

CIVIC BODIES

Sense of the City

Canadian Center for Architecture
1920 rue Baile, Montréal
Through September 10, 2006

West 8 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 Délit* (1975).

Museums typically try to keep out the air pollution associated with urban living. But since October 26, the scent of rotting garbage and subway fumes has been wafting through the galleries of the Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA). *Sense of the City*, the show responsible for these unlikely sensations, is designed to challenge visitors to experience cities through our noses, ears, and other parts of our bodies.

The show, which will fill the CCA's main galleries for nearly a year, is the first effort of the center's new director, Mirko Zardini, since he assumed his post on November 1. Zardini has a background in the world of magazines, and is perhaps best known as the editor of the Italian publications *Casabella* and *Lotus International*. His editorial perspective comes through in the exhibition and its accompanying 350-page catalogue, which have a post-grunge, neo-modern style that is familiar to us from art-based magazines: lots of sumptuous images, edgy graphics, and pull-quotes. *Sense of the City* blasts visitors with non-traditional material, and compared to most CCA exhibits, is distinctly ahistorical.

Sense of the City unfolds in six big rooms connected in an enfilade loop. The first room explains how animals' senses far surpass those of humans. Did you know that the eye of a

fly has 3,000 lenses? Each subsequent room is devoted to a different theme: "Nocturnal City," "Seasonal City," "Sound of the City," "Surface of the City," and "Air of the City."

These sections promote a range of ideas: In "Nocturnal City," a subway poster from a child-abuse nonprofit and Madelon Vriesendorp's erotic *Flagrant Délit* of 1975 (best known as the cover of Rem Koolhaas' *Delirious New York*) suggest that cities are more frightful, transgressive, and clandestine at night than during the day. "Seasonal City" is not really about all the seasons but primarily about winter, playing to its Montreal audience. It features the city's magnificent 1889 Ice Palace designed by architects Hutchison and Steele. Some sections work better than others; for example, in the "Sounds" section, 16 sets of headphones suspended from the ceiling invite visitors to appreciate the soundscapes of as many cities. It's a nifty, interactive feature, but after a while, recordings of garbage trucks, raindrops, honking cars, cathedral bells, ice cream vendors, and cooing pigeons sound the same in Vancouver and Amsterdam. In the "Surface" section, one can touch the black goo of real asphalt and see the textures of pavers, but this emphasis on roads and sidewalks (Zardini wrote a book in 2003 called

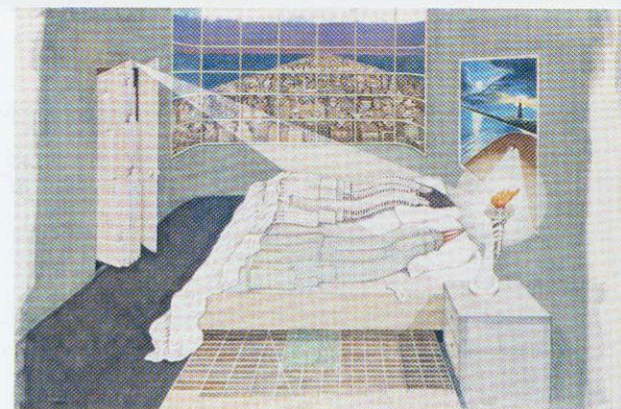
Asphalt) excludes a host of other urban feelings. It is disappointing, for example, that food plays a negligible role in a show about urban sensations.

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 Staatsgalerie 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 this 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—about the ways cities frighten, disturb, delight, and chill us—can be so soothing. Low 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 sensual 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 Linnaea Tillet. "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.

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