

The City and the Senses: Urban Culture Since 1500. By Alexander Cowen and Jill Steward. Hampshire, UK and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2007. 264 pages. £55.00 (Hardback)

This edited book examines the city through the five senses: touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell. The book is historical in nature as it portrays particular aspects of urban culture at a given era through the senses. This is done through a collection of essays that are organized and divided in three parts, from the early to the modern city (the 1500s to the 1950s).

There is a brief preface from the editors of the Historical Urban Studies series outlining that a historical perspective is necessary to comprehend the relationships that exist between human beings and urban change. The editors, Alexander Cowan and Jill Steward, highlight that this collection of essays contributes and informs the analysis of urban transformation. Starting with a good introduction into the study of the sensory dimension of city life, Cowan and Steward state that the aim of the book is to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between humans as sensory beings and their urban milieu.

Although the theoretical interest of the senses in the urban city is not a new concept, the impact of the material and cultural environments of cities on the sensory lives of its inhabitants has, until recently, received little attention. Georg Simmel, for example, identified sight, hearing and smell as basic elements of human interaction. More recently, Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have examined how mobile bodies, and their meanings, contribute to the production of urban environments. The study of the sensory world can be done through the direct testimony of people, through government reports, art works and literature. The editors indicate that the essays in this book demonstrate that a number of models can be used to assess the role and meanings of the senses in the production and contestation of spaces within the city. The cities highlighted in this book are capital cities as, firstly, they often possessed material and political structures, as well as diverse populations that enabled urban change. Socio-economic pressures on space would enhance the sensory experiences at play, and therefore encourage authorities to intervene. From early to modern times, the development of cities was linked with how the inhabitants experienced their environment. The senses, therefore, contribute to a better understanding of the historical processes involved in the city.

The five senses are then defined, the editors proposing that further research could be done in comparing experiences of these with, for example, other cities, peripheral areas and through cities specific populations.

Part 1 of the series, entitled "An environment of all the senses," features four essays that examine smell, touch, sound and vision. They are focused in Venice, London and Paris between the 16th and 17th centuries. Venice is the location for the first two essays as Jo Wheeler looks at how stench contributed to making the city adopt stringent health regulations, and Alexander Cowan examines how touch

was a measure of social distinction. Laura Wright looks at the coexistence of two dialects in early modern London and how social geography is encoded in speech. Ulf Strohmayer then argues that the Pont-Neuf in Paris is a symbol of visual aesthetic that contributes to an early form of modernity. Part 2 of the series, entitled "The culture of consumption," features four essays that explore touch, smell, taste and sight in the 18th and 19th centuries. Ava Arndt provides an interesting interpretation of literature in 18th century London and how its narratives are based on objects, thus contributing to a particularly sensitive expression of motion and touch in the city. David Inglis provides an exhaustive and insightful account of the history of the bourgeois faecal experience in the 19th century city. The 19th century is also explored, firstly, by Kim Carpenter who discusses the social significance of beer in the lower classes of Munich, and then Hazel Hahn examines boulevard culture and advertising as spectacle in Paris. Part 3 of the series, entitled "Cultural control and cultural subversion," features three essays on the modern city in relation to taste, sight and sound: Janet Stewart discusses how food is a signifier to urban modernity in Vienna; Dorothy Rowe provides a sensible and informative account of Lesser Ury, as the eyes of a stranger, looking at Imperial Berlin; finally, a pleasant and well-developed essay by Rosemary Wakeman who examines celebrating the Liberation in Paris through music and dance.

I was particularly fond of the essays produced by Wheeler, Strohmayer and Arndt: Wheeler makes Venice in the 16th century come alive through her writing as I could imagine the stench that was described, how the authorities attempted to intervene and the difficulties in enforcing the regulations; Strohmayer provides a captivating argument through the historical context of Paris in suggesting that the Pont-Neuf is a visual marker for early modernity – the first bridge in Paris not to have had houses constructed on it, paved in its entirety, and partly financed through direct taxation; Arndt demonstrates the social significance of literature to argue that characters' descriptions of crowding, touching, and moving contributes to enhancing the tactile sensitivity of the period.

The chronological division of the book, from the early to the modern city, emerges as the proper means by which to unravel the historical context embedded in the senses. In examining issues through the experience of the senses from a temporal perspective, it is possible better to understand the links between the various cultural and material developments and the impacts these have had on human beings. From Parts 1 to 2, the essays revealed a linear progression on the increase of sensibility that the *époques* of the 18th and 19th centuries brought to the city – how inhabitants *felt* translates into an enhanced awareness of the senses through the advent of the industrial revolution. By the end of Part 2, the stench and decay that used to fill the streets in the earlier centuries are corrected, which allows for a focus on the other senses. What is deemed civilized is a particular type of commodity, sound, scent, fashion and taste. From Parts 2 to 3, the reader acquires a better idea, for example, of the division of class and how this can be examined through food in the late 19th to the 20th centuries.

By the end of the book, I had a different 'sense' of the urban environment. What this book offers the reader is a new appreciation in examining the city, and it

sheds light on how the senses could act as a vehicle through which the historical urban context can be explored.

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