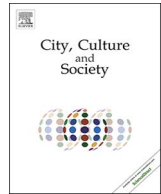




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

City, Culture and Society

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ccs

Sense(s) of the city: Cultural mapping in Porto, Portugal

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cultural mapping
Sense of place
Porto
Contemporary city

ABSTRACT

The elusive notion of sense of place and the possible ways it may be researched in a contemporary city are the central themes of this article. Sense of place has been in the focus of attention of heritage, space and place-related scientists, such as cultural geographers, planners and architects, since 1970s. That was the epoch of revival of researchers' interest for the places' character in diverse fields of study dealing with cities. The argument related to the sense of place revolves around several principal ideas: that history and meaning are the defining characteristics of a place; that there is an interdependence of senses and meanings, embodied in the sense of place; and that it is needed to acknowledge the perspective of the people who give sense and meaning to a place. How can cultural mapping be used to address these issues and grasp the sense(s) of contemporary city? This was explored through a series of workshops conducted with artists and citizens as a part of case study of the sense(s) of Porto.

1. Introduction

The elusive notion of sense of place and the possible ways it may be researched in a contemporary city are the central themes of this article. Sense of place has been in the focus of attention of heritage, space and place-related scientists, such as cultural geographers, planners and architects, since 1970s. That was the epoch of revival of researchers' interest for the places' character in diverse fields of study dealing with cities. One of the most influential cultural geographers of the time, Yi Fu Tuan, developed his entire humanistic theory around the key notion of sense of place, which he defined through the dialectics of space and place. Tuan argued that a place is defined by having “a history and meaning”. He emphasized the multisensory character of a place experience and interdependence of senses and meanings embodied in the sense of place. According to Tuan, sense of place “incarnates the experiences and aspirations of people” and “it is a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspective of the people who have given it meaning” (Tuan, 1979, p. 387 and 410).

How can cultural mapping be used to address these issues and grasp the sense(s) of contemporary city?

This was explored through a series of workshops conducted with artists and citizens as a part of case study of the sense(s) of Porto.

2. Theoretical and methodological background

In line with Tuan's ideas, the people-centered approach was adopted as one of the three key premises of the work.

The recent *Québec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place*, adopted by ICOMOS in 2008, attempts to define sense of place from the perspective of cultural heritage studies. In that document, interplay and interdependency of tangible and intangible components of place and its values have been recognized, and the plural and dynamic character of the concept acknowledged. In the *Québec Declaration*, “spirit of place is defined as the tangible (buildings, sites, landscapes, routes, objects) and the intangible elements (memories, narratives, written documents, rituals, festivals, traditional knowledge, values, textures, colors, odors, etc.), that is to say, the physical and the spiritual elements that give meaning, value, emotion and mystery to place.” It is also defined as a “continuously reconstructed process”, thus putting forward the importance of people and communities, who assign meanings and values to a place and reinvent them over time.

From his perspective of a social scientist, philosopher and psychoanalyst, Michel De Certeau also put people, who assign meanings to a place, in the focus of attention: he understood the city as “an immense social experience of lacking a place”. In his well-known work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (particularly the chapter “Walking in the City”), De Certeau argued for a concrete spatial practice that enables an individual to assign their own meaning to an urban space, to give sense and life to a city. The practice he proposed was that of walking: according to De Certeau, “to walk is to lack a place”, and walking can be interpreted as “the indefinite process of being absent and in search for a proper” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 103). That is one of the reasons why the idea of exploratory walks was considered key for the development of cultural mapping exercises for the purposes of this work.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2017.08.001>

Received 11 August 2016; Received in revised form 5 July 2017; Accepted 22 August 2017
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Such a methodological choice closely corresponds with the second premise of the work – acknowledging the importance of multisensory character of a place. That idea permeates different scientific disciplines and artistic approaches dealing with space and place.

In his book *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense, and Place* (1994), Paul Rodaway focused on touch, smell and hearing as elements of humans' multisensory experience of place, thus counterbalancing the emphasis on visual characteristics of place he recognized in the previous research (see chapter on "haptic geographies" in Rodaway, 1994). Taking into account culturally determined nature of people's experience of place, he interpreted sense of place as both "a sensation and meaning". In 2005, the CCA (Canadian Center for Architecture) organized an important exhibition in Montreal, entitled *Sense of the City: an Alternative Approach to Urbanism*. In his text "Toward a sensorial urbanism", written on that occasion, the curator, architect Mirko Zardini, brought about a number of issues related to contemporary cities and their problems, highly relevant for a study on heritage and sense of place. Most importantly, he proposed "a broader view of the environment that takes into consideration the full spectrum of perceptual phenomena that make up the sensorial dimension *beyond the regime of the visual*". He also recognized the trend of "sensorial revolution" that has been penetrating design and artistic practices linked to urban spaces (Zardini, 2005, pp. 19, 24–25). The Finnish architectural theorist Juhani Pallasmaa even linked people's preferences towards historical ambiances in comparison to modern and contemporary built environments to richness of sensory experiences they offer (Pallasmaa, 2005, pp. 13, 26).

There is a strong argument in favour of exploratory walks as a way to investigate cities' sense and sensescape. The idea of sensewalking is not new (it emerged decades ago, in the 1960s), but has been overlooked in the current research discourse. Victoria Henshaw, who based her research on smellscape exactly on the methodological technique of exploratory walks, assessed that "it is useful, but still under-utilised methodological technique in understanding people's everyday experiences and memories of geographic space and place" (Henshaw, 2014, p. 45). In her recent (2011) project, focused on the underexplored, olfactory and tactile realms of urban reality, Mariana Diaconu also argued in favour of a methodology based on walking. With the aim of "sensitizing urbanites to multisensory qualities of urban space", Diaconu performed an analysis of olfactory space based on descriptions, "smell maps" and commented "smell walks". An important part of the work was the involvement of non-experts. As pointed out by the author, the importance of the non-expert engagement lies in the fact that "the experience of smell is the least objectified, i.e. unmediated encounter of a subject with space happens". An analysis of the results of the smellscape representations on the participants' maps in Diaconu's research revealed analogies with Kevin Lynch's elements of visual perception of cities.¹ Diaconu promoted the idea of interactive, "tactile knowledge" through walking, drew attention to synaesthetic correspondences (the intertwining of vision and tactility) and argued for broadening the conceptual framework of design through the emphasis on tactility.²

From a perspective of an artist, Lucy Lippard also argued for the exploratory walk methodology in tackling the sense of place. In her book *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*, she centered on the ideas that "sense of place does indeed emerge from the senses" and that "place can be felt as an extension of the body, especially the walking body, passing through and becoming part of the landscape" (Lippard, 1997, p. 34).

The sense of place escapes full understanding by means of scientific inquiry. Thus, acknowledgement of the value of artistic approaches that have a capacity of intuitively grasping sense of a place may be considered the third key premise for building the strategy of this work.

2.1. Artistic projects tackling sense of place

Within a multitude of recent artistic projects analyzed for the purposes of this research, three currents have been recognized. The first contained a set of strategies focusing to the need for a multisensory approach to the urban reality. Another current aimed at pointing out and criticizing the predominance of the visual in the contemporary city experiences, while the third current dealt with exploring and capturing sense of place in diverse cultural contexts.

Among the infinity of possible choices, some examples of examined projects will be mentioned, that left the most impact on the concept of cultural mapping exercises developed for this work. Within the first current, the *Map of Senses*, created in 2009 for São Paulo, Brazil, may be pointed out. It revisits the concept of sightseeing, offering a sensory, experiential city map of relevance both for visitors and for citizens of São Paulo. The map has been conceived as an open-ended project, welcoming further contributions from the public through its online platform.³ Other projects within this stream revisit sightseeing through experimental travel, emphasizing sensory domains other than visual and their relevance in an urban experience. In 2008, Paul Coudamy, French architect and artist, developed a project named *Blind Tourism* that took place in Tirana, Albania. Non-typical sightseeing locations were chosen instead of common sites of tourist interest, and the participants' sense of vision was suppressed. Other sensory experiences were thus put under the spotlight. The participants did a blindfolded walk while describing their experience and listening to the information about the sites provided by a guide. Afterwards, the participants could watch video records of their experiences. The methodology enabled deeply immersive experiences and the results were revelatory of the overlooked sensory properties of the research territory. A similar project, *Lisboa Sensorial*, was launched in the same year in Lisbon by the experience design studio *Cabracega* and a range of collaborating institutions and individuals. The Lisbon initiative had a twofold impact: besides revelatory and stimulating sensory experiences that provided the participants with new knowledge on Alfama, the historical neighbourhood where the walks took place, it helped raising awareness about the world of those visually impaired.⁴

The Geotaggers' World Atlas (2010 – ongoing) (see Fig. 1), a long-term project by the data artist and software developer Eric Fischer, belongs to the second stream. The project idea stems from the author's interest to discover "the world's most interesting places" and the argument that "a cluster of geotagged photos is a good indicator of the interestingness of a place".⁵ The visual analysis and the maps produced are based on the location data of the photos shared publicly on the Flickr network. The first version of the *Atlas* was created in 2010 and contained maps of 100 major cities, where their visual attractions were represented by the density of image location data. Among those cartographic representations of cities, reduced to their visual landmarks and focal points, two Portuguese cities, Lisbon and Porto, were present. The current version of the Fischer's *Atlas* dates from 2015. The Fischer's maps make obvious the level of digital imagery overload today, that, in some interpretations, has contributed to the dominant, "vision-centered interpretation of the reality".⁶ Saturation with images is the theme of another recent interaction design project, the *Camera Restricta* by Philip Schmidt (2014–2015). According to the author's web page (see: Schmidt, s.d.), it was conceived as a "disobedient tool for taking unique

³ For further details see: <http://www.mapadassensacoes.com.br/mapadassensacoes/> [Last consulted 20/01/2016].

⁴ See: <http://www.torquecc.com/220907/2090181/for-users/sensorial-lisbon> [Last consulted 20/01/2016].

⁵ The author's description published on his blog in April 2015: <https://www.mapbox.com/blog/geotaggers-world-atlas/> [Last consulted 21/01/2016]. The new version of the *Atlas* is actually a dynamic world map rather than a set of static maps, and uses Flickr's 10-year photo location database.

⁶ As extensively argued by Pallasmaa (2005, p. 16ff).

¹ This finding was used for the development of the cultural mapping exercise *Personal Porto*.

² Diaconu's work was done in the cultural landscape of Vienna.

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