

The Smell of Memory: Sensorial Mnemonics

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"I doubt if there is any sensation arising from sight more delightful than the odors which filter through sun-warmed, wind-tossed branches, or the tide of scents which swells, subsided, rises again wave on wave, filling the wide world with sweetness. A whiff of the universe makes us dream of worlds we have never seen, recalls in a flash entire epochs of our dearest experience."

Helen Keller¹

"The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again." Walter Benjamin²



I against senselessness

Time, landscape and memory represent a potent triumvirate. Each is embedded within the other, and the landscape architect has a critical role to play in orchestrating connections. In this paper I explore the hegemony of the visual over the other senses, and contrast this with the potency which the sense of smell has in the context of evoking time and memory. I identify some opportunities for design, and present some examples from a range of designers and artists.

The hegemony of the visual in culture in general, and in landscape design in particular, is a significant oversight for two key reasons. On one hand, visibility has prompted a relationship with the landscape that is characterised by distance and detachment. Such a mode of experiencing the landscape was most effectively characterised by the picturesque period and its subsequent imprint upon the profession of landscape architecture, and the broader field of landscape aesthetics. In landscape architecture, one of the consequences of the visual hegemony is a detachment from experience. The picturesque, along with many other forces contributing to modernity's visual paradigm, has led to an impoverished engagement with the world. Not only in landscape architecture, but also in architecture, film and art, visibility remains the primary sensory field, with other senses diminished, or edited, from experience. Representation, and its subsequent translation into 'reality', are relentlessly hijacked by the visual, denying beholders an authentic engagement with the dense, swarming territory of existence.

On the other hand, at the same time as visibility dominates, it is also the *least effective* of the senses in terms of time and memory, images of the past "flit by" as Benjamin observed. Therefore, the dominant paradigm is one that is doubly disabling for the beholders of landscape, and diminishes the lived experience of the world. Through daily immersion in a culture dominated by the visual, our ability to "see" beyond this is severely impaired. Indeed, as Classen observes, "sight is so endlessly analyzed, and the other senses so consistently ignored, that the five senses would seem to consist of the colonial/patriarchal gaze, the scientific gaze, the erotic gaze, the capitalist gaze and the subversive glance."³

Design professions have tended to focus dominantly on the visual, which has long been considered the 'primary' sense, while the other senses are considered 'secondary'. This separation is evident in terms of the development of 'aesthetics' as being a philosophy of the fine arts concerned only with the visual. In its original sense, with its origins in the Greek *'aisthesis'*, it was concerned with the breathing of the world, and involved the full range of sensory experience. Liz James points to how, "It is the traditions of Western philosophical thinking about the senses, based on Plato and Aristotle, that have placed sight and then hearing as the most significant and spiritual of the senses, relating them to the higher functions of the mind, and which have relegated smell, touch and taste to the lower functions of the body, considering them base and corporeal."⁴ The dominance of the visual became aligned with the 'higher' arts, together with the sense of hearing. Both senses are those of distanced, detached experience, and as Christian Mertz explains, "It is no accident that the main socially acceptable arts are based on the senses at a distance, and that those that depend on the senses of contact are often regarded as 'minor' arts (= culinary arts, arts of perfume, etc)."⁵ Yet, in designing for time, and specifically for memory, it is these secondary senses that hold important potential.



II Telling smells

The most potent sense in evoking memory is smell. While the other senses must send messages to the lower part of the brain first to be processed and sent on to the cerebral cortex, the nose's nerves cells are directly connected to this part of the brain. And from the cerebral cortex, smell signals are sent directly to the limbic system, the part of the brain which deals with feelings and memory. Thus smell connects to both the cortex, which is the zone of cognition, and the limbic system of the hypothalamus which deals with memory and emotion, the non-cognitive zone. This allows for the brain to process smell simultaneously in terms of cognitive and precognitive responses. The memory of smells becomes deeply embedded, powerful triggers of the past.

In pre-Modern times smell was a primary sense, it provided means of navigation, a tool of recognition, and warned against threats from predators and the danger of unsafe foods such as poisons and decay. During these times, when the visual was of minor importance, smell and touch both provided a profound connection to the metaphysical. The odour of sanctity—the sweet smell associated with the divine—was often alluded to in descriptions of metaphysical experiences. This suggests further potential for the evocative role of smell in the realm of time and memory, it is a means of accessing the subliminal. This particular association is one which has been lost to modernity's concern with rationality, as Constance Classen explains, "In modernity the sense of smell is usually associated with instincts and emotions rather than with reason or spirituality. With few exceptions, smell and smells have been discredited and removed from the arena of intellectualised discourse, and, in many cases, from cultural life in general. In this deodorized ambience traditional olfactory concepts such as the 'odor of sanctity' appear to be simply quaint relics of a more credulous age and not worthy of serious attention."⁶ This was reinforced by theorists of aesthetics, with Kant dismissing smell as the sense which is least important and not worthy of cultivation, and Horkheimer and Adorno warning that, "When we see remain what we are; but when we smell we are taken over by otherness. Hence the sense of smell is considered a disgrace in civilization, the sign of a lower social strata, lesser races and base animals."⁷

Moreover, modernity's obsession with hygiene has served to severely restrict the role of smell within our phenomenological engagement with the world. This contributes to an impoverished connection with the environment, and adds to the homogeneity that comes from a standardised approach to the language of smell. The concern with deodorising ourselves, and the world at large, has caused the elimination of many 'bad' smells in our world, and along with this the specificity of sensory place and time. Smell was tied more closely to cycles of time in the past—modernity has sanitised this as much as everything else, where city dwellers are now detached from seasonal cycles of flowering, fruiting, burning-off. Even within the daily domestic world the olfactory dimension is severely reduced. Porteous describes the generic "American motel bathroom" ("sanitized for your protection"), as the "antiseptic symbol of a sensuous death."⁸

Modernity is also concerned with commodification, and this is well-served by the visual, such that apples are bred for appearance rather than taste. In design professions such as architecture and landscape architecture this is reflected with a concern with how photogenic a work is, rather than how it feels to touch it, or how it sounds ... let alone how it smells. The claim that "art history has no odour" is true also of landscape architecture.



This homogenisation of smell, along with other sensory stimuli, contributes to the loss of place particularity. Laura Marks describes this “aroma of the commodity”, which “now floats from the shifting centers of multinational capital to the furthest corners of the market. As smells are synthesised and marketed, their indexical link to a particular place is severed, so that ‘everyone’ can now scent their rooms with mountain pine air freshener whether or not they have ever known a real pine tree... Avon ladies, traveling by canoe where necessary, now ply Crystal Splash cologne to villages in the Amazon ... (This fact is even more ironic in light of the fact that European perfumers travel to the Amazon in search of flowers, woods, and insects on which to base their new formulas).”⁹

However, the potency of the hotwired connection between smell, memory and time begs an investigation into how it might be drawn into the designed landscape. Smell offers a means of authentic, palpable experience. Because it is unmediated, as in the case of visual representation, it is more ‘real’—it is, in fact, seen by some philosophers of aesthetics as more ‘animalistic’. Thus in terms of countering our detachment with experience, smell provides a means of ‘reclaiming’ the landscape.

Yet scents are not solely animalistic—or beyond language—since there exists a shared notion of smell in the development of conventions. Judgements of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ smells begin to form an olfactory language. The ways in which smell is manipulated in some circumstances is testament to this, such as the elimination of some smells which convention deems as bad, and are their replacement by ‘good’ smells in terms of perfumes, essential oils, fragrant plantings and so on.

Even so, the language of smells remains one of analogy, that something ‘smells like’ something else, and this makes it difficult to specify smell in the way of other materials with a precise language. Such associations might be things like ‘hospital smell’—something impossible to record or specify, beyond the allusion to some mix of cleaning products, processes, and unknown factors, that collide to form a particular signature. Perfumes are on one hand simply a particular combination of ingredients, yet in order to convey their nature to consumers there is a need to make an associative connection ... an emotional impulse, an experience, a sentiment ...

.... ‘*Obsession*’
 ... ‘*Poison*’
 ... ‘*Envy*’
 ... ‘*Beautiful*’

Throughout history there have been various attempts to categorise smell, for example Linnaeus’ 7-category system (1756) (aromatic, fragrant, ambrosiac, alliaceous, hircine, foul, nauseous), Henning’s Smell Prism (1916) based on 6 odour references (spicy, resinous, burnt, floral, fruity, foul), and the complex 9-category table of Dutch scientist Zwaardemaker (1925), see Table 1.



Table 1.: Zwaardemaker's (1925) complete 9-category odor classification system.¹⁰

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1. Etherial [sic]: e.g. acetone, chloroform, ethyl ether, ethyl acetate
 2. Aromatic
Subclasses:
 - a. Camphrous e.g. camphor, eucalyptol, pinene
 - b. Spicy e.g. eugenol
 - c. Anisic e.g. anisole, thymol, menthol
 - d. Citric e.g. citral, geraniol
 - e. Amygdalate e.g. benzaldehyde, nitrobenzene
- Others e.g. laurel, resins, lemon, rose, cinnamon, lavender, mint, majoram
3. Balsamic
Subclasses:
 - a. Flower perfumes e.g. jasmine, orange blossom
 - b. Lily e.g. ionone, violet root
 - c. Vanilla
 4. Amber-musk
 5. Allicious
Subclasses:
 - a. Garlic e.g. acetylene, H₂S, ethyl sulphide, mercaptan
 - b. Cacodyl e.g. trimethylamine
 - c. Haologen e.g. bromine, iodine
 6. Empyreumatic e.g. roasted coffee, toasted bread, tobacco smoke, tar, benzol, phenyl xylo, toluol, cresol, guiacol, naphthalene, aniline.
 7. Hircine e.g. caproic acid, other fatty acids, cheese, sweat, bilberry, cat's urine, perhaps also vaginal and sperm odour, chestnut and barberry.
 8. Repulsive suffocating e.g. odours of the solanaceae and of coriander, some orchids, some bugs; narcotic odours.
 9. Nauseous e.g. rotten meat, indole, skatole, carrion flower.
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Despite such efforts to describe smell, it is impossible to record, aside from as a chemical formula, and is a fugitive component of environmental experience. Odour is highly susceptible to atmospheric circumstances, and is difficult to predict and specify. The difficulty in both the representation and realisation of designs based on non-visual experience has deterred the development of practice in the area of multi-sensory design. Visuality seems to come 'naturally' to the field of design, in terms of imagining possible scenarios, and communicating these to clients. The visual is easily transportable, rolled out from here to there with little need for inflection or variation.



III Smell and memory

Psychological experimentation suggests that our memory of smell is far more effective than our visual recollection. In addition to the notion of a 'language' of smells in terms of shared olfactory conventions, smell is also paradoxical in that it tends to be extremely individualised. Smell is often evoked in our thoughts of the past, as though recollection of that smell allows access to that particular part of our memories. Perhaps the most iconic example of this smell trigger is Marcel Proust's passage of reverie in *The Remembrance of Things Past* which resulted from the character 'Marcel' tasting a madeleine dipped in tea, which acted as kind of hyperlink into memories of his childhood. Proust wrote, "When nothing else subsists from the past, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls—bearing resiliently, on tiny and almost impalpable drops of their essence, the immense edifice of memory."¹¹

Philosopher of phenomenology, Gaston Bachelard, wrote how the smell of raisins connected him with a cupboard from his childhood, "Memory and imagination remain associated...I alone in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor of raisins, drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that takes a lot of imagination to smell."¹²

A friend of mine was recalling her experiences of growing up and going to university, and her narrative was closely focussed upon descriptions of olfactory memories. Her childhood memories were infused with the smell of baking bread from a nearby bread factory, mixed with the wafting aromas from the chocolate factory where her father worked. Later, when at university, she flatted next to a spice factory, with the fragrances permeating her daily life.

Smell has the ability to "remember", and to evoke atmosphere. For landscape architecture this is a compelling connection. Juhani Pallasmaa, in *An Architecture of the Seven Senses* describes what he calls the 'space of scent', which is a temporal sense of space. He says, "The strongest memory of a space is often its odor; I cannot remember the appearance of the door to my grandfather's farmhouse from my early childhood, but I do remember the resistance of its weight, the patina of the wood surface scarred by a half century of use, and I recall especially the scent of home that hit my face as an invisible wall behind the door."¹³

IV The visual and the invisible

There is, therefore, a conundrum at the heart of the connection between smell and memory in terms of design and time. While it is evident that the olfactory has considerable potential to create the evocations and associations that connect landscape, time and memory, it remains an elusive design element. How can an invisible phenomenon be represented and communicated? How can the designer reveal the invisible? Paradoxically, it is the visual domain which provides a means of creating the kinds of triggers which allow access to the olfactory. This is exemplified by landscape designs which tune the beholder into such elusive elements as the metaphysical, or the presence of ambient sound.

One example is Ilya Kabakov's 1997 construction *Looking Up, Reading the Words*, (Münster, Germany) which could be thought of as a landscape hypertext to draw the invisible, the metaphysical, through into the experience of the beholder. The text of the aerial-like structure reads:



Mein Lieber! Du liegst im Gras, den Kopf im Nacken, um Dich herum keine Menschenseele, Du hörst nur den Wind und schaust hinauf in den offene Himmel—in das Blau dort oben, wo die Wolken ziehen—, das ist vielleicht das Schönste, was Du im Leben getan und gesehen hast.

*My dear friend! You are lying in the grass, with your head thrown back, not a living soul is around, you hear only the wind and look up to the open sky—into the blue, where the clouds float by—perhaps this is the most beautiful thing you have done and seen in your life.*¹⁴

The first 'hyperlink' is via the form of the metal structure to Alexander Rodchenko's *Sukov Tower*, as an expression that nature and technology are not mutually exclusive. There is a further link to Rodchenko's photograph of Pines, and "via cultural memory, this image of nature blends into Kabakov's installation."¹⁵ Seibold-Bultmann suggests yet another layer which the Kabakov installation links to—a passage by Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774/87): "Lying in the grass near a stream where only a few rays of sunlight penetrate the darkness of a forest, he observes insect life, and is then prompted to feel

the presence of the Almighty, who ... in a state of continuous bliss bears and sustains us—then, my friend, when ... the world around me and the sky fully rest within my soul like the figure of a beloved; then I ... often think: oh if only I could express it all on paper, everything that lives so richly and so warmly within me, in such a way that it would reflect my soul, just as my soul is the mirror image of the infinite God!—My friend—but it makes me perish, I succumb to the violence of the splendour of these images.¹⁶

The 'hyperlink' connects to the 'epiphanic sky'—a portal to the Sublime—and Goethe's *Sturm und Drang*, with self intimately reconnected to the cosmos. "The possibility of epiphany through nature is bound up with a memory of the unfragmented Romantic self [...] Epiphany can be, but does not have to be experienced as a result of viewing the work. If it is, this results from the potency of a cultural tradition combined with the sublimity [...] of the natural sky and of infinite space."¹⁷ The intertextual *jouissance* of such a reading liberates the mind to associate, to follow the path of language. The aerial-like ascending form of Kabakov's textual sculpture, and the association with Rodchenko's Pines, opens up further layers. Bachelard's meditations on the verticalizing image, and the 'aerial tree', and to Schopenhauer's pine at the edge of the abyss, and Nietzsche's fir tree "on the edge of the abyss, [which] is a cosmic vector of the aerial imagination."¹⁸

This type of associative hyperlinking and textual prompts brings to mind Ian Hamilton Finlay's evocative sculptural works, which use text and form—which are both visual elements—as a trigger for other senses. Vocalising the landscape makes the word in the world audible. Carter imagines that "the poetic remaking of the world is not via the silent word, nor even via the materialisation of the spirit in breathing, but consists in the act of sounding."¹⁹ Speaking the site dissolves the subject-object split, and "... if we read inscriptions aloud, they contribute to the plenitude of sounds that make a site..."²⁰ Jan Birksted relayed a tale to me of how this sensory realm was unleashed through the simple textual prompt.

*"Some time ago, we went to see the Ian Hamilton Finlay garden at Luton (just north of London where we live). There is a grove with a weeping tree in the middle. A stone hangs in the tree which reads something like: HEAR THE MUSES SING. This grove with its tree and inscription are right under—I mean right under—the flight path of the aeroplanes landing at Luton Airport. As you stand there listening to the muses, the roar of the jet aeroplanes every five or ten minutes is right over your scalp and is truly deafening..."*²¹

Another of Finlay's works, "See Poussin, Hear Lorrain", also seeks a multisensory engagement with the landscape, via the association of text and experience. Through a minimalist textual gesture whole worlds are opened up with words, as Yves Abrioux explains of Finlay's work, "A single word can condense an entire descriptive sequence without losing the element of aura the corresponding prose passage would seek to convey."²² Words crystallise the murmuring of the world. Bachelard believed that "All the being of the world, if it dreams, dreams that it is speaking."²³ Paradoxically, the visual element of text in the landscape releases and realises the non-visual phenomena that elude the so-called "post-enlightenment" experience of the world. Beyond the contemporary imagination, the tyranny of the visual has subdued the phenomena which excite the other senses. Unaccustomed and unattuned to nonvisual phenomena, the means of articulating them are impoverished. Hunt suggests that there are many examples of how "the verbal is invoked to augment the impact of the other senses."²⁴

V Smell and design

Textual triggers and prompts, and the orchestration of the movement of the beholder within the landscape therefore open up ways of enhancing the experience of the non-visual—the most important thing a designer can do in many cases, is to place the beholder at the point where they will experience the ambient sensory environment. Bernard Lassus' proposal for Marne-La-Vallée imagined a verbal signal to reveal a non-visual phenomena: "*par vent d'Ouest. . . MOUSSE AU CHOCOLAT*": "Courtesy of the west wind, chocolate mousse."²⁵ Lassus believes, "In order to suggest a landscape, it is not . . . necessary to modify a relief even slightly, to plant a few trees, or to enlarge a river. To say, to show, to make heard, means to propose other readings of what surrounds us, without modifying the physical presence."²⁶ "An intervention, even a very slight, minute one, can bring landscapes to light from a series of objects, or challenge a usual landscape reading of a place."²⁷ Lassus' proposal for a simple sign was a means of highlighting the multi-sensate facets of the site, in this particular case to underscore the ways in which non-visual phenomena—the Meunier chocolate factory's wafting smells, as well as the sounds of overhead aircraft and passing cars, could leach into what could otherwise be perceived as a "wild" landscape—Lassus believed it was "out of the question to isolate the fraction of the site called 'wild,' even if extended, from those smells and noises, particularly those of the power plant, which invaded a third of the site's surface."²⁸

While the use of textual prompts is one means of constructing an olfactory landscape, there are other types of interventions which might also serve to create sources of evocation. In garden design the attention to smell has lingered in varying ways throughout history. The use of fragrant plantings is a common means of adding sensory richness to a garden, something that can in itself become a sublime event, as in Le Nôtre's description of the Trianon at Versailles, "The garden is always filled with flowers which are changed every season in pots and one never sees a dead leaf, or a shrub not in bloom. . .", and Berrall adds to this that "the fragrance of Jasmine, narcissi, hyacinths, lilies, heliotropes, carnations and tuberose filled the air, but Saint-Simon claimed that on one occasion the King and his court departed because the scent in the garden was overwhelming."²⁹

However, fragrant plantings understate the role of smell in landscape experience, and frequently tend towards a 'decorative' overlay to the garden, rather than an authentic, phenomenological experience. Often driven by those same impulses of modernity that seek to create a world which is free of 'bad' smells, and dominated by 'good' smells, recourse to lists of fragrant plants is



often nothing more than a horticultural form of 'air freshener', serving to mask ambient smell. (illustration of collage) This type of masking and decorating through smell has parallels in the sonic realm for example. Interventions such as building wind chimes on a site can obscure rather than reveal the sonic qualities of a site. Drawing on Paul Rodaway's notion of 'sensuous geographies', Marks highlights the artificiality of the sonic environment in cities, where many sounds are synthesised. She finds "that some urban warning sounds have turned into aural decorations, such as the ubiquitous cycling car alarms that reassuringly signify one's arrival in the city."³⁰ However, it is the *ambient* qualities of a site which can lead us to a particular frisson with a place, and the designer's role can be in the amplification of these 'authentic' sensory dimensions, or the underscoring of them through means such as verbal triggers.

The intensification of the olfactory environment can be achieved through the editing and focussing of a particular aromatic experience. While much of modernity's obsession has been with the elimination of smell, and often the replacement of 'bad' smells with 'good' smells which are generally synthetic, this process of editing can be used in a way which creates richer experiences, in a sense returning to us our knowledge of the natural environment.

Communicating examples of olfactory artworks is problematic, for the very reasons outlined above in terms of the impossibility of *representing* smell. Such projects must therefore rely largely on description to evoke their sensory qualities. Constance Classen's 'vision' of an installation based on an experience described by Helen Keller's experience is based solely on textual representation, and arguably the addition of imagery might serve to dilute this evocative piece. Keller had related how, "The other day I went to walk toward a familiar wood. Suddenly a disturbing odor made me pause in dismay. Then followed a peculiar measured jar, followed by dull, heavy thunder. I understood the odor and the jar only too well. The trees were being cut down."³¹ Classen responded to this olfactory and sonic moment through imagining how this might be represented, "Suppose Keller's sensations on that day were to be transformed into a gallery exhibit. One would walk into a room entitled, say, *The Disappearing Forest*. The room would be visually empty but filled with the sharp scent of a cut tree. The vibrations of sawing would reverberate throughout the room, followed by a heavy thud. Would such an exhibit, lacking as it does any visual referents, be any less moving or evocative than a painting or photograph of a tree being felled?"³²

Two projects which focus on very particular smell signatures are again difficult to comprehend through imagery alone, and without firsthand experience it is necessary to call on the writings of critics, or the merest fragment of explanation of the images. The first is Kuryu Architect & Associates with Masayuki Kakiuchi and Tadashi Saito's pavilion for the International Flower Show *Kokusai Hana no Koyu-kan* in Japan. The design consisted of baskets of wood chips, forming a portal for visitors to pass through.³³ The olfactory imprint marked time and space with the scraps of cryptomeria and Japanese cypress combining powerful fragrance with the atmospheric setting of filtered light.

A second, similar, project is Italian artist Giuseppe Penone's *Respirare L'ombra (To Breathe the Shadow)* (1999), an evocative space which appeared to transform people's experience of their environment. The gallery walls were lined with chicken wire baskets filled with bay leaves, in the manner of gabion baskets. Samson Spanier commented that, "The fragrance is intoxicating, and comes as a splendid surprise in the sterile museum environment. The effect on visitors is correspondingly unusual, and I saw several people sit down as if in the shade of a tree. The room also contains a

pair of bronze lungs articulated by moulds of laurel leaves; clearly, the leaves should be 'breathed'. The subject of the work is breath, both as something inside us, and as a connection to the external landscape."³⁴

Smell's ability to transform spatial experience relates to its affect upon the emotions as opposed to the intellect. Through this phenomenological impression, the shapes and forms of spaces can be altered and moulded, and as Malnar and Vodvarka observe, "The question remains whether odors—and our sensing of them—can act as primary determinants of spatial judgements. If by this we mean affective spatial judgments, the answer must surely be affirmative."³⁵

VI Phenomenal works

It is as though philosophy suddenly wakes up to the fact that there is a dense, swarming territory beyond its own mental enclave which threatens to fall utterly outside its sway. That territory is nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together—that business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal biological insertion into the world. The aesthetic concerns this most gross and palpable dimension of the human, which post-Cartesian philosophy, in some curious lapse of attention, has somehow managed to overlook. Terry Eagleton³⁶

The theory of phenomenology glimmers at the edge of design potential, and this paper seizes the opportunity to explore the potent connections between time and the non-visual. Working within the burgeoning field of design-as-research, I am using design experiments to explore the potentials of the multi-sensory domain. Design disciplines are becoming increasingly aware of design as a mode of research. This development is in part motivated by research environments within academia which require quantifiable quality-assured outputs. The hegemony of science dominates the language and practice of 'research' within institutions, and disciplines such as design and performance arts are challenged to make their work recognised, without diluting their modes of working, to fit in with the inflexible parameters. There is therefore a necessary recognition that research and design are not forks in a path, but a convergence, and in fact a reunion of two elements that formerly co-existed, where science and art were not considered mutually exclusive. However, the reunion is not without challenges, and as Paul Carter writes, "while 'creative research' *ought* to be a tautology, in the present cultural climate it is in fact an oxymoron."³⁷

The series of design experiments I am exploring is entitled "Phenomenal Works", and seeks the development of memory triggers in the landscape, triangulating the connection between landscape, memory, and sensory stimulation. Early investigations included the use of sound, as sonic experimentation within an urban park, where a whispering wall was to invoke the ghosts of a radio station which was housed in an art deco building demolished to make way for a carpark in Central Auckland. Another project explored the use of noise cancellation to create pools of tranquillity adjacent to a motorway, through capturing the sound and feeding it back through speakers to create the necessary phase shift of sound waves.

One of the series of experiments which sought to draw in the olfactory was the *Black Box for Gaston Bachelard* which was based upon identifying a range of extra-visual modes which are overlooked, and creating a type of toolkit. (Figure 1) The Black Box was modelled on a painting box, but its contents were about things other than the pictorial, from a blindfold to a lead weight and a bottle



Figure 1. Black Box for Gaston Bachelard, Jacky Bowring 2005



of smelling salts. Through switching off the visual domain, other senses immediately become enhanced. The Black Box moves toward a reclamation of the sensory realm. Phenomenophilia (imagining a term for a love for phenomena) motivates this excursion into extra-visibility, into the promotion of an existential awareness, to find and locate for one's self, the distance between the body and the milieu.

Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological passages are a route for existentially intense design, through the amplification of the imagination and poetics, and the spatial manifestation of metaphysical meditations. His notions of reverie reveal the absent potentialities, those losses which as Eagleton points out were removed from the original conception of *aisthesis*, with the eighteenth century's insistence on a cleavage of realms, such that there came a separation of the material and immaterial, between "that which is bound up with our creaturely life as opposed to that which conducts some shadowy existence in the recesses of the mind." It is toward this shadowy existence that the Black Box gestures.

The box contains three items, selected for their phenomenal intensity:

1. *Smelling Salts*—to bring us, literally, to our senses. This aromatic preparation of ammonia was traditionally used to promote a return from a loss of consciousness. (Smelling salts are a strong evocation for time on a personal level. My great grandmother had a bottle of smelling salts which we would be allowed to smell from time to time as children. This small bottle of dark glass seemed possessed of something quite magical).
2. *Lead Weight*—an intensification of gravity, beyond what is expected for an object of this size. To sit with the weight resting in the hand is to experience a heightened sensation of gravity, to make the pull palpable, and extend the sense of touch beyond tactility, into the telluric, or earth-bound.
3. *Blindfold*—the exclusion of the visual realm is not intended simply as a crude counter to its dominance, but a stretching and contracting of sensory topology.

The Black Box seeks to promote a metaphysical metamorphosis in those that engage with it. Through the simultaneous deployment of the smelling salts, the lead weight, and the blindfold, a sensational transformation takes place, and this is a designed *experience*, liberating the participant from the hegemony of the visual.

Another recent project which explores the importance of phenomenological factors within landscape experience is my proposal for the Henry John Nicholas memorial in Christchurch. Nicholas was a recipient of the Victoria Cross for bravery in World War 1, and while other holders of this award have been memorialised within the local landscape, he had been overlooked as his family only recently presented his medal to the Canterbury Museum. The design, *River Crossing*,

(Figure 2) sought to draw in aspects of the environment which would enrich associations of time and memory, including the visual, through using a familiar language in an unfamiliar way as a means of simultaneously inviting the beholder into the design, and destabilising them. No particular symbolic element is proposed for the artwork as a whole. Rather than being didactic or 'instructive', the gesture is intended to be 'open' to a range of potential readings and interpretations. Multivalent, or abstract forms, allow the participant to become far more engaged with the work—the become part of thinking it into being. Architecture critic Robert Maxwell says with reference to abstract objects in the context of an architecture of the tragic, they are enigmatic, and *because* of this "resist[] being emptied of meaning."³⁸ The design is also ambulatory or participatory, such that it is only completed through walking from one part to the other. The aspect of movement is also invoked through the focus upon the river itself. And finally, the sense of smell is captured through placing the beholder in close proximity to the river, where the damp, dark and melancholy smell might be received as a smell of times past, and of sadness. Overall the memorial seeks to 'retard', or slow down perception, and maximise these experiences of liminality, of intensity at the edge of sensation.

Epilogue

The restoration of authentic and meaningful connection to place and time is one of landscape architecture's most promising potential gifts to the world. Landscape, arguably, is the most place-centred and time-centred of all design disciplines, of all of the arts. It is not isolated within a gallery, it is not modified by air-conditioning which allows it to be the same the world over, it is not immune to weathering such that it does not reveal time's passing. Yet, all the same, landscape has become shaped by modernity's obsessions as much as any other media, rationalised, exorcised, deodorised, decorated, and commodified. The challenge is therefore to *reclaim* sensory experience, and to re-tie the ligatures that connect landscape, time and memory, to embrace, rather than suffocate, the breathing in of the world, to return *aisthesis* to aesthetics. °



Figure 2. River Crossing, Memorial Proposal for the Avon River, Christchurch, Jacky Bowring 2006. View across memorial steps in foreground, towards Bridge of Remembrance.



Endnotes

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- 15 *ibid*, p.208.
- 16 *ibid*, p.208–9.
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- 18 G Bachelard, (1988 [1943]), *Air and Dreams: An essay on the imagination of movement*. Trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell. The Dallas Institute, Dallas, 148.
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- 24 Hunt, 122.
- 25 B Lassus (1998), *The Landscape Approach*, The University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 60.
- 26 *ibid*.
- 27 *ibid*.
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