

Sense of Smell

Smell and architecture: what is the connection?

Nothing to do with one another—that is our first reaction.

Yes, it's true that the association of these two realms of the senses—architecture and smell—seemingly divorces them from one another.

But let us pause for a moment—why are these two realms, so powerfully stimulating, in and of, themselves so separate from one another? Why is scent so absent from created space?

It is true that each space evokes a scent that is unique, every space in which life unfolds has a particular and unique olfactory signature however furtive it may be; but one has to admit that even given the olfactory reality of any space, there is no recognition as such, and certainly no conscious attempt to integrate sense of smell with space, or space taking sense of smell into account.

It seems to me that it would be useful to elaborate on the deeper reasons why there is no trace of scent in the realm of architecture and why so little importance is given to it in our living spaces, our working environments, etc. It is only by understanding the reasons for this oversight, clarifying the deeper causes why we do not consider smell as a primary element, that we can continue to work constructively.

So why is sense of smell so rarely considered in the realm of architecture? That is the question at the heart of this paper.

For many people, the obvious response would be that it is because architecture is essentially visual. It is an art that we see, an art to be seen, and if we enter into it, if we move within the spaces that constitute it, the experience remains essentially, and first of all, a spectacle of vision. Books and architectural reviews are filled with drawings and photos. The other senses, being of less importance, are not evoked.

But is this the only reason?

On further reflection, we realize that the question is much more complicated than it seems at first and that the real reason that there is so little attention paid to sense of smell in our living spaces is based on an ensemble of psychological, physiological and cultural factors.

These reasons, it would seem to us, are the following seven:

1. We consider space to be emptiness
2. We find it difficult to represent smell itself, to which the following elements/reasons can be added:
3. Physiology
4. Hygiene
5. Behavior
6. Moral
7. And little knowledge of historical « olfactory practices »

1. Considering space as emptiness

As we have said, the majority of people consider architecture and space as an essentially visual experience. Architecture : these are buildings – and space is the emptiness contained within its walls. This is precisely where the misunderstanding resides, because space is not emptiness but rather an environment for life contained within the walls, an environment that is stimulating to the senses. It is obviously light and shadow, proportion and color, perspective and decoration, but also sounds that reverberate, surfaces that our feet walk upon, textures that we touch, temperatures that determine our degree of comfort and smells that surround and seduce us. All these things together multiply one another into an ensemble that we perceive as a whole surrounding.

2. Problems of representation

If we consider space to be an environment for life where each element is important, then we are obliged to represent smell and sound, temperature and the degree of humidity in the air. However,

- 1) All these elements are invisible. Given that we live in a hyper-visual world, we lack the tools, the means of representation for all these elements. Representation of any of the other senses than the visual is rare and complicated. When reading a Db survey, enthalpy diagrams are not accessible to everyone. It remains to translate these parameters into commonly experienced sensations in order to understand what the numbers mean.
- 2) While in the visual domain, I can always maintain a distance from things; in the realm of sound and smell, I am completely enveloped. And it is very difficult to represent something that surrounds me, which envelops me, an environment in which I am a part of.

These difficulties are nothing new.

It is most surprising, when we look at old paintings, drawings or photos showing streets bustling with crowds of horses, idlers and pedlars, etc..., or market places filled with people, to find them silent and without odor. These factors, so very present in reality, once painted onto canvas or printed onto paper have lost their characteristics and their intensities. The crowds have become mute, the hooves of horses on cobblestone have become silent, the streets are without odor and the buildings exposed to the sunlight have lost their warmth.

All these characteristics so present in experience, because they are invisible and transparent, are erased by the fact that we are incapable of representing them visually.

3. A physiological reason

Sight and sound have always been considered in our western culture from the time of Plato as “noble” senses—the only ones deserving of our interest.

If this can be explained by the lack of importance accorded to the sense of smell in esthetic theory, we nevertheless are surprised to so rarely encounter in literature descriptions of towns that mention their particular smell such as that of the gardens of Royal Palace surrounded by such extraordinary architectural order:

“ One does not know, in summer, where to rest without inhaling the odor of putrid urine.”
(Pierre Chauvet) (1)

And at the Palace of Versailles:

"The cesspool that adjoins the palace, the park, the gardens, even the castle catches one's breath with its stinking odours. The paths, the courtyards, the wings of the buildings, the hallways are filled with urine and fecal matter even at the very feet of the ministerial wing, a butcher bleeds and grills his pork every morning, the St. Cloud Avenue is covered with sewer water and dead cats." (La Morandière) (2) - to cite only two texts.

We would like to advance the hypothesis here that if the smell of a place is so rarely included in literary descriptions of towns, it is partly because of the phenomenon of adaptation that dictates that the human nose no longer notices a particular smell after a certain time to the point that we forget its presence. (You can easily verify the phenomenon each time you go to a public swimming pool where the pungency odor of chlorine that causes you to gasp on entering disappears rapidly—it virtually no longer exists for us!)

If we do not take into account this factor of perception, we could not explain the rarity of citations concerning the odors of pollution that exist in our modern cities, just as writing concerning the stench of ancient cities is so rare. These inherent odors were so pervasive in ancient cities, and are so common in our modern cities, that we are used to them and do not believe it necessary to describe them.

4. A behavioral reason

The rare traces of the use of perfumes in architecture are only encountered in romantic hideaways or harems and nowhere else.

Why?

A kind of "bubble" (also called "*body buffer zone*") exists around each of us, an invisible space that is our own territory. This space is indispensable to our feeling of autonomy. When someone approaches us within a distance of more or less a meter (varying between 0,70 m et 1,20 m), we experience discomfort; it is a feeling of unease that all of know well, one that we feel when we are confined in an elevator with a stranger. Usually, our relationships (such as the one we are experiencing here) are verbal and visual. When we then allow another to enter into our personal "bubble", a completely different kind of relationship is established, which is both olfactory and tactile.

Places intended for intimate encounters "cultivate" these senses intentionally in order to put the other at ease, so that he or she is as relaxed as possible: filtered light, soft music, but especially deep and comfortable cushions and perfumes, the warmth of a fire and plush materials.

5. A moral reason

In our daily lives, even if we are surrounded by fragrant flowers, or sometimes a few pots of potpourri in our apartments or houses, discussion about eliminating bad odors outweighs discussion about certain sources of pleasant smells, and the expressions we use underline the sensation of being in an embalmed space or the wonderful feelings we have encountering the particular odor of room or another. Television ads remind of this every day.

I believe the reason for this is unease in speaking of odor, of showing pleasure, as well as the discomfort in cultivating expressions of pleasure concerning the encounter of pleasant odors. From this point of view, we have not entirely left Puritanism behind. I would like to cite the following phrases of Claude Lévi-Strauss from "Tristes tropiques":

"In visiting the famous Jain temple built by a millionaire in the Calcutta park filled with cast iron statue covered in silver, or sculpted from marble by clumsy Italians, I believe I recognized in this alabaster pavilion incrustated with mirror mosaic and impregnated with

perfume, the most ambitious image of what our grandparents could have conceived in their own youth of a private and highly luxurious bordello. But in making this reflection, I did not condemn India for building temples similar to whorehouses, but rather ourselves who have failed to find in our own civilization other places to affirm our liberty and explore the limits of our sensuality, which is, after all, the very function of a temple.” (3)

6. A reason of hygiene

In the process of sanitation infrastructure begun some 200 years ago in all European cities, we not only succeeded in eliminating bad smells, but in total deodorization. (4) While cities no longer smell of horse manure, human excrement and industrial effluents, they no longer smell of grilled meat, sawdust, etc. Exhaust pipe gases remain and are common to every city, but more pronounced in certain cities such as Athens, Bangkok, etc.... and ever-present, sometimes, the smell of baking bread.

The ongoing process, the overriding attitude in cities remains the total elimination of olfactory factors, without any selection being made amongst them.

Bruno Bettelheim demonstrated in his Orthogenic School at the University of Chicago just how difficult it was to obtain in any lieu, a good smell, a warm smell, a smell of warmth and sympathy. (5)

In most psychiatric hospitals there reigns either a “bad” smell that is the result of closed spaces, or a “cold” smell that reeks of too much cleanliness, or else the smell of antiseptic that signifies the battle against microbes that is the least human smell of all.

Creating a good smell in these places, an aroma that smells good and not that smell of hospital that inhabits the corridors, that creates a sense of security is a non-verbal sign that one is in a favorable environment given that the “silent” messages perceived by autistic children do not consist of neutral information, but are instead, full of powerful intention. Bettelheim concludes that the smell of a place reflects the well-being or discomfort of its occupants, a subtle message, but one that is impregnated in the walls, the textiles, the furnishings, etc...and the sought-after reassuring smell can only be produced by individuals who feel comfortable in themselves. A new perspective indeed.

7. Finally, too little knowledge of historical « olfactory practices »

Even if we are aware that in the past herbs were laid out upon the ground, that plants were hung on exterior and interior walls, and that other plants were burned to purify the air, we do not entirely understand the reasons for these practices. Numerous botanical works inform us, as does the Middle Ages, that chamomile was used to cover the ground because of the sweet odors that they exhaled when they were trodden upon, and that meadowsweet and lavender were valued for the same reasons, and that sweet woodruff was suspended in churches for its wonderful odor that evoked hay, honey and vanilla. Rosemary was burned in the chambers of the sick in order to purify the air. During epidemics fires were lit in public squares and branches of juniper and laurel were thrown into them as well as angelica root. In France, fumigations using juniper were regularly practiced in hospitals in the last century, and housewives sometimes still use this practice today. Many of these same plants were tucked in amongst the linens to ward off moths and other insects. (6)

Even if we recognize the antiseptic and disinfectant virtues of these plants, and if we know that the French verb “joncher” originates in the practice of spreading aromatic rushes on the floors, we no longer fully understand the significance of these practices, nor their frequency or the circumstances in which they occurred, etc.

It would be enriching to uncover the significance of these acts and the reasons for their decline. This lost knowledge may of use for us today. It is up to the historians to help us in this quest.

These are, in my opinion, the true causes of the non-interest for the sense of smell in our architectural spaces.

By determining them, it allows us to deal with them, to counter the real obstacles to a better understanding of the olfactory and the place it should take in the amelioration of our living spaces.

The role and importance of smell in future architectural spaces will be given its true value:

- by considering space as a sense-stimulating environment and not as emptiness;
- creating means to visually represent odors;
- emphasizing that it is a means of communication for personal and romantic relationships;
- surpassing simple reasons of hygiene;
- overcoming the discomfort we feel in expressing our feelings of pleasure;
- and acquiring more knowledge as to "olfactory practices" of the past.

Before concluding, let's consider looking at what another culture makes of the role of the olfactory.

THE ORIENT

This word evokes a culture as well as a geographical and climatic notion. The Orient, from an olfactory perspective, begins in the Mediterranean basin. The difference in temperature affects everything. In the north, plants, flowers, and fragrant trees are rare; to the south, it is the contrary—the same species that is without scent in Belgium can be recognized with one's eyes closed in warmer climates and this transformation is unexpected. The cypress in our latitudes is silent; already at the latitude of Florence, it surrounds us with its resinous scent. Our lilacs seem very timid when compared to the perfumes of mimosas, jasmines, pittospores or orange blossom along the avenues of Marrakech. An olfactive presence much stronger than our discrete lindens or plane trees when in flower characterizes these countries and surprises us with each voyage.

"On leaving the convent (of Palermo), one enters the gardens where one can look upon the whole valley full of blossoming orange trees. A continuous breeze rises from the perfumed forest, a breeze that enraptures the mind and disturbs the senses. The vague poetical craving that forever haunts the soul, prowling about, maddening and unattainable, here seems on the point of being satisfied. This odor surrounds one, mingling the refined sensation of perfumes with the artistic joys of the mind, throws you for a few seconds into a well-being of mind and body that is almost happiness" (Maupassant). (7)

In addition to the flowers, the very trees emanate a resinous perfume (the trees breathe, forming a kind of moist cloud around their leaves to protect them from the sun's rays) and much of the wood used in construction or furniture making in the south emits a particular fragrance. To note: the common juniper, the berried juniper, the cedar of Lebanon, the Atlas cedar, the cypress, the thuya and the laurel. (8)

Each of these species is fragrant as well as repellent to insects thanks to essential oils that render them resistant to rot, a highly appreciated characteristic from ancient times.

A warm climate, perfumed flowers and fragrant woods cannot in themselves be responsible for a culture where the olfactory is so much more appreciated than in our own. These elements, nevertheless, contribute to creating, but above all to openly expressing the pleasure that fragrance procures and to accord it great importance in interior spaces. The use of fragrant woods for construction and carpentry already contributes to a very evident olfactory environment.

To conclude, let us cite an example of the presence of fragrance intentionally used in Arabian architecture, and this described by a **westerner**: T.E. Lawrence: *“The common base of all the Semitic creeds, winners or losers, was the ever present idea of world-worthlessness. Their profound reaction from matter led them to preach bareness, renunciation, poverty; and the atmosphere of this invention stifled the minds of the desert pitilessly. A first knowledge of their sense of the purity of rarefaction was given me in early years, when we had ridden far out over the rolling plains of North Syria to a ruin of the Roman period, which the Arabs believed was made by a prince of the border as a desert-palace for his queen. The clay of its building was said to have been kneaded for greater richness, not with water, but with the precious essential oils of flowers. My guides, sniffing the air like dogs, led me from crumbling room to room, saying, ‘This is jessamine, this violet, this rose’.*

But at last Dahoum drew me: ‘Come and smell the very sweetest scent of all’, and we went into the main lodging, to the gaping window sockets of its eastern face, and there drank with open mouths of the effortless, empty, eddyless wind of the desert, throbbing past. That slow breath had been born somewhere beyond the distant Euphrates and had dragged its way across many days and nights of dead grass, to its first obstacle, the man-made walls of our broken palace. About them it seemed to fret and linger, murmuring in baby-speech. ‘This,’ they told me, ‘is the best: it has no taste.’ My Arabs were turning their backs on perfumes and luxuries to choose the things in which mankind had had no share or part.” (9)

I would also like to say, in conclusion, that it is because the sense of smell is one of the most powerful means of stimulation and evocation that exists, that it is essential that its enveloping dimensions are expressed in our architectural, poetic and affective spaces. It is my wish that it becomes as important a component as light and sound are on the scene of future daily lives.

And to cite Paul Valéry:

“Marble masses should not be still buried in the earth (...) nor cedars or cypresses be content to die by flame or rot when they can transform themselves into fragrant beams.”(10)

Marc Crunelle

(traduction Kate Goff)

NOTES

- (1) Chauvet, Pierre: *Essai sur la propreté de Paris* (1797), cited by Corbin, André: *Le miasme et la jonquille*, Flammarion, coll. Champs, Paris, 1986, p. 31. (trad. K. Goff)
- (2) La Morandière: cited par Corbin, p.31. (trad. K. Goff)
- (3) Levi-Strauss, Claude: *Tristes tropiques*, Paris, Plon, 10/18, p.359. (trad. K. Goff)
- (4) Corbin, André: *Le miasme et la jonquille*, Flammarion, coll. Champs, Paris, 1986.
- (5) Bettelheim, Bruno: *Un lieu où renaître*, Robert Laffont, coll. Réponses/ Le Livre de Poche, coll. Pluriel n° 8354 J, Paris, 1975, p. 175-178. (trad. K. Goff)
- (6) Garland, Sarah: *Le livre des herbes et des épices*, Fernand Nathan, Paris, 1980.
- (7) de Maupassant, Guy, *The Wandering Life*, transl by Albert M.C. McMaster, A. E. Henderson, Mme. Quesada and others. 1911. (de Maupassant, Guy: *La vie errante*, Soc. d'Editions littéraires et artistiques, Paris, 1903, p. 108.)
- (8) Lieutaghi, Pierre: *Le livre des Arbres, Arbustes et Arbrisseaux*, Robert Morel édit., Les hautes Plaines Manes, Haute Provence, 1969, tomes I et 2.
- (9) Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Books@Adelaide, The University of Adelaide Library, University of Adelaide, South Australia 5005 (*Les sept piliers de la sagesse*, Payot, Paris, 1941, p. 52.)
- (10) Valéry, Paul: *Eupalinos*, N.R.F., Gallimard, Poésie, p. 103. (trad. K. Goff)

Also see:

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• **text published**, in: "*Fragrances: du désir au plaisir*", under the direction of Joël Candau, Marie-Christine Grasse and André Holley, Musée International de la parfumerie de Grasse, Ed. Jeanne Laffitte, Marseille, 2002, pp. 183-189.