



## Designing with Scent

Although I discourage the licking of buildings, I otherwise believe that architecture should delight all the senses. Here are some thoughts on the oft-forgotten one.

Most of the time when scent is considered, the result is choke-inducing applications of supermarket scents. However, there are a tiny handful of people who are taking environmental scents seriously—I mean, other than those selling sophisticated systems linked to upping retail sales. So let us jump right into architectural scent-scapes.

Since we adapt to smells, especially pleasant—that is, benign—ones, they soon fade to inconsequential background for us. So environmental scentscapes should be present at transition points only. There is no sense in having them in static areas where people remain for long periods, unless they are part of intermittent air movements.

I propose three different categories of environmental scents. The first category is those most redolent of the local outdoors. Most probably that should be the natural environment, but it may include distinctive human artifact scents too. Generally the human artifact scents could be the local major industry as long as it is not noxious. It is an artistic judgment, to determine which scents are the essential defining ones of a place—which likely will vary by season too. There is a very strong time element when considering smells. One ought to use those local essence scents at indoor/outdoor transition spaces, to strengthen the link.

As an aside, a fun exercise is to describe the smell of your town or neighborhood. I would love to hear readers' stories about local smells.

So, I want to identify the dominant smells of a region, what's borne on the wind, the major blossoms and resins and vegetative scents, and the markings and droppings and scratchings of the pungent fauna, and the earth and mud and creeks and waters. And what are the manmade scents? Likely you've got transport exhaust, the outpourings of factories and businesses, the waste piles and sludge pools, the scents people use—and make unconsciously—aromas of foods cooked and eaten, the materials of the built environment exhaling. Fragrant ornamental plantings are also part of human influence.

And then, how do they change at twilight and in the wee hours? What happens at the changes from spring through to winter? Plus one must consider when it's raining hard, and after, and during dry spells. Picking the essential characteristics of a place, even after you have a handle on the constituent bits, is something of an art in itself.

The second architectural scent category is for interior spaces meant to deliberately contrast with the outdoors, the profane, the public, whatever. These would be special scents, either (a) "authentic" scents arising naturally from the uses and activities therein, and perhaps reflected and boosted by the artist or (b) more overtly emotion-appealing perfumes. Under this category are also the idea of scent-clocks to mark the *"minding the place"*

passage of the hours and alter moods, aromatherapy-style. These can also try to recall other places and times.

Third are signals for making special places; they become part of the genius loci by delineating a special zone, like an odor of sanctity. I would use these types in boundaries. These are signaling smells, that a special place has been reached, or that an event needing notice is taking place. That event could range from a ceremony to a gas leak. One of the loveliest tales I have heard, besides Cleopatra's perfumed sails, was that many mosques in central Asia in olden times, had rosewater or musk mixed into the mortar. As the sun warmed the stones, a light fragrance arose in the environs.

As I mentioned before, environmental scents need to be applied at transition areas as they fade into the sensorial background in less dynamic spaces. If they are actively released, it has to be a time-conscious event, to be part of some ritual human activity. The lingering after-effects in the built environment and on people's clothing and hair must also be considered. So, a changing of scents in that context is likely to be unsuccessful.

Scents should be designed to harmonize with visual and audible aesthetics, I think. Deliberate contrast, which can work to create drama in sight, sound and touch, tends more to confuse people in scent, and they then consider the experience unsettling. Perhaps that guideline can be relaxed if building users are very scent-literate people. But that is rare.

Since smells are concentrated most at ground level, the designer should consider the relative strength of environmental scents when used in relation to ideas of distance from the ground, or in elemental associations such as earth or air. Here is where I note that I must think more on the desire to avoid bad smells, without going into denial about them. I want to promote both pleasant and neutral scents, which begs the question of a moral justification for preferential aesthetics of the good and pleasing in architecture (and distinct from that of art). Perhaps that might be argued on the grounds that it is encompassing, long-lasting and somewhat imposed upon people.

If you, dear reader, will allow a small digression into aesthetic evocations....Okay, one can manipulate materials to stimulate various senses and suggest other sensations, yes? Overall then one can create a mood, suggest an emotional state. So, a superior design suggests a mode of use: how to resolve the presented problem. The art, that is the aesthetic program, is then generating a dialogue about something from within. [Oh, dear, I then wonder can there be purely intellectual art, utterly without emotion? What is the intellect here anyway?] So the spirit of the place is...emotion? Processed perception? Mood? Experience? Or a set of conditions which are then to be processed by the observer? I am not sure where to start.

Our built environment affects our moods, strongly. I hope that can be taken as a given. So, we should be conscious of what those effects are, how they're achieved, and consider that from the very beginning of design. In addition to the technical brass tacks of environmental psychology, lots of other questions are raised. What are moods? The literature I've found on that is very murky and conflicted but I would summarize them as long-lasting emotional states. Presumably, like colors, they can be categorized into usable lists, without necessarily using nuance. (Though truthfully, I have yet to find that bit of information).



To what extent can someone's mood be manipulated? And I suppose that the effects of time apply, but do not know to what extent; that hedonism diminishment argument must apply. How, and how many, secondary moods can be accommodated within the desire to evoke a primary mood? How right is it to even set a mood? I ask that especially given that one is bound to do something, intentionally or not.

If we pick all the happy, serene, alert, energetic moods exclusively, and evoke them all successfully, might that have any negative effects by not allowing needed stressors and expression of dark sides? After all, most of us are somewhat captive—socially, legally, medically, contractually, logistically, etc.—in our spaces, for varying periods of time. Do the obligations regarding manipulation differ based on people's level of captivity?

Are moods really distinct from (as opposed to, say, being a step on the way to) functional behaviors? The latter can be performed in various moods, some of which hinder or help that performance. That needs to be better understood, particularly for multi-function type spaces.

And how do both moods and functional behaviors relate to the hierarchy of human needs? Expressions of the same may not quite cover it. I have argued elsewhere for putting the needs first, as a way of ensuring health and well-being. But perhaps that is too biased toward the individual and thus ignores or perhaps even contradicts the needs of the collective. One definitely wants to support a healthy society and communal bonds, but I'm not sure how they fit in.

I see three major approaches to aesthetic design. There is (A) the hoped for effect and one must ask when is that overly manipulative and inflexible? (B) One can echo historical or common experience conditions. How truthful should those be? And (C) one could opt for just pushing x number of emotional buttons—looking, perhaps, for an overall balance of stimulus or not. Sounds a bit cold-blooded, but is it really? My gut choice is mostly (A), as expressing the purpose of the building, which is after all the *raison d'être* of the project.

Back to smells....

More thought is needed, besides the obvious issue with signal scents, on how seasonality works with transitional, place-making and with mood-setting scents. Activity related scents have an obvious time component and thus appear to change with the change of activity, or simply the passage of time, and seasons, but that is not entirely so clear in practice. Materials for activities will continue to exhale their perfumes, even if the woodworker is not actively creating shavings, for instance. Activities clearly leave echoes in their scents.

So, after thinking about scent-scapes, it follows that there are scent types based on use. I mentioned the names already. The first are signal scents to signify an event; to repeat my examples: incense in a religious ritual, a natural gas leak, time of a day from a scent clock. They are all fairly short-lived and very consciously partaken. They could also signal a variable status, the way dogs advertise their moods and health in their p-mail.

Next are place marking scents, *genius loci* smells, most strongly associated with perimeters and transition zones, and also with dynamic traffic routes. They might vary in strength or even type across the day or



seasonally. They need to really speak of the place, but could still be wholly artificial in character, if that is appropriate. The big thing to remember is that a boundary is traversed in both directions. Scents to mark or bolster moods are something of a subset of this type.

The last are what I call inherent activity scents. These could, and indeed may well, arise intrinsically from human activity (sweating, cooking) and materials used (paints, grease, burning wood, etc.), or they could be more abstractly working to harmonize with the mood/activity of the space, as applied ornament. These are also time-linked, but in longer periods, not moments, and may be perceived a little more subliminally, as background.

I would suggest that a single major type be chosen for each space, as there will already be other scents with which to contend. Actually one should give first priority to inherent activity—pleasant or informative ones anyway—scents and signal scents. The place making and mood activity scents are more ornamental in character. Now then, some activities involve noxious scents; I can't really see the argument for preserving stinks. I am trying here to distinguish between an unpleasant smell which warns of some poor condition and a deliberate ornamental stink. Rather, the use of exhaust ventilation and /or neutralizing or absorbing substances should be employed. Without much justification, I will just state my belief that masking odors are inappropriate.

Using the scent type categories, for inherent activity, the scents come from the materials or movement themselves (as you've read ad nauseum), but could be boosted selectively by the designer. Mood activity scents are similarly temporal and thus can change with desired shifts of mood or season. They do involve an interactive component; as people touch things and move about, scent is released. It is a separate decision to boost such scents with such "passive" measures as candles, diffusers, etc. Place making scents are suffused in the materials of the environment. They should be released at portals, thresholds, gates, borders, etc. Try smells in hinges, or curtains, or mortar. They could even be considered as navigation aids.

Once having decided which type of scent is appropriate for a place, one must then work out relative strengths of the scents as well as the actual smells, which are likely to be tied into the technologies of the delivery system. That is a decision between the possibility of a neutral scentscape and a mood or place-making one. Isn't this all fun stuff?

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