

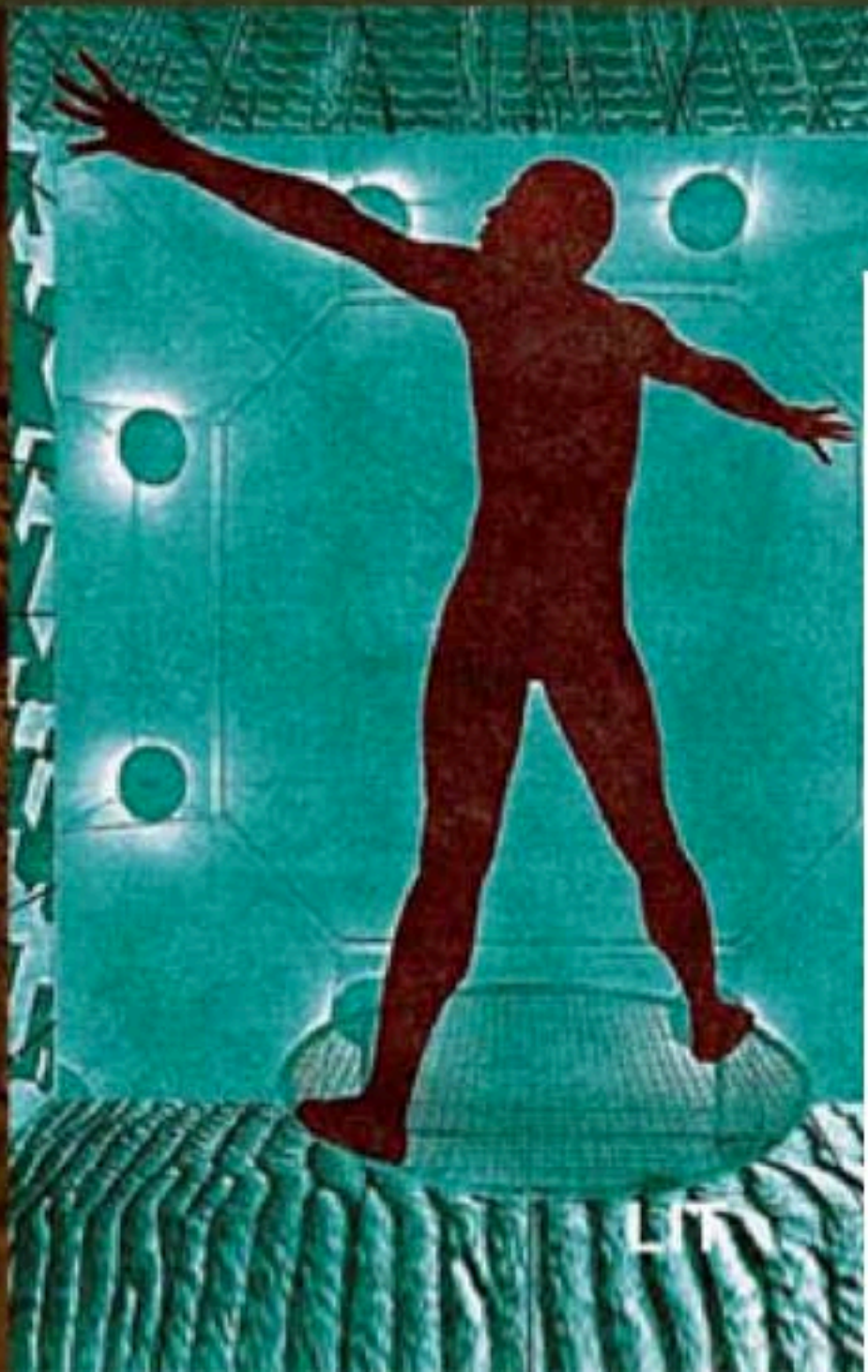
# SENSES

Mădălina Diaconu  
Eva Heuberger  
Ruth Mateus-Berr  
Lukas Marcel Vosicky  
(Eds.)

and  
the

# CITY

An interdisciplinary approach  
to urban senses



LIT

# SENSES AND THE CITY

An interdisciplinary approach  
to urban sensescapes

edited by

Mădălina Diaconu, Eva Heuberger,  
Ruth Mateus-Berr, Lukas Marcel Vosicky

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# Blindness/City: The Local Making of Multisensorial Public Spaces

Patrick J. Devlieger

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In this article, I take up the mindful dialogue between blind people and their city, to explore how cities can become more multisensorial. The use of blindness here is to be seen in a context of dismodernity, which points to a stage in which the discussion about disability moves beyond identity politics, and in the use of disability as an unstable category in a dialectics. I will illustrate with a conceptual project as well as two concrete projects that have the city of Leuven as a central focus point, namely 'The Design in the Dark' workshop, in which architecture students and blind people (re)designed public spaces, and the project 'To Hear and Feel Leuven', which is an alternative tourist guide and walk through the city. I will conclude that inserting blindness into the dialectics of the city proves to result in the local making of multisensorial public spaces.

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*Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated in a state of distraction.*  
(Walter Benjamin 1968 (1955), 239)

## 1. Introduction

In the above quote, Walter Benjamin says implicitly about architecture that it is an art and, simultaneously and contradictorily, that the receptor of architecture is not involved in this art. In the work of Benjamin, this state of distraction is a byproduct of reproduction, which is enhanced by technology and produces 'the flâneur', the figure that he links to the emergence of modernity. The figure of the flâneur is endlessly extended, which, for Benjamin, is to be understood as the result of a never ending progression of modern life. Today we may see the flâneur not only in the city but throughout the world and we could ask the question whether the figure is also not prominently there in politics, religion, and science. In the progression of modern life, two elements appear to be important: the possibility of copying (*mimesis*), which is both considered as a human quality and the result of mechanical reproduction, made possible through technology. Such copying and multiplication however also lead to increased alienation and a sense of loss. Nevertheless, despite this endless progression of modern life, Benjamin also reminds us that the so-called primitive, which is likened to authenticity, unicity and which is captured in what he calls 'aura', is always catching up. We thus have in Benjamin's thought a dialectic between the modern and

the primitive, and not merely the emergence of the modern in always new forms and the extinction of the primitive. Both the modern and the primitive co-exist in a dialectic.

The production of the flâneur is enhanced by the multiplication of the visual in modern societies. This has raised much scholarly discussion about the impact of the visual and the workings of all of our five classical senses. In particular, there has been a critique that the tactile sense was to be diminished or at least given a second order importance. In her book *The Skin of the Film*, Laura Marks (2000) argues that this is not necessarily so. She argues, within film, which is a more limited medium than architecture, that the visual can incorporate the tactile. I tend to agree.

In this paper, I use Benjamin's critique as a background to explicate not so much the part of the dialectic of modern life that is so well known, namely the progression of alienation in modern life, but rather the other part, in which the resurgence of unique qualities can emerge. I use the mindful dialogue between architects and blind people and, on a more theoretical level, the dialectic between blindness and the city. I will argue that such a dialogue may hold the possibility of generating knowledge that can lead to genuine innovation (see also Heylighen and Devlieger 2007). Moreover, I believe that such an approach also holds a promise for anthropology, as it opens up an anthropology that focuses on the future.

## 2. Fieldwork in uncommon territories

Over the last seven years, I have engaged with the Workgroup Accessibility of the city of Leuven, a group of disabled people, who are given a platform by the department of social welfare of the city of Leuven. The group was introduced to me through a doctoral student who became aware that within the city such a group was active with regard to accessibility. I started to collaborate intensively on different projects that were spurred by the 2003 European Year of Disabled People. My position within the group changed as well. I started as a partner in the collaboration of certain activities. Upon completion of the international conference, I became the president of the group from 2003 till 2006. I gradually handed over the leadership to a person with a physical disability who is an electric wheelchair user. The group evolved over a period of about ten years from one in which projects were heavily dominated by experts who worked with disabled people in the arrangement of tactile pavements. Gradually, a larger collaboration emerged with the technical services of the city, in particular the city landscape architects, who developed systematic consultations. Mixed groups of disabled and non-disabled people then offered their input to everyone's satisfaction. I also participated in the group's visits to two important buildings in the city, one a sports facility, the other a cinema complex. And subsequently, I invited the group to a workshop in which they evaluated the physical accessibility of the new income building for the faculty of social sciences.

### 3. Looking back: two examples of historical dialoguing with the blind, leading to particular representations

Before entering into the specific dialogue that we favored in our workshop, I would like to focus on two examples that I have also discussed in our book *Blindness and the multisensorial city* (2006, 28–29). The examples come from paintings, the aura of which, according to Benjamin, comes from an involvement between a spectator and the producer of the painting.

The first example is a 1998 painting by the Australian painter Susan Dorothea Whyte, entitled *The Blind Woman of Annandale* (acrylic on panel, 112 x 112 cm, for a reprint see Devlieger et al. 2006). In this painting we see central in the picture an old woman depicted in three different positions, pointing with a white cane and holding a shopping bag in her other hand. The outer points of the cane are connected with a dark blue. I interpreted this painting as the possibility of this blind woman, and blind people in general, as their capacity of making spaces. In this I was inspired in what I had read for the first time in an article by Constance Classen (1998) on lessons in aesthetics from the blind. In this article she points to the ways knowledge is built up cumulatively. The common example is that for example in the perception of a park, for a visually oriented person a picture of the park is given as far as the vision of the park reaches. From an overview of the park it is then possible to focus on particular details. For a blind person however, the here and now of the park happens. For the blind person sitting on a bench in the park, the park gradually happens as she feels with the coldness and humidity of the bench, the temperature with the skin, and the wind on the face. The sounds of the park reveal passers-by, children, etc.

However, when I entered in an email conversation with the artist and asked about the interpretation of the painting, I heard a story that spoke of admiration, compassion, and sadness. The artist explained that she had met the woman at a street crossing. Apparently, the woman had lost her orientation as she had gone out for a shopping trip and asked the artist whether she could tell her the name of the street crossing. The encounter had filled the artist with both admiration for the fact that she was independently going on a shopping trip but also intense compassion and sadness. As she depicted the woman in different positions, she took the limitations to be central, thus showing the person in a cloak, imprisoned, not being able to get out, while surrounding her life is passing by and rather unreachable. The delicate flowers, the cityscape, and even the letters written to her would not be reachable for her, while her own house attests to a destiny of poverty.

In the second example, a 1856 English painting entitled *The Blind Girl* by John Everett Millais, we see a blind woman depicted in a pastoral scene that features a rainbow and dark clouds, farm animals and ravens, a little river and some rocks, plants, and flowers. All of this may suggest that the girl will not be able to enjoy this. Yet, the face of the girl reveals that she intensively taking in her environment. Her reddish cheeks show how much she interacts with temperature and the hair of the other girl and her leaning against



her reveal an intense tactile contact. There is also reference to music as the accordion on her lap may refer to the fact that she both can play and listen, thus being able to intensively interact with her environment through the auditory sense. In other words, loss and gain are co-existent in this painting.

It is clear from these examples that the dialogue between able-bodied and disabled people can take many forms and interpretations. How these forms and interpretations take shape is of course a matter of both personal, social, and other forms. I am inspired by Benjamin that a dialogue between disabled and non-disabled people may lead to a dynamic that I would like to further explore. I am also inspired by Lennard Davis (2002) who, coming from the field of disability studies, states that disability is inherently an unstable and shaky category. I have myself maintained that it is a category that manages again and again to be lodged between existing categories. What it means and how it could be interpreted is very variable. Modernity has focused on the equality of chances, and in postmodern times identity politics has played a significant role. However, Lennard holds that disability can be the beginning of an entirely new way of thinking about identity categories, which he calls dismodernism. By extension, I would argue that disability, if brought into a mindful dialogue, can lead to new knowledge, multi-sensorial experiences, and practices that renew the skin of the city. In this thinking, I take a cultural model of disability, with its centrality of information and the exploration of potentialities, to be central (see Devlieger et al. 2003).

As we have written before, "in *disability dialectics*, we seek transformations, the exploitation of unused potential, an opening up of our habitual sensorium, and a critique of existing material conditions. In tracing a path, we draw upon the process of producing similarity and difference as it results from the interfaces between disability and society, the interstitial nature of disability itself, and two figures, namely the figure of the architect and the figure of the blind person. This however does not yet constitute a disability dialectic. In the given context, a disability dialectic is an experimental effort of disentangling two culturally fixed phenomena and opening the way for change in each of them" (Devlieger et al. 2006, 20). In further developing this dialectic, we also found out that it necessarily involved figuring out the limitations of the way we communicate, namely through a book, a visual medium, and the necessity to also open up this medium so that it can be experienced by people whose use of the sensorium may be different.