

Urban Theory Symposium „Sensing DiverCities”

Nov 14-15, 2024

Organizers: Dr. Christine Barwick-Gross (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Dr. Christy Kulz (Technische Universität Berlin), Claudia Mock (Europa-Universität Flensburg)

Topic Outline

Cities are places that provide – or confront – their inhabitants with endless sensory stimuli. These sensory experiences, as various scholars have demonstrated, affect how people make sense of the city and of urban diversity. As such, the senses also play a role for categorizing ‘others’, for creating boundaries and hierarchies. To date, studies on urban diversity and urban inequality still heavily rely on the visual – they mostly ‘see’ the city, but do not listen to it, smell, taste, or touch it (Back 2007). However, these other senses, particularly sound and smell, are as relevant for experiencing and making sense of urban life, for processes of identification and local belonging, as well as for processes of boundary drawings and the (re-)production of urban inequality.

In the past years, scholars from a variety of disciplines (sociology, geography, anthropology, history) have increasingly addressed this lack of attention to the senses. Our symposium wants to contribute to giving more attention to how the sensory mediates people’s engagement with the city, based on three broader themes:

First, we want to inquire how urban sound, smell, and taste relate to the **material and atmospheric figuration** of cities, including its underlying **urban planning and policymaking**. The material environment impacts on the sounds, smells and tastes that are present in each space, while the regulation and control of sensory inputs through urban planning and policymaking can (re-)produce or challenge, or de-/legitimize urban inequalities. Attending to the senses in the city therefore provides insights into how the material environment impacts upon experiences of sound and smell, but also how these sensory experiences feed back into, and even disrupt the material environment. Sensory experiences do not just happen in the city, but are influenced by the built environment, political regulations, urban planning and policies (Aceska et al. 2024; Low 2015).

With the second theme, we aim to address **the relevance of sensory practices and experiences for boundary making between different (groups of) urban actors**, while also examining the resistance and subversion of symbolic and social boundaries. Various scholars have demonstrated how the sensory is crucial for the (re-)production of boundaries, but also for challenging and overcoming them (Le Breton 2017; Largey & Watson 1972, Simmel 1997). Boundary making through the senses often relates to claims to belonging to certain spaces, such as neighborhoods, streets, buildings (Lisiak et al. 2021) or to larger materially or symbolically existing spatial dichotomies, such as that of east and west (Mau et al. 2024). Categorizing ‘others’ based on the senses is tightly linked to biographical experiences and cultural embeddedness and is thus relevant in the

(re)production of constructed differences based on race, migration status, but also gender, or age (Liebelt 2023; Le Breton 2017). At the same time, sensory experiences in diverse spaces can also lead to boundary crossings, often in very subtle ways that cannot be captured through a visual focus (Rhys Taylor 2013).

Lastly, the focus on sound and smell (and other senses) can inevitably incite novel **methodological questions and reflections on knowledge transfer**. This starts from very practical questions, such as how can we adequately capture people's practices of listening, smelling, and the process of meaning-making of sensory experiences? Drawing from reflexive migration studies, the focus on the senses also invites us to consider our own positionality, our own capacities to listen and smell, our biographical and cultural influences and how they accompany, support or conflict, the research process. We also want to inquire about the purchase of sensory methods for research that is rooted in postcolonial studies and/or adopts a feminist perspective. Moreover, sensory methodologies also invite novel ways of knowledge transfer beyond the common production of texts and beyond the common academic audience.

Conference Program

Thursday, November 14 (Refugio¹)

16-20 Uhr: Opening Event

Friday, November 15 (Humboldt University Berlin, Georg Simmel Center²)

09.30-10.00: Arrival and welcome

10.00-12.00: Senses & urban materialities

Chair: Bodo Mrozek

Prof. Ana Aceska, Wageningen University

Dr. Laleh Foroughanfar, Malmö University

Dr. Paul Eisewicht, Universität Münster

Lunchbreak

13.00-15.00: Boundary drawing/boundary crossing through the Senses

Chair: tba

Prof. Claudia Liebelt & Mayıs Tokel, Freie Universität Berlin

Prof. Alex Rhys Taylor, Goldsmiths, University of London

Meeri Ott, University of Eastern Finland

Coffee break

¹ LenustraÙe 4, 12047 Berlin

² M*hrenstraÙe 41, 10117 Berlin

15.30-17.30: Roundtable: Sensory methodologies

Chair: tba

Dr. Nora Küttel, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg

Dr. Céline Barry, Technische Universität Berlin

Discussion with all participants

17.30-18.00: Wrap-up

18.30: Conference Dinner

Attendance only after registration: gszbuero@hu-berlin.de