


Urban Smellscapes

Understanding and designing city smell environments

Victoria Henshaw

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Smellwalking and representing urban smellscape

Smellwalking is a form of sensewalking which Adams and Askins (2009) describe as a varied method by which we might '...investigate and analyse how we understand, experience and utilise space', and which usually involves focusing on sensory information gained through one or more of the senses. Since its introduction in the 1960s, sensewalking has been used by a range of disciplines in different ways for research, educational or documentation purposes. One of the earliest recorded examples of a sensewalk was that undertaken by Southworth (1969) with a focus on the sonic environments of cities while also investigating interactions between the senses (primarily vision and hearing). Southworth led individuals and groups along a set route through the centre of Boston, USA, and while undertaking the walk he deprived some participants of the use of one or more of their senses by placing them in wheelchairs, blindfolding them or covering their ears with headphones. In doing so, Southworth observed that participants were more likely to pick up on auditory and olfactory information when deprived of their vision. Blindfolded walks were also carried out more recently in Lisbon, Portugal, with groups of people wearing eye-masks being led around the city by a visually-impaired person in order to experience the city through their non-visual senses alone. These examples of sensewalks provide useful insights about non-visual aspects of the environment and the way people use their senses to perceive the environment around them, but they do not replicate the experience of a deaf or blind person. For a more detailed account of the influence of blindness in particular on environmental perception, see the work of Sacks (2005). Devlieger (2011) also draws from projects involving blind people and architecture students in Leuven, Belgium, arguing in favour of a 'mindful dialogue' between disabled and non-disabled people and highlighting an alternative tourist guide and walk that was developed in the town for people with sensory impairments.

Rather than being centred on sensory deprivation, however, sensewalks more frequently focus on everyday experiences of the environment gained through one sensory mode. Soundwalks are the most common form of sensewalking, introduced by Schafer at Simon Fraser University during his work on the World Soundscapes Project in the 1970s. In his research, Schafer and his colleagues used soundwalks to record and identify soundscapes in

Vancouver and five European villages, placing emphasis on 'listening' as a means of educating people about the soundscape, which was classified broadly by Schafer (1994:7) as '...any acoustic field of study'. More recently, Thibaud (2002, 2003) and his colleagues at the CRESSON laboratory at the Graduate School of Architecture of Grenoble, France have similarly used commentated walks in exploring people's responses and feelings to sensory information in urban space, particularly those responses relating to sound environments and broader urban ambience.

This focusing of attention on information gained through one specific sensory mode is a key reason why I believe sensory walks work well in general, and for researching urban smellscape in particular. Throughout our entire lives we necessarily breathe in and out, and it is therefore important that we do not consciously register every smell we detect; to do so would leave little scope for processing other necessary information about our environments and lives. Instead, our sense of smell filters odours according to habituation (where we no longer consciously register a familiar smell) and adaptation (where our smell receptors become fatigued following exposure to a smell and are therefore unable to detect odours over prolonged periods), with smells only being brought to our conscious attention if they present a potential threat or a source of pleasure (see Chapter 3). However, at the risk of delving too deeply into psychological theory, it is important to dispel an implied suggestion that individuals maintain a constant state of readiness to detect and process odours. This is not the case. As I outlined in Chapter 3, bodily state, whether it is related to hunger, illness or individual factors, has a significant influence on our ability to detect smells in the air around us; the same is true of our ability to process them, and this we term our 'perceptual state'.

In research on acoustic communication, Truax (1984) observed three distinct listening states in individual soundscape perception: *listening in search*, when an individual undertakes focused listening and actively seeks out auditory stimuli; *listening in readiness*, when an individual is ready to receive sensory information but attention is focused elsewhere; and *background listening*, when an individual is distracted, engaged in another activity such as talking on a mobile telephone. The same is true of smell perception; when we ask people to focus primarily on their experiences of smell we ask them to switch their perceptual state from being one which is generally passive in nature to a receptive state of 'smelling in search'. Smell perception therefore operates differently during a smellwalk than in normal everyday experiences of odour, as these smellwalking participants observed:

It's [a smell] intrusive but normally I'm just walking by... now I've stood here I can smell it, so I must have smelled it travelling past before, but not registered it. (D50)

...you don't think about smelling things unless you can smell something that was really nice or really horrible... because you can't see it. (D42)

This does not invalidate the findings of sensory walks, or in the specific case of my work, urban smellwalks, as this method allows us to gain insights into what odours people can detect in the environment and what they think of them, which would otherwise be very difficult if not impossible to access. That said, it remains important to acknowledge this difference since it does have some potential implications for the research findings that I will highlight in later chapters.

In 2004 and 2005, sensory walks were undertaken by researchers from the University of Salford and University College London, UK as part of the Vivacity2020 Project, a large project supported by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) investigating urban environmental quality and the sustainable design of twenty-four-hour cities (Cooper *et al.* 2009). The walks were carried out individually with eighty-two residents of the three English cities of Sheffield, Manchester and Clerkenwell in central London, and they were supplemented by photographs taken by the residents prior to the walks. Residents were asked to select a route of their choice prior to the walk, and to describe their sensory experiences of city living in post-walk interviews with each sense considered in turn. Experiences and perceptions of odours were discussed as a small part of the interviews, with responses being analysed by the Vivacity2020 project team as part of a wider analysis of urban sensory experiences and perceptions (see Adams *et al.* 2009). As a late arrival on the Vivacity2020 project team in 2008, I was extremely lucky to be allowed access to the dataset of 154 odour-related quotations, many of which I drew from in developing my ideas, formulating my plan for further detailed research and informing the arguments to be found in later chapters. Some of these quotations are included in this book, coded to protect the identity of participants according to the first letter of the city in which the participant lived (i.e. 'L' for London, 'M' for Manchester and 'S' for Sheffield; also D for Doncaster, see below), and a number representing the order in which the interviews occurred (e.g. L01, L02, L03 and so on). In a limited number of cases more than one person participated in the interviews, and in these cases participants are differentiated according to gender (e.g. L01 female and L01 male).

Prior to commencing my own research on urban smellscape, I found few documented examples of walks with a specific focus on ambient smell experiences in the city. One interesting previous example was that involving artist Caitlin Berrigan in Brooklyn, New York as part of Conflux, a psychogeography conference that took place in 2006. Berrigan and her colleague Michael McBean organised a smellwalk as one component of a

project called 'The Smelling Committee', named after the Fifteenth Ward Smelling Committee of 1891 that discovered oil refinery pollution by following their noses to the source of the stench (<http://smellingcommittee.org/>). The smellwalk served an artistic and educational function, with the group of participants actively detecting and mapping smells. In 2007, Berrigan and McBean went on to develop downloadable audio clips (still available online) recorded at selected points of a walk around the Nolita (North of Little Italy) neighbourhood in Manhattan (<http://smellingcommittee.org/mapit/index.html>). More recently other smellwalks have emerged; Natalie Bouchard at the University of Montreal, Canada has introduced a commented smellwalk in the city exploring and mapping people's memories of odours as they walk along a set route (see Figure 4.1). The route passes through a variety of areas in Montreal ranging from a trendy multicultural district, a busy retail street and road, a residential area and a public park. Bouchard's work seeks to reveal the temporal patterns provoked by smell and to explore how olfactory memory alters perception of space-time in the city (Bouchard 2013).

Sensewalking therefore offers a valuable but as yet under-utilised method of drawing from and gaining understanding of people's everyday olfactory experiences and memories of geographic space and place. However, with few examples carried out specifically relating to smell, little has been written about the suitability of the method and related issues that might arise as part of such an endeavour.

Since 2008 I have led smellwalks in numerous towns and cities across the United Kingdom, mainland Europe, the United States and Canada. I undertook a small number of these smellwalks by myself with the aim of documenting the smells of specific urban environments, in an approach similar to that adopted by Schafer and colleagues as part of the World Soundscapes project. More frequently, I have undertaken the smellwalks with other participants, either individuals or groups, and with the primary purpose of exploring the smells that people can detect, what they think about them, how these change between places and how the built environmental form and component parts influence the urban smell experience. As with some of the early soundwalks, the smellwalks also serve an educational purpose, raising the participants' awareness of the role and potential for smell in the city, and perhaps most relevantly within the context of this book, with the aim of educating built environment professionals such as urban designers, architects, planners and city managers.

I draw from all of these studies in the content of the following chapters, but there are two detailed empirical sensewalking studies that contribute more substantially than any others. The first comprises the data collected with eighty-two participants in English cities via the Vivacity2020 project outlined above. The second empirical study was devised and implemented myself,



Figure 4.1 Section from commented smellwalk in Montreal. Montreal 2011 ©Natalie Bouchard

adapted in particular from methods used by my colleagues at the University of Salford in the Positive Soundscapes Project (Davies et al. 2007), which included the use of stopping points and on-site interviews while undertaking sensory walks. It will be useful for me to outline the format and content of my detailed empirical smellwalking study here, both to provide contextual information for later chapters, but also to highlight the practical issues and decisions that I faced when planning the smellwalks with the intention of providing guidance for those attempting to embark on such endeavours in the future.