adams, M. D., Cox, T. J., Croxford, B., Moore, G., Sharples, S., and Rafaee, M. "The Sensory City" in R. Cooper, G. W. Evans, and C. Boyko (eds), *Designing Sustainable Cities*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

[13] William J. Mitchell, *e-topia. Urban Life, Jim - but not as we Know it* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 2000).

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