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Exploring the world nose-first. Temporalities of urban smellscape.

“It smells like Amsterdam,” is a well-turned phrase. Each year about 1.5 million tourists visit the city to legally consume cannabis in specially licensed coffee shops, and every time their doors open to welcome a new customer a potent smidge escapes with the force of a jet missile into the street.

Whatever your views on the subject, the scent of marijuana and hashish is strong. The distinctive and easily identifiable smell curls along the narrow streets of De Wallen, lingers among the pubs, clubs, bars and coffee shops of the red light district and wafts across the open expanse of Stationsplein as newcomers in transit cram in a full, enhanced, poly-sensory experience of the city.

As an urban smellscape researcher and mapper I was genuinely curious to discover to what extent Amsterdam’s notoriously famous odour pervaded and to explore the other aromas floating around the city, from the constant and subtle presence of any background smells to the episodic scents of specific neighbourhoods and the unexpected and curious aromas as detected by a local population. To explore the urban smellscape I organised a series of smellwalks with perfumers, landscape architects, university students, design thinkers and members of the general public. The walks took place over four particularly windy days in the spring of 2013.

Instead of just marijuana what 44 urban smellwalkers uncovered was a vast range of 650 perceived scents, some belonging to the city and others more in line with expectations of walks in the countryside or a meander in a foreign land.

The distinctly urban scents, as delineated by the late urban smellscape specialist Victoria Henshaw, included food (waffles, asparagus, bakery, cheese, fat and grease, bacon, Dutch sausages, coffee and beer), traffic and exhaust fumes, synthetic odours (rubber, plastic, spray paint, cleaning products, bleach, chemicals), construction (wood, asphalt, paint) and plants (greenery, garden, grass).

Specifically localised smells (known in the trade as 'episodic' odours) encountered during the series of walks included Albert Hein (a local supermarket with a peculiarly distinctive smell at the entrance to many of the stores), wet fish (at the fishmonger stalls in the street markets), incense and Chinese spices (in Chinatown). Scent marketing, an increasingly common extension of branding, ensured that the scent of a well-known US-based clothing company was clearly identified some distance from the shop itself. In Vondelpark and Sarphatipark, the flowers and the rain each proffered nuances of green, leafy volatiles. Time and again we encountered seasonal specialties: the scents were those of fresh growth, of the spring.

One of the more enjoyable aspects of my slightly transgressive practice is seeing the faces of sniffers ('olifactors') as they discover a smell that they were not expecting. Smellwalking is an active practice, the whole body is involved as olifactors stoop, bend and stretch, smell-hunting they seek out olfactory possibility; road drains, keyholes, inside bushes, along park benches, materiality, humans, non-human animals, plants are all homes to scent. In seeking out the smell of urine, apparently a common occurrence in the half basements of Nieuwmarkt, the smellwalkers instead happened upon a completely unexpected odour. Their bodies jolted upright, indignation and astonishment on their faces as they instead encountered the whiffs of old books, musty and forgotten, slightly damp and strong enough to escape through the cracks in the metal-framed glass doors. They all leant back in to reaffirm the finding.

An early morning stroll in the south east of the city unveiled another unexpected odour, whimsically listed in the smellnote as 'light horse' by the olifactor. Scanning the misty landscape of Oosterpark we saw a fairground company packing up to leave, and in its midst stood a couple of ponies. We nodded sagely, quietly acknowledging smell's occasional capacity to pre-visualise the world we walk through.

The wind is both a destructive and a productive force in smellscape mapping. On the one hand it serves to remind us of the temporal nature of the

smellscape; very few smells pervade insidiously into our everyday city existence as the breeze disperses them, disrupting an attempt to identify or share a smell. But then a steady wind can bring the most unexpected smells into play. One smellwalker wrote a follow-up note to the walk saying that the city sometimes contains a hint of chocolate powder in the air. Further research indicated that the chocolate factories of Zaandam were the source – perceptible only with a northwesterly wind.

All of Amsterdam's scents were perceived to exist against a background aroma of the canals – a subtle tone of slight decay and mould, a savoury smell akin to that of a coat bought at a jumble sale or a plastic bag containing a two-day-old used swimsuit and towel.

Smells are more pronounced in warm and humid environments, just think of a gym changing room for a second and you'll get where I'm coming from. Odour molecules move more slowly as the temperature drops, so while there are fewer smells to detect on a cold day, hot days can appear to be super-stinky. Water is the conduit to transfer scent molecules to our 400 olfactory receptor cells.

It occurred to me that Singapore, with its equatorial climate and average temperatures of 30C would make an interesting comparison to a cold spring smellscape in [Europe](#). Singapore rates highly on the 'controlled olfactory' city scale. The law prohibits a smelly fruit, the durian, in the underground transportation system and the city has a predilection for indoor malls artificially fragranced with signature scents. The research visit was a nose-opener.

The Katong area was dominated by roti-prata and curry, cooked in buildings that open fully on to the streets. As one smellwalker exclaimed: "Was smelling a very rubbish flower. Then out of nowhere ... Dinner!" Smells quickly jump to fill a space without indicating their appearance, and just as swiftly are gone. Described as "intoxicating" the scent of (soon to be illegal) shisha was only detected in Kampong Glam, and only at night. Both Chinatown and Little

India contained a cacophony of smells, day and night – from the herby, bitter, minty, musky aromas of traditional herbal medicines to further intoxication in the form of jasmine garlands.

Unexpected odours in Singapore included stale sweat in the Gardens by the Bay and chlorine by the beach in East Coast Parkway. And surprisingly there were relatively few smellnotes citing car and diesel fumes. But Singapore is a highly regulated with regards to air pollution, and is a clean city. Spices of cooking food and a residual humidity form the background aromas to Singapore's smellscape as "deep dark secrets" and "the smells of a hard life" emerged as local curiosities.

The other cities explored nose-first as a part of my art and design practice are Paris, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Milan, Ellesmere Port, Canterbury, Newport (Rhode Island), New York, Pamplona and Marseille. Each city's smell profile is necessarily complex and very much in the nose of the beholder as every one of us will pick and mix from odours to assemble an olfactory profile of the place. This combination then becomes an individually memorable city scent mélange.

Both culture and expectation weigh heavy on a city's smellscape. Edinburgh retains a heavy industrial scent of the brewery – an endangered and disappearing smell from many cities as the major beer factories move out of town. On certain days the yeast extract pervades Edinburgh's air, travelling seemingly as a cloud for miles across the undulating, volcanic terrain from Slateford Road to the top of Carlton Hill. One curious scent in Edinburgh is that of the penguins at the zoo. Penguin colonies in the wild are stinky, cited as "the worst smelling odour you will ever encounter in your life". This emanates from a combination of mud, penguin poo and regurgitated fish for feeding the young that often misses its intended destination. Thankfully it is both localised and slightly out of the city centre.

Pamplona's autumn smellscape reflects the city population's fixation with food. Glasgow's winter smellscape is of building and construction, the scents of regeneration underpinned by greasy food particles hanging in the

omnipresent dreich with a highly specific smell of the clockwork orange subway system – damp, metallic sponge is a descriptor, but really it is just the smell of the subway that starts as you descend the inner stairs to the platform. Every city’s underground transportation system has unique smell, in Paris the metro even smells different to the low-stop commuter trains of the RER, which may be partially due to the fragranced water used to wash the platforms.

The summer scents of Canterbury included the literal – fresh strawberries in the market place – and the lyrical – the smell of history embedded in the ancient architecture. New York’s summer smellscape is rife with garlic, green macrobiotic wheatgrass drinks and spilled beer – evocatively described as “the smell of broken dreams”.

My process of smellmap creation involves taking data directly from the comments of the smellwalkers and transcribing them into symbols on a digital or physical map. Some of the newer maps are animated. The symbols may be watercolours or digital icons in the form of morphed isolines or tiny dots. Each map is also full of white space, alluding to the massive smell voids where we simply don’t notice the aromas around us.

Whereas some maps are scientifically accurate symbolic representations of the reality of the earth’s surface, the mapping that I use in my practice is exploratory – pointing out transient and ephemeral phenomena. Ultimately this means any final, printed smellmap can only ever be an indication of possibility: there might be a real odour in the location indicated by my iconography, but there again, there might not. As the security of the map is lost, it becomes instead a tool and a driver for further exploration – the map as a guide and a pointer to the more evanescent aspects of our lived environment.

Smellwalking reveals how – despite the human desire for control – temporal flows and fluctuations remain. Amsterdam did not emerge as being primarily a city of the scent of cannabis during my initial week of research, but on a

return visit the heady scent of marijuana assailed my nostrils both day and night. The urban smellscape is highly temporal – emanating from the rhythms of the city, the rhythms of its people, and affected by incremental vagaries of the weather as well as seasonal growing patterns.

The range of scents in the urban smellscape is a salutary reminder of our inability to exercise complete control over the environment, and a smellscape's tendency to swiftly evaporate serves as a reminder of how the challenges of the unexpected are short-lived.

To become more aware of everyday smells, beyond the binaries of good and bad, requires curiosity and a willingness to spend five of minutes of each day walking nose-first, reorienting your primary perception of the world from visual to olfactory. The process is often surprising and results in a richer experience of place, mindfulness as you slow to consider smell, and a new understanding of the world.