

SENSE the CITY

Exploring the
Future with all
your Senses



CITY PLANNERS AND DESIGNERS: DARE TO USE YOUR SENSES!

Emotions and sensory perception hardly play a role in the planning and design of cities or in the debate about the urban future. According to popular opinion, decision-making needs to be an “objective process”. Of all the senses, only the visual, the shape of the urban form, is treated as something special because it is easy to grasp and communicate. But people experience the city emotionally and with all their senses — not just with their eyes.

So if we want to design cities that focus more on people, on their needs and well-being, we cannot ignore the other dimensions of their experience. We need to take a more sensory approach in both planning and participation processes in order to achieve a humane and ecologically sustainable future.

How do we make that happen? In the following, we present four methodological steps. More details on their practical implementation are

available on the website: www.sense-the-city.org. The individual steps were developed, tested and combined into a systematic methodology in the context of the Sense the City project. They build on each other and can be applied in different contexts and for different purposes, including:

- as an introduction to the planning of concrete measures or for dealing with a new problem.
- to sensitise city planners, urban designers and decision-makers to the multi-sensory qualities of spaces and the associated design tasks and possibilities.
- in civic participation processes and idea-finding phases, for example in the context of creating municipal mission statements.
- for the design of public spaces (e.g. in the creation of usage concepts) and for mobility issues and actions (e.g. security in urban space, European Mobility Week).

STEP 1

Sharpen your senses

Humans are not just rational beings; they are also sentient beings who evaluate the quality of their environment on the basis of their sensory-emotional experience. What is the local atmosphere like? Is it loud, cheerful, lively? Consciously strolling through the city can sharpen one's own perception of both the multi-sensory qualities of spaces and their effect on people.

Example method The sensory city walk

The route for the sensory walk can be chosen freely. Depending on the requirements and the task at hand, a public square, a street or a neighbourhood can be the right choice. The task is to consciously concentrate on all five senses during the walk: How does the urban space smell, sound or taste? How does it feel? What does it look like? These impressions and experiences should be recorded in writing. They provide a good starting point for in-depth discussions about the qualities of the space, and help to identify possible areas for action and design tasks. You can find detailed instructions for the implementation of a sensory city walk in the profile: [the sensory city walk](#).

Reading tip

The Sensory City Toolkit presents methods, practical approaches, case studies and resources for researching, evaluating, and presenting the sensory perception of urban spaces. It offers suggestions for academics, planners, and civil society actors alike.

STEP 3

Outline ideas for the city of the future

The idea is to look ahead and develop ideas and visions for the city of the future. Have no fear of the utopian — these visions will be critiqued later on. When developing these ideas, consider the findings from steps 1 and 2 to strengthen the connection between the sensory experience and the desired city of the future.

Example method Developing ideas for the future

In small groups, the participants work on a given scenario for a real or fictitious place in the future. For example, the city of Transformia wants to become climate-neutral by 2045. To this end, the planning department has launched a competition for ideas in the areas of housing and architecture, public space and quality of life, and has put various questions up for discussion. The participants develop ideas for each of these areas. It is important that the senses be the main focus of the exercise. What sensory experiences should citizens have in 2045? You can find guidelines for creating urban future ideas and narratives based on sensory perceptions in the profile: [Developing ideas about the future](#).

Reading tip

Various guidelines and methods can be used to guide the idea-finding phase. One such method is the Zukunftswerkstatt method (‘Future Workshop’ — in German), which creates a space for proposing imaginative and utopian solutions. It can also be used in the critical analysis and realisation phases.

STEP 2

Work with the senses

Smells, sounds, materials or even colours awaken certain memories, emotions and feelings in us — both positive and negative. They provide insights into people's wishes and needs with regard to urban environments. Systematically examining a variety of sensory stimuli can help to identify which places and experiences in the city are already perceived as particularly pleasant or beneficial, which are not, and what characterises each of them.

Example method Experiment with sensory samples

The work with different sensory stimuli takes place in small groups. Each group receives touch plates, audio, scent and taste samples, as well as visual stimuli, and the participants seek to immerse themselves in the sensory experience of them. In each sensory exercise, they answer various questions, including which sensory samples evoke the strongest positive or negative reactions, which emotions and associations they evoke, and which places in the city they associate with them. You can find detailed instructions for this method in the profile: [Experiment with sensory samples](#).

STEP 4

Bring urban visions of the future to life

The ideas for the city of the future are brought to life in a short space of time, for example through models, collages or small installations on site. This stimulates the imagination and makes ideas feel more tangible and real. The practical work creates new perspectives, helps to critically question existing ideas, and encourages creativity. What effect does the prototypically designed lively public space have on people? What is missing? How would the target group use and perceive this new urban space? This helps to clarify how ideas can be further developed.

Example method Making urban visions of the future tangible

The prototypical development of future visions ideally takes place in small groups of three to four people. Using the simplest possible materials such as dough, Lego, and drawing and handicraft materials, prototypes are created within a short period of time (max. 60 minutes), either in the workshop room or directly on site. We recommend adapting this stage to the respective target group and providing materials that encourage creative solutions and appeal to the senses in as many ways as possible. At the end, the participants present their work and reflect on it together. You can find detailed instructions for the prototypical development of urban visions of the future with all the senses in the profile: [Making urban visions of the future tangible](#).

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adelphi research gemeinnützige GmbH
Alt-Moabit 91, 10559 Berlin
+49 (030) 890 00 68 – 0
office@adelphi.de
www.adelphi.de

AUTHORS

Franziska Schreiber, Camille Serre

DESIGN

Sebastian Vollmar | www.vividshapes.com

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