CIVIC BODIES

Sense of the City
Canadian Center for Architecture
2012 rue Baile, Montréal
Through September 10, 2006

West B inscribed rivulets into the sloping asphalt approach to the Jaarbeurs exhibition center in Utrecht. The pattern allows for drainage and conveys a variety of visual effects, from an aerial view of a wetland to a sun-cracked desert. Below, Madelon Vriesendorp’s Flagrant Delit (1975).

Asphalt excludes a host of other urban feelings. It is disappointing, for example, that food plays a negligible role in a show about urban sensations.

The focus of Sense of the City is more anthropological than architectural, although buildings are part of the story. In addition to the Koolhaas bedroom scene, there’s a drawing by James Stirling showing the ventilating ducts at the Staatsschule in Stuttgart, and a stunning 1958 photo by architectural photographer Ezra Stoller from inside CCA founder Phyllis Lambert’s beloved Seagram Building. These disconnected images remind us of the rarely mentioned mechanical guts of famous buildings. In the regard Sense of the City is remarkably different from Out of the Box; a show Zardini organized as an independent curator for the CCA in 2004, a more straightforward exhibit on the output of superstar architects Cedric Price, Aldo Rossi, James Stirling, and Gordon Matta-Clark.

What’s really startling about Sense of the City is how an exhibit about urban stimulation—a show about ways cities frighten, disturb, delight, and chill us—can be so soothing. Lower and changing lighting conditions in each gallery make the overall experience calming, almost like a visit to a spa. The change helps visitors through the different sensory dimensions of each space—the aromas in the smell gallery, the textures of the surface gallery, the tones of the city in the sound gallery. Low-level violet lighting in the gallery devoted to the city at night slows everybody down. “You slow down in order for your eyes to adjust,” explained lighting designer Linnea Tillett. “Otherwise you’d miss everything.” She’s right. It’s dark.

Zardini claims that the show offers a new approach to urbanism that’s less dependent on sight than the other senses. It’s a worthwhile project because it does open our ears, noses, and miscellaneous body parts to ignored aspects of urban life, but the result is not nearly noisy, stinky, dark, tasty, or gooey enough to give us a real sense of the city.

ANNMARIE ADAMS IS A PROFESSOR AT THE SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE, MCGILL UNIVERSITY, MONTREAL.