

Book Review

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Kelvin EY Low and Devorah Kalekin-Fishman (eds), *Senses in cities: Experiences of urban settings*. Routledge: London, 2018; 236 pp. ISBN: 9780367273019, £29.59 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Karla Berrens, *Universitat de Barcelona, Spain; Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain*

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Senses in Cities presents a collection of articles that explore different ways of living the city through the senses. I want to stress the use of the verb “living” instead of “experiencing” as is in the title because in each chapter there is the repetitiveness of an everyday life occurrence, something that makes for the living in a space and by such, an embodied making of place (Low and Kalekin-Fishman, 2018; Low, 2014).

The volume is articulated around four major themes. The first one is titled “sensory inequalities” with three chapters that explore urban economic, social, and gender inequalities through an attention to thermoception (the sense of body temperature) and charisma. The second theme is “sensing urban space through movement” with three chapters examining the synergies between the senses and movement through the soundscape and smell-scape. These chapters explore movement both in terms of motion through space but also in terms of moving relations. Researching the repetitive routes or patterns in space (for example routes within a public square) and how they generate a sensorial dynamic that reconfigures the space they are in. The third theme is titled “delineating sensescapes and boundaries” and explores the boundaries, or rather non-boundaries that different sensescapes invoke. In this section, we are taken through the olfactory and visual sensoria associated with smoke, the colonization of bird noise (for example where there are so many birds in a given space they actually overtake the traffic sound), and finally a systematic methodology for analyzing sensory aesthetics. The last theme is “sensing diversity in social relations” where we find and explore social relations through creative flares, like sensescapes or soundscapes. The book concludes with a chapter from the editors bringing together the diversity explored in each chapter and makes an argument for an expansion of sensory research.

The theoretical framework of the chapters is well defined and rests both in traditional sensory studies literature, such as Schafer’s definition of the soundscape (1968) or Lefebvre’s study of rhythmanalysis (2004), while also drawing on more contemporary literature on sensory studies such as Stenslund’s (2015) study on smell. If we understand the senses as the gateway for us to make sense of our environment, why are they not yet present in all kinds of research? Studying the city through the senses enables the tacit information that might otherwise be lost in the research process to emerge. Cities are lived, and we live through

more than just our eyes, hence the need to incorporate the full sensorium into any research. Most, but not all, of the chapters rest on a conception that separates the different sense-scapes as if they were not all working simultaneously. From this perspective, the chapter “Companion species and a multisensory urbanism” by Hamish Win brings a welcome addition of a mixed sensorium as do the chapters that bring in more than one sense like “The senses of the interactional self in the uses of Pershing Square, Los Angeles” by Nathalie Boucher. Pershing Square is a space in Los Angeles that has seen a difficult evolution of its uses in the last two decades and the author explores the sensuous relations affecting this. Writing with a focus on a single sense can prove to be an exclusionary experience since we perceive the city with all our senses simultaneously.

Along these lines, I am reflecting here on the most prominent chapter in my opinion: “A framework analysis for urban sensory aesthetics: looking at sensescapes as ‘brush strokes’ of an urban canvas”, by Alexandra Gomes. The author methodically lays out a very detailed system and analyzes the aesthetic sensation the users of a certain space have. In this case, she studies Bishopsgate in London; a square that agglomerates several uses in the same space, having an uneasy cohabitation. The chapter uses a carefully and precisely drawn methodology that is a very interesting addition to an urban researcher’s toolkit. I believe that this chapter is an important addition to the sensory methodology literature this volume brings. There is a need in sensory and urban studies to be able to develop systematic data analysis methods while at the same time gathering and analyzing data, alongside retaining the human quality of such data. Measuring the way we feel in space, how we make place or even how we perceive space has been one of the most difficult quests in sensory and urban studies. Sensory researchers are constantly asking themselves how to best conserve the personal element of corporeal perception while at the same time trying to understand and theorize wider “perceptual models”. The chapter by Gomes achieves this very successfully.

Finally noting that, although this collection brings chapters from around the world, all the research projects depict experiences that are deeply enmeshed in a subtle portrayal of everyday urban life that is very relatable. Even the chapters reporting on “remote places” (from a western perspective), such as “Senses of distinction: social differentiation, metro-mobilities and daily life in Ho Chi Minh City” (by Catherine Hall) or “Atmospheric affinities: olfactory accounts of aero-pollution between smokers and non-smokers in Singapore” (by Qian Hui Tan), one can think of mirroring examples in one’s own city and relate to that sentiment evoked. As such, this book invites reconsidering and questioning one’s own sensorium and relation to the city. As a sensory researcher myself, I can relate to this being an important aim of writing about the senses, bringing the reader to reflect and to question our own sensorium and the way we socially construct and reproduce patterns of place-making, which lays at the heart of urban research. Therefore, this book is a recommended addition to in any urban researcher’s library, whether practitioner or academic.

Senses in Cities is from the series “Routledge Advances in Sociology” and is suitable for both practitioners in sensory studies as well as academics. Even though it is part of a Sociology-focused series, it should also be of interest to social/cultural geographers, planners, and urban researchers.

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