

Sensing the City: an Embodied Mapping of the Changing Uses and Tempers of Urban Place (a Practice-based Case-Study of Coventry)

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A 3-year AHRC-funded collaborative research project (Apr 2017-Mar2020). Project participants also include members of Warwick University Film & TV Studies, Centre for Dance Research, Coventry University and various commissioned artists). Further details available on the project website: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/theatre/research/impact/sensing/>

Project overview

The 3-year *Sensing the City* research project overall is a *practice*-based initiative in both its methodological approach to fieldwork and in aspects of its final outputs. The research aspect resides, first, in practice itself: how it can be utilised to interrogate and represent the sensory life of a city. Second, it presumes the discovery of forms of knowledge about the city that only practice – above all via the human body and its senses – can access. The project's three principal **research questions**, which are interdependent and correspond to the three main developmental stages of the project over three years, are as follows:

1. How can the sensate performing body be developed and utilised as a form of 'living barometer' to generate usable data relating to the perceived materiality and form of urban locations, as well as to the atmospheric vicissitudes of urban life?
2. How can such 'embodied' or 'felt' data, which seeks to give validation to emotions, moods, rhythms and sensations, be processed and re-presented in appropriate textual, oral, physical and visual documentary forms that incorporate digital technologies, book-form publication, exhibition presentation, performance and symposium-style discourses?
3. How can a sensate 'cartography of affect/atmospheres', presented as an integrated portfolio of research findings, contribute to an enhanced understanding of the way inhabitants use and respond to urban spaces and, therefore, what makes for a viable, liveable and sustainable city?

The overall purpose of the research was to establish a range of methodologies towards, first, engaging productively with urban sites using the sensibilities of the human body as the primary means of gathering data; second, processing that data; and, third, presenting it in innovative ways within a critical framework that assesses the city's habitability and sustainability. The programme of work has taken place in four autonomous micro-projects of which "Conjunctions" is one.

The **research context and concept** for the *Sensing the City* project overall was conceived against the backdrop of a marked and continuing expansion in the 21st century of the overall urban demographic on a global scale, the space of the city being where the business of 'life' takes place now for the majority of the global population. This by no means presents an even picture, there obviously being significant discrepancies of economic prosperity, political power, socio-cultural infrastructure and resource in cities not only across continents but also just within an advanced country such as the UK. So, some cities are subject to greater and more rapid degrees of population expansion than others, and for a variety of complex contextual reasons that cannot easily be generalised. For example, sometimes such growth serves primarily as an indicator of relative prosperity (with mobility occurring as a product of socio-economic privilege), sometimes of relative poverty (with mobility occurring as a product of economic destitution or political aggravation). That aside, though, it is fair to assert that all cities are engaged not only in continual processes of adaptation and transformation

– however incremental – but also in assessing how they may best operate in order to maintain their viability as places in which people may reside and survive.

The question of urban space use is paramount, then, to understanding and shaping the future of civilisation and in recent times there have been numerous developmental projects related to the implementation of ‘smart technologies’ that carry the promise of planning for functioning, efficient cities. Broadly speaking the majority of initiatives relating to academic research and innovation for urban sustainability and resilience involve either the industry-related disciplines of engineering and science (in their respective and various forms) or those of the social sciences. Typically such projects implement the latest (big) data gathering technologies – such as digital sensors – to study how cities operate from various perspectives, and in order to develop radical, problem-solving infrastructural utility projects or make concrete recommendations towards improved, more sustainable cities in the 21st century: how transport networks can be optimised in their efficiency; how to track and bring under control the spread of infectious disease in urban environments; how to prevent urban flooding in increasingly adverse climate conditions. By contrast, where arts and humanities research has been concerned with questions relating to urbanity, it has tended to confine itself to reflection and discourse: for example, on how the modern city is represented in film and literature or on histories of urban architecture.

Uniquely the *Sensing the City* project sought to employ performance-based techniques to arrive at its outcomes. In other words, it aimed to make use of the presence and movement of the human body in urban space – drawing on methods ranging from dance-based practices, to using the film camera as an extension of the body, to walking-as-performance – in a manner equivalent to the advanced, data-gathering digital sensor typically implemented as smart technology by engineering and the sciences. Its premise was less to perform for an immediate audience in situ – though there were occasions when this proved appropriate (eg. with commissioned work from artists) or when it occurred effectively as an inevitable by-product of urban fieldwork activity – than to engage the body for its capacities to register and convey crucial details relating to the human senses in selected urban contexts. Importantly, as Carl Lavery points out in prefacing remarks to his ‘eco-graphy’ of Paris, the body here is “not synonymous with subjectivity (reflective consciousness), and neither is it contained by the skin; rather it is psycho-physical matter, a type of instrument engaged in a logic of intensities and speeds. To have a body is to be affected, to be open to the flux and flow of anonymous forces, the chaos of molecules”. Thus, he concludes, drawing on the research into aesthetics and atmospheres of the philosopher Gernot Böhme, we can “attempt to capture how the materiality of the environment impacts on [bodies], provoking intangible moods and sensations” (2014: 58).

Specifically, the project’s outcomes have sought to draw conclusions about the constitution, character and morphology of urban space as *public* space, *habitable* space and *sustainable* space by monitoring the instinctive reactions of the body. In other words, the project has been centrally concerned, as a symptom of the degree to which cities are changing in the 21st century, to examine the effects on the practices and behaviours of urban dwellers of key features of the force-field that is modern-day urban space, including such factors as: defensible space, retail/consumer space and gated space; the effects of surveillance technologies, motorised traffic and smart phone use; the integration of ‘wild’ as well as ‘domesticated’ nature in urban planning and living. City centres such as Coventry’s, which have served as the focal point for the research, are changing rapidly in the way they are being used (or are permitted to be used) and there is currently profound uncertainty about their future purpose as significant aspects of new or recent life practices – many of them linked to developments in technologies – are brought to bear. So, for example, online shopping has reduced the demand for centralised retail outlets, above all when it comes to the ubiquitous chain-store, and so the very need for the centre-piece of most cities, the shopping mall, is being undermined.

Coventry finds itself in a transitional moment, poised to embark on a second radical plan of regeneration after an initial phase of rapid post-war reconstruction. Its functionalist architecture, constructed at a time of high local authority investment in an ideal of civic responsibility, democratic participation, welfare provision and social commitment (to say nothing of industrial optimism), is visibly in decline now. The city is ripe for change and the arts have the potential to facilitate that process, not least since the city's nomination to be UK City of Culture in 2021 (not yet confirmed at the commencement of the *Sensing the City* project in April 2017).

The project was designed to offer insights to arts-based research in general and urban performance studies in particular, opening up new possibilities relating to both the premise of its approach and the nature of the data it hoped to gather. Its multi-medial, integrated basis would also attract interest from a range of other academic disciplines concerned with the many features of urbanism, from human/cultural geography to architecture to cultural and media policy studies. But the aim of *Sensing the City* was also clearly to entice a non-academic constituency of local users at various stages and in differing capacities thus enabling practical research findings to have an impact on the everyday lives of Coventry citizens.

Bibliography

Lavery C. (2014) "Performing Paris: an Eco-geography of Meridians and Atmospheres", in *Performing Cities*, ed. N. Whybrow, Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan, pp.56-79.