

Teaching to understand the urban sensorium in the digital age: lessons from the studio

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This paper proposes a cinematic technique-based method for teaching urban design studios to improve students' appreciation of the connection between the human cognitive-sensorial system (the human sensorium) and the environmental qualities of public spaces (the urban sensorium). Students learn how to do street analysis by way of flânerie and using audio–video devices; how to use cinematic storyboarding as part of the design process; and how to present the final project as a movie (in addition to a physical model and drawings). A pedagogical goal of the studio is to sharpen the designer's mental and cognitive skills necessary to establish sensorial relationships between people and the built environment, and to present such relationships in the optimum media.

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The ominous environmental changes accredited to global warming seem to have reawakened sensibilities about the connection between the human sensory–perceptual system and the environment that surrounds it. Yet design students do not seem any more aware of these connections than they have been in the past. Indeed, critiques by design theorists since the 1970s (Tuan, 1977; Lynch, 1981; Lefebvre, 1991; Motloch, 1991; Roszak, 1993; Roszak et al., 1995; Kahn, 1995) still to apply to current architectural and urban design projects in schools of design. In *The Eyes of the Skin*, for example, Pallasmaa (2005) tells us how he has become ‘increasingly concerned about the bias towards vision, and the suppression of other senses, in the way architecture [is] conceived, taught and critiqued, and about the consequent disappearance of sensory and sensual qualities from the arts and architecture’ (ibid. p. 10). Further, Pallasmaa tells us how

‘... many aspects of the pathology of everyday architecture today can ... be understood through an analysis of the epistemology of the senses, and a critique of the ocular bias of our culture at large, and of architecture in particular. The inhumanity of contemporary architecture and cities can be understood as the consequence of the negligence of the body and the senses

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.... The growing experiences of alienation, detachment and solitude in the technological world today, for instance, may be related with a certain pathology of the senses' (2005, p. 18–19).

Indeed, it seems that students continue to place emphasis on the visual qualities of their design projects offering little insight into their understanding of the project's sensorial aspects. Such lack of understanding is reflected in the production of architectural and urban design projects of stunning visual qualities – marvellous facades, impressive volumes and building massing, great colours, perspectives and vistas lavishly presented in large format glossy paper – but displaying no evident understanding of the sensual attributes of architectural or urban spaces. The introduction of digital technologies in design studios in the 1980s, which have helped visualise and understand quickly and easily design aspects such as spatial relations between buildings and to anticipate solar exposure, shadows, and wind effects on a building or a street, for example, have not helped to increase awareness of a project's sensorial aspects. In fact, the opposite seems true. 'Digital design' has seemingly contributed to perpetuate the proverbial barrier between classroom learning and the 'real world' (see Boyer, 1996). In the words of Pallasmaa, 'computer imaging tends to flatten our magnificent, multi-sensory, simultaneous and synchronic capacities of imagination by turning the design process into a passive visual manipulation, a retinal journey' (2005, p. 12). While studio instruction is geared towards training students to deal with a world of 'bricks-and-mortar,' the time they spend in front of computer, mobile-phone and TV screens seems to make them ever more detached from the world of the senses, thus widening the gap between the reality of 'bits' and that of 'bricks.' No doubt, the constant dwelling of students in the virtual world of video games, podcasts, video-mobile phones, email, and television has contributed to this desensitisation.¹ It seems that the primary aesthetic goal in students' designs is the pleasing of the visual at the expense of other senses (Lynch, 1960, 1981; Neisser, 1967; Berger, 1977; Tuan, 1977; Ackerman, 1990; Pallasmaa, 2005). The exclusive emphasis on the visual often becomes evident when someone visits a built project – a building or public space – that they have so admired in the glossy pages of a magazine only to be disheartened by the poverty of its sensorial attributes: the place is either too hot, too cold, too windy, too noisy, it smells bad, it is too long to walk, or simply it just does not *feel* right.²

The concern about the sensorial qualities of urban environments is not new and, indeed, it has a long tradition among urban theorists such as Lynch (1981), who spoke often about the 'sensuous city' (Lynch, 1981; Banerjee and Southworth, 1995). But it is Phenomenology, as conceived by Husserl and advanced by Merleau-Ponty (1962), what sets the foundations for a sensory-aware urban design theory focused on environmental perception and place cognition, and as articulated scholars such as Holl et al. (2006), Motloch (1991), Norberg-Schulz (1993), Abram (1996), Pallasmaa (2005) and Tuan

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