

Walking with the Senses Open

Helle Nebelong argues for a sensory approach to urban analysis and design



The Sensory Garden in Faelledparken Copenhagen, is a green and quiet place for adults and children of all ages and abilities to calm down and enjoy the moment. I designed it in 1995 and it was inaugurated as part of new designs and initiatives in 1996, when Copenhagen was designated European Capital of Culture. The garden was a novelty and not just another playground. The idea was to create a special place that could open up the urban child's senses to nature and awaken a longing to get out into real nature, or at least being aware that it exists not only on television and movies, but also outside the city and even in little splashes within the city. The Sensory Garden was the first public place in Copenhagen where accessibility for all was implemented.

Why not let these experiences and lessons enrich us all – city planners, architects, designers and decision-makers – to be more aware of our senses when we design or make changes to everyday environments, and so provide more diverse opportunities for multisensory experiences both in contemplation and in activities?

When walking in the city, there's often a specific purpose for the walk: we may be on our way to work, shop or meet somebody. We're in a hurry and concentrate on walking the shortest route from A to B as fast as possible. According to American scientists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (ART) we are making use of directed attention when walking in urban spaces, trying to avoid bumping into other people, escaping traffic accidents, and trying to exclude unnecessary sensory impressions that can distract and delay us.

In a foreign city, it is easy to lose one's sense of direction. You stop and all your senses are heightened ringing like alarm bells. Only then you can find a way back to your starting point.

TRY IT AND BE SURPRISED

We have to learn to sharpen our senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch, and cultivate them so that we are open to impressions. Last summer I did a three-hour research study based on walking around Copenhagen with my senses wide open in this way. I had done the same walk several times before, but this time, with this special purpose in mind and a slower walking pace, I noticed myriads of temporary and constantly changing experiences – tactile surfaces, details in design and crafts work, the sounds of wind and water fountains, children's happy voices – that I had never noticed before.

If you allow yourself to walk around a city at a slower pace than usual with the aim of stimulating your senses, you will be surprised to find what a diverse environment there is and the richness of its details. Open your eyes, prick up your

1 Copenhagen: the Sensory Garden in the summer. Design and photo Helle Nebelong



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ears, widen your nostrils and give full rein to your curiosity and experience a city with hourly, daily and seasonally changing surprises.

In 2003, I arranged a 'try it yourself' event for Copenhagen's mayors. They participated in an hour's tour through the city as temporarily wheelchair users. It was an eye-opening experience for them to sense the uneven surfaces and slopes on the pavements, which made it impossible not to roll into the road space. The event was part of getting more focus on universal design, which was a relatively new concept at that time. Our interdisciplinary team drew up the first strategy for how to improve all urban spaces – streets, squares and parks – for all citizens. The strategy was officially adopted in 2005 and led to the first physical improvements of the city and a greater understanding of human diversity.

CHILDREN AS DESIGNERS

Involving children in urban planning should be much more common. Children have the right to be involved in decisions that affect them and it makes them understand that they have a democratic voice which will be listened to.

In 1999 a seven-year-old girl who participated in a competition Children draw Ørestad (a new district in Copenhagen that has since been built) suggested: 'There must be a large hollow tree that you can walk through when you go down to the Metro'. Imagine how it would be walking through the tree, feeling the rough trunk and the smell of bark! A grown-up city planner is unlikely to come up with such a poetic and sensory stimulating proposal.

My experience of working with children in different projects is that it adds something unique. Recently children involved in the design of Ilse and Charles Jobson Play Park at Colene Hoose Elementary School in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois were asked: If you were a fish, what would you look like? 250 unique fish drawings were transformed into a wonderful mosaic river by artist Robin Brailsford. The mosaic adds both beauty and sensory experiences to the park. Especially during winter, the colours in the thousands of beautiful, little bright stones will light up and stimulate the visual attention. The park will open in spring 2023 as a new spot for all families and residents in the city. The community, accustomed to playgrounds with standard steel and plastic play equipment installed on colourful rubber



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surfaces with no plants, has great expectations for this new organically shaped play landscape with its hundreds of trees, shrubs, perennials, herbs, boulders, stumps, logs and sand.

LAYERS OF URBAN MEMORY

Tim Knudsen, Professor Emeritus in Political Science, University of Copenhagen, has a thesis that countries and their identities have not been built up rationally and consistently, but rather formed like archaeological layers, by the more-or-less conscious norms and values of politicians, officials and citizens.

Old districts in particular, which have been shaped over centuries by events, trends and people who have left their personal marks, hold much identity and collective urban memory and offer multi-sensory experiences to those with receptive senses. Every brick and architectural detail in old buildings tell a story, as do the pavement, sculptures and urban fixtures carefully placed in streets, squares and parks; similarly trees mark and convey the city in the different seasons, from the first leaf buds unfolding to autumn leaves with multiple colours. Trees move and rattle in the wind, have good smells and trunks of different tactile bark.

Old trees are often associated with myths and legends. An old plane tree in Østerbro in Copenhagen is a historic feature and part of the urban memory. My grandchildren call it Grandma's Tree and, in that way, they contribute to the further storytelling of that particular tree. Among local citizens it is known as Hans Christian Andersen's tree and although not documented, it is said that Andersen who lived nearby often sat underneath the old tree.

2 Hans Christians Andersen's tree in Copenhagen is part of the urban memory and genius loci. Photograph by Amalie Nebelong
3 Copenhagen: the Sensory Garden. Design. Photograph by Helle Nebelong

The same rich aesthetic multisensory experiences will not be available when walking in modern cities with new offices and residential buildings made of glass and steel, and in volumes that are out of human scale. How can we design human cities that stimulate our senses and make us feel welcome and safe?

AESTHETIC DETOURS

Over years of documenting where I walk, I've always been fascinated by 'nature's temporary art', for example during spring when cherry blossoms sprinkle down on different surfaces, and in the autumn, when leaves, chestnuts and acorns change the surface I'm walking on, on a daily basis. Old granite surfaces change when it rains and when the sun shines. All these little, daily masterpieces are free to enjoy. So, remember to look down wherever your shoes take you.

Landscape, beauty and sensory impressions have an impact on our movement patterns. Carefully designed urban landscapes influence people to make detours and walk a longer way than is necessary, which is good for individual wellbeing and public health as a whole. Sensory stimuli strengthen our desire to make detours.

BETWEEN THE BIRD CHERRY AND THE LILAC

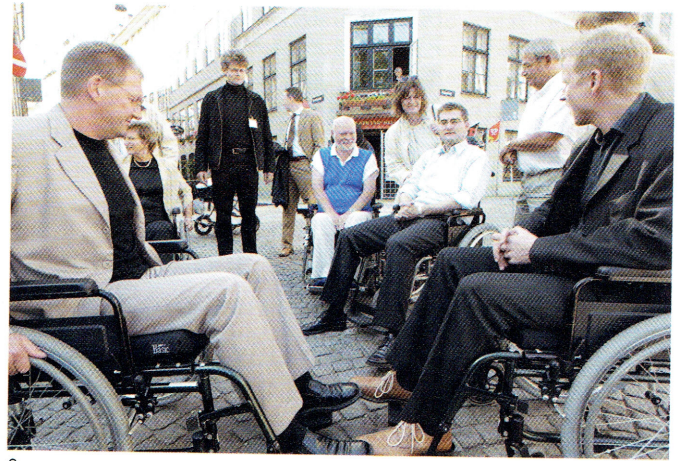
In April and May spring unfolds all over Copenhagen. The more than 200 blooming Japanese cherry trees at Langelinie in Copenhagen Harbour attract thousands of people in the two weeks when they blossom. The same happens at Christianshavn's embankments when the Hawthorns blossom and the whole area smells of the flower's characteristic fragrance. In Sweden they have an expression 'Between the Bird Cherry and the Lilac' that describes the short period between the flowering time of these two very fragrant bushes. It was first used by a cobbler who put a sign up in the window of his shop when he decided to take a brief holiday, and the sign said 'Closed between the Bird Cherry and the Lilac'.

So how can we create spaces that affect us mentally? Urban planning is about taking into account the fundamental human needs for good physical and mental health, whether you are a child, young, adult or elderly. It is possible to create urban spaces that move people emotionally by thinking of the city as a multisensory arena to move around in. The use of plant scents gives places identity and creates another dimension, with special stimuli at certain times of the year.

According to Victoria Linn Lygum, Assistant Professor at BUILD, Aalborg University: 'Scents have a very strong connection to our emotions and memories, and this is connected to the way smell information is processed in the brain, where they have direct access to the centre of the brain that also deals with emotions. This is why we can sometimes smell something and then a feeling arises in us, and then that feeling can be linked to a memory'.

There are unattractive smells that repel us, such as exhaust fumes, rotten seaweed on the beach and overflowing waste bins on a hot summer day. These stinking smells are challenging but the problem can be solved by consciously working to activate and stimulate the senses in a good way and choosing plants based on different characteristics. Their beautiful colours, shapes and structures capture and delight the eye. Their special scents tickle the nose. Strange fruit and seed pods, thorny or soft leaves appeal to the sense of touch. Edible plants such as fruit, vegetables or herbs speak to the sense of taste. Finally, there is hearing, which picks up the sound of the wind in the leaves, the hum of insects and the whistle of birds.

According to Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (ART) we make use of involuntary attention – the instinctive, automatic attention – when we are under the influence of nature's sounds, smells and changes of temperature. This attention is the one that we use when we are out in nature. It demands no special mental effort. After my three-hour study research experience walking around Copenhagen, I've practiced turning on and off directed or involuntary attention – with success!



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The UIA World Congress 2023 in Copenhagen has Sustainable Futures as its main theme with the headline Leave No One Behind and is organised around the United Nations' 17 sustainable development goals with a special focus on inclusion and diversity. All people are unique and have different needs during life, different skills and individual ways to sense the spaces around them. There is no perfect human figure like Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* from 1490. As city planners, architects, designers and decision-makers, we should ask ourselves throughout the design process: 'Am I leaving someone behind?' and 'How can I add multisensory qualities to the design and contribute to a better quality of life for people and places?' ●

Helle Nebelong, Landscape Architect and expert in sensory gardens

REFERENCES

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WHAT SENSORY EXPERIENCES DOES YOUR CITY OFFER?

A simple and entertaining way to incorporate senses into the design of urban spaces is to think about the senses when analysing a place and during the design process.

Think of the five senses:

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| SIGHT | What is the dominant visual impression? |
| HEARING | What is the soundscape like? What do you hear? |
| TOUCH | Are there different tactile surfaces, sculptures or other elements to touch? |
| SMELL | What scents do you notice? Are they good or bad? |
| TASTE | Is there anything you can taste or eat? |

6 Try it yourself event for Copenhagen's mayors. Photograph courtesy of City of Copenhagen