

Smellmap: Amsterdam – Olfactory Art & Smell Visualisation

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Figure 1: Smellmap: Amsterdam Legend of selected smells

ABSTRACT

Creating a smellmap of a city is a collaborative exercise. During a series of smellwalks, local participants identify distinct aromas emanating from specific locations and record the description, expectation, intensity, personal association, and reaction. I then analyse this data, along with conversations arising from the walks, and select a set of smells that convey the smellscape of the city at that moment in time, visualising the scents and their locations in the city as a “map”. The resulting map visualisations are propositions: indications of what one might smell in a certain place. The map is accompanied by scents, which are the nasal stimuli, and a catalyst for discussion. This visualisation/olfactory art emphasises human interaction with a vast set of contestable sensory data.

Keywords: Smellmap, smellscape, olfactory art, Amsterdam, catalyst for discussion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Smellmap: Amsterdam is an artwork that explores individual and shared interpretation of place. Inspired by *toposmia* “which describes the spatial location of odours and their relation to particular notions of place.” [1] the artwork aims to refocus

sensory perception of a city by temporarily foregrounding the olfactory over the visual through a combination of visualisation and scents. In the Western ocularcentric world a focus on everyday smells can be both refreshing and revelatory, resulting in new knowledge of self and our individual relationships with the city. Smellmapping as research and experiential art practice explores this relationship and encourages a general public audience to do the same through active participation with the exhibited artwork.

Smellmap: Amsterdam is a multi-sensory and participatory experience including printed visuals, 12 individual scents and sticky notes onto which the audience inscribe their own smell associations with the urban smells on “display,” leaving a trace of a personal olfactory journey.

As our senses work hard to make themselves invisible, so contemporary art, philosophy and everyday life enable us to use our senses to “rediscover the world in which we live, yet which we are prone to forget.” [2] Using design to present urban smells is a relatively new discipline; my approach takes a phenomenological perspective of re-exploring through an alternate sensory modality.

Amsterdam. Depicted as a low value, low key background, it acts as a locative base for the smell data on the map.

3.4 Smell sources, range and movement

Smells emanate from sources, I plot these origins on the map, where they are indicative not absolute, since urban smell sources alter, emerge and fade over time. Concentric circles indicate the smell range based on a combination of perceived smell intensity and the physical size of the smell source. Smell ranges drift in the wind forming distorted contours. Movement is based on the prevailing north- and south-westerly winds encountered during the 4 days of the smellwalks.

3.5 Smell creation

Creating the smells required a shared vocabulary and understanding of the smells in question. I specified the scents as the perfumers at IFF worked to select and generate synthetic fragrances from their vast databanks of smell molecules. Occasionally they reinforced the experience using Headspace technology (a dome-shaped collection device for capturing odour molecules in the air to enable them to be analysed and synthetically reproduced at a later time) to generate a best-fit for concept (Laundry was a case in point). A constant exchange of perceptions, meetings, samples and testing over a six-month period ensured matching of fragrance to smell concept. The perfumers worked independently to create a blended fragrance of the city

4 CONCLUSION

This paper presents a methodology for the research and design of how urban smellscapes may be represented, recorded and visualised for current use and as a form of olfactory cultural sensory record-keeping. Smellmap: Amsterdam exhibition opened at Mediamatic in Amsterdam in April 2014 and is now on private display in IFF Headquarters.

As a lived-in experience, a constantly shifting set of odours translates into an experience of infinite possibility, a proposition, a virtual *dérive* of a city through its smells. The final work, by its notable absences, poses the question as to whether a smellscape can ever be fully known, and simultaneously challenges the ontological security of the map. The suggested and propositional aspects of the map are intended to evoke a personal response to place. Smellmapping as an art form may simplify and reveal complexity by using one modality in a traditional cartographic sense; attracting the audience through visualisation before generating complexity through the introduction of smells themselves.

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