

**PRAGMATIST VIEWS OF URBAN EXPERIENCE:
SENSORIAL PERCEPTION IN URBAN STUDIES**

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ABSTRACT: The paper investigates how classical pragmatist views of sensorial perception may contribute to current research on urban life. It focuses upon the possible diffusion of pragmatist stances within accounts of perceived built environments. It elaborates on the existing use of pragmatism, and shows its strong contextual relevance to this task, in order to illustrate how such a philosophical perspective may serve urban studies. To assess theoretical stances that are often implicit, the author surveys methodological texts by social scientists and samples of field work – distinguishing these two levels in order to improve upon the analysis and theoretical support for perception-driven approaches to urban studies. He then examines several reasons for the relevance of pragmatist views of perception to urban research, focusing upon different yet compatible conceptual legacies.

Keywords: Senses, City, Pragmatism, Philosophy, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Kevin Lynch, Social Sciences, Action, Situation, Habit.

Introduction

The sensorial perception of built environments and urban situations has not been a longstanding topic in urban social sciences, unlike in such practice-oriented disciplines as architecture and planning. By paying little attention to the materiality of urban settings, the rich tradition of urban sociology, considered here in both its American and French contexts, appears to have neglected the city-dweller's bodily perception of the urban environment. Rather than attempting an actual account of urban experience, sociological approaches to space have often led to a more abstract or formalist 'social space', defined only by human interactions (for instance by Bourdieu 1979, 1994). Whilst this situation has undergone recent amendments amid the emergence of new sociological perspectives on space (Löw 2008, 2013), urban studies still, arguably, lack perception-driven accounts of the vast diversity, complexity, and richness of city life.

Unlike urban sociology, other academic as well as non-academic accounts of city life have provided fine-grained accounts of built environments, urban infrastructure, and their perception by both urbanites and non-urbanites. Thus, for instance, one might refer to various artistic traditions such as in prose, poetry, photography or film. This paper rather explores the possible diffusion of pragmatist stances within accounts of perceived built environments by social scientists and architecture theorists who have considered varying ways of making use of the resources available to a pragmatist philosophy of experience. It will, therefore, investigate how classical pragmatist views of sensorial perception contribute to the work of urban scholars in geography, anthropology, and sociology. Focusing upon selected examples of ethnographic fieldwork and important essays by architecture and urban scholars, it aims to elaborate upon the existing deployment of pragmatist views and show their strong contextual relevance to the task of describing sensorial experience within urban contexts. Finally, the paper will attempt to illustrate how a philosophical perspective may serve urban studies on the issue of a perception-driven approach to urban environments. More specifically, the purpose is to explain the current diffusion of pragmatist ideas throughout the urban social sciences, especially among French-speaking fieldwork researchers and scholars. This increasing use of pragmatist resources within urban social sciences has elements of philosophical justification, as well as strong contextual motivations.

To assess theoretical stances that are often implicit, the paper surveys methodological texts by social scientists and samples of field work – distinguishing these two levels in order to elaborate upon the analysis and theoretical support for perception-driven approaches to urban disciplines. The paper then examines several reasons for the relevance of pragmatist views of perception, focusing upon different yet compatible theoretical legacies. As evolving urban contexts demand more fine-grained surveys, the author argues that pragmatist views of sensory experience enable a refined perception-driven approach to urban environments.

Background**'State of mind' and 'frames':
urban sociology without urban space?**

How do social scientists characterize the perceptible features of urban space? For most urban geographers, anthropologists, and sociologists, sensorial perception of the environment has not been a topic or a *problem*. The physical space of built surroundings, even living bodies themselves, have appeared as a mere background to social interactions. In other words, elementary ecological conditions rarely mattered to analysts of social interaction. Just as field studies for the most part began with broad descriptions of the setting, the actual context did not play any distinctive role or have a particular effect on the various processes which connect, mingle, or separate people. It seems all the more striking that urban scholars have neglected the specific spatial environments of cities, as the same authors often patiently scrutinize the semantic and symbolic set of social interactions, the 'frames' (Goffman 1974) in which any social experience has to occur in order to be meaningful to its participants. Yet these 'frames' have no material referent. As a result, the material context – the visual, tactile, acoustic, and even olfactory aspects of events – has been largely kept out of focus and, at best, remains in the background of traditional social scientific portraits of the city. Detailed descriptions of physical interactions hardly occurred in classic works of urban sociology and anthropology, even in fieldwork inquiries (Whyte 1943; Goffman 1963, 1971. See also the studies quoted by Hannerz 1980). In the first lines of his 'Suggestions for the Investigation of Human Behavior in the Urban Environment', Robert E. Park famously wrote:

[The city] is more than a congeries of individual men and of social conveniences – streets, buildings, electric lights, tramways, and telephones, etc. [...] The city is not [...] merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who compose it; it is a product of nature, and particularly of human nature. (Park 1925, 1).

These few sentences are almost the only mention of the materiality of the urban setting in the entire text, even though the article exposes a much more detailed and ambitious program of research and asks an impressive number of questions. As Park briefly distinguishes physical space from the city in its entirety, he tends to reduce the built environment to a mechanism, leaving this aside in order to highlight the city's multiple social and practical functions – its life. In other words, the built environment seems to be both the infrastructure of human activities and their effect (their 'product', in Park's words), but is deprived of any sort of agency or causal propensity in its own right. Park acknowledges that the city is both physical and social, only to emphasize the primacy of social activities over the material environment. The dynamic process of urban life seems to be going only one way, according to Park. Proposing the theoretical programme of a 'human ecology', the sociologist cannot ignore how the city's concrete organization, its infrastructure, and its technological ('artificial') 'factors', affect human behaviour. For instance, 'transportation and communication' do play a role in shaping the ecological context of urban interaction. Yet for Park, as for his colleagues and his students, material conditions as such never come into focus. Only their activation by human use makes them meaningful and interesting to urban sociology. They gain their significance from 'the vital forces resident in individuals and in the community', as if their passive presence awaits consciousness in order to mean something to people. In Louis Wirth's words, Park: 'emphasized that [...] human ecology was less concerned with the relationship between man and his habitat than with the relationship between man and man as affected, among other factors, by his habitat' (Wirth 1945, 484). A couple of pages further, Wirth adds:

[W]e might well be predisposed to follow the general principle that physical factors, while by no means negligible in their influence upon social life and psychological phenomena, are at best conditioning factors offering the possibilities and setting the limits for social and psychological

existence and development. In other words, they set the stage for man, the actor. We are not yet far enough advanced to say with confidence what importance shall be ascribed to any one factor operating in the complex sphere of the social and the psychological, much less to evaluate the relative importance of physical as distinguished from social and psychological factors. (Wirth 1945, 487-488).

However, such dualism remains unsatisfactory, as the two authors' dialectical writing itself seems to attest. Their implicit claim is that the material environment of the city does not really make it a special kind of place, qualitatively different from other inhabited settings. Strikingly, these sociologists ignore the specificities of architecture and urban infrastructure. They barely suggest that differences of degree (quantity, intensity) might count as significant ecological factors of distinction. However, following other lines of inquiry partly envisioned by the Chicago sociologists (Wirth, 1938), one may look for sharper differences between urban and non-urban settings. The present paper claims that, in order to consider such differences at the level of sensorial experience, conceiving the programme of an actual ecology of perception within urban environments is promising. Yet for all the ground-breaking work that Park, Burgess, Wirth, their colleagues and their students achieved in the development of a professional urban sociology, and despite their conceptual work around the intellectual project of a 'human ecology', they never aimed at an *urban ecology* in the fullest sense of the term¹.

¹. The phrase 'urban ecology' is, strictly speaking, a neologism that the Chicago sociologists barely used. 'Urban space' too hardly occurs in their texts, evidence that describing the urban built environment was a mere peripheral aspect of a research program centered on 'collective behavior', 'social control', and interactions between groups or communities. Space and material environment are remarkably absent in the overwhelming series of questions or 'suggestions' asked by Park in the rest of his groundbreaking article. His priority is always to study social or 'population' issues, that is, a neighborhood's organization and history, the attitudes, vocations, occupations, mobility, customs, and social unrest of its inhabitants, their collective psychology and

A few decades later, Erving Goffman's *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (1963) and *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (1971) came much closer to the possibility of an actual urban social ecology. Goffman's observations and remarks paid attention to the roles of physical space and the built environment within social interactions. Although his initial field work was done in the Shetland Islands in the early 1950s, and despite his interest in closed 'total institutions' such as asylums and hospitals, the majority of situations mentioned by the sociologist were undoubtedly urban. Most of these situations even played out in historically specific urban environments. Goffman's field of observation was mainly the streets, restaurants, clubs and cafés of postwar North American industrial cities – and he deployed newspaper reports about what was going on in these places. In this regard, there is strong implicit continuity between Goffman and the earlier Chicago sociologists. And, as for his predecessors, urban infrastructural elements were somehow left out of his main focus. Just as in Park's analyses or descriptions, for Goffman the physical urban environment is underdetermined and non-specific and, as a matter of fact, the issue of experience remains unquestioned. The Canadian sociologist's famous concept of 'framing' never refers to physical space or infrastructure, as if the material features of the settings of interactions could not in themselves become a significant factor in public interactions.

Yet physical space matters. Strolling the streets of an American industrial city does not easily compare to walking along the roads, beaches, and past the house fronts of the Shetland Islands. For example, these different contexts convey utterly distinct histories and senses of the passing of time. The more immediate conditions of sensorial experience also vary in crucial

behavior, moments of crisis, the perpetuation of social control, and phenomena of 'disorganization' such as delinquency, drug abuse, corruption, and crime, which tend to create their own 'moral regions'.

ways. Such variations depend upon architecture and urban design, the presence and shape of urban furniture, the width of the streets, the height of the pavements, the intensity of car and pedestrian traffic etc. In the section from his book *Relations in Public* 'The Umwelt' (Goffman 1971, 248-256), Goffman does not even suggest these variations, proving that his consideration of spatial issues is remarkably abstract. In his text the environment remains a mere background and, at most, an implicit subtext for human gestures and behavior. Since any given place contains 'alarming' factors and signs which will affect our perceptions and trigger our actions, nothing really seems to distinguish a particular area or place from another. For all the compatibility of his observations with more space-focused investigations, and the recurring presence of street life in the situations he describes, Goffman never mentions urban infrastructure, architecture, or design. It is as though they do not make any difference.

By focusing upon social interactions alone, early generations of urban sociologists seem to have reduced the dynamics of urban life to a sort of live theatre performance. Yet a street is never just another street. Its specific qualities single it out from two different angles, that is, from any other space that is not a street, and from any other street which may be similar to it but does not duplicate its form and social life.

A consistent ecological and perception-driven approach to urban space needs to consider these qualities in order to grasp their full meaning. What makes a city different from other environments is both physical and historical. Neglecting architecture, urban design, and material infrastructure in the name of the meaningful and animated diversity of human interaction, is unsatisfying. Inversely, human diversity and density count as material and empirical perceptual factors as well, and not exclusively as social or intentional factors. As many scholars have insisted over the last century, culture cannot be sharply separated from nature (Dewey 1925; Descola 2006; Ingold 1986, 2000, 2004). Quoting Park's words to mitigate his own view: the city as 'a state

of mind' cannot be separated from its 'physical organization' and from the city-dwellers' living bodies. These elements also lie at the heart of urban experience, and distinguish it from other types of human experience. Material infrastructure and urban life do not only 'mutually interact' (Park 1925, 4), they should never be separated in the first place.

Through the analysis of sensorial perception, urban social scientists may shift their focus onto urban architecture and design, to consider built environments as a concrete conditioning factor of social interactions themselves. To some extent, such a project might have been part of the unfinished programme of human ecology. Yet, in this regard, the legacy of the Chicago tradition of urban sociology still awaits significant revival and critical update. Using sensorial perception as a guiding principle, it seems possible to argue that physical space not only makes up the setting or stage (or 'backstage') of human interactions within cities, but directly shapes them. Since no city life would occur without the subtleties of human perception, there remains room to attempt a convergence between research or scholarship in architecture and various currents of urban sociology (from human ecology to social interactionism).

Analysing urban space: geographers, architects, and essayists

For Goffman as for Park, the actual spatial analysis of cities was not a sociologist's purpose. It remained, rather, a task for urban geographers and planners. However, on the other hand, most architects and planners have long neglected the possibility and fecundity of an in-depth study of perceptual experience in urban space. Some pioneering exceptions aside (Lynch 1960, 1973; Gehl 1977, 2010; Sennett 1992, 2002), perception was not a specific issue to practitioners during the industrial era and up to the 1960s. And even when they took it into account, or occasionally alluded to the presumed 'effects' of built environments on

people, urban scholars did not consider neither sensorial perception to be a problem.

Unlike sociologists, urban geographers have examined infrastructures of transportation and communication (Gottmann 1961; Webber 1964; Soja 2000). Gottmann, for instance, argued that the material density of these networks and the intensity of their use distinguish urban and suburban areas from rural districts. Later other geographers also stated, echoing Georg Simmel's views (1903) and Park's early 'suggestions' (1915), that consciousness was affected by urban space or 'urban experience'. In particular, the critical geographer David Harvey came relatively close to conceptualizing perception as a legitimate topic of inquiry (Harvey 1985, 250-276). However, he did not really address the specificity of urban experience at the sensorial level. From a more general standpoint, the potential conceptual resources to sustain a perception-driven approach to urban space in the social sciences appear to have been neglected.

Beyond the social sciences, planners and architects have increasingly contributed to such a task, starting from the 1960s. Significantly, practitioners were the first to take the full measure of the issues of scale that modern city planning and design have bequeathed urban life. It may even be said that the perception of built space has been a problem long familiar to architects, planners, artists, and to some aesthetic philosophers. In particular, the two major architectural treatises of the Western tradition give the problem of articulating scale some thought². Yet until the 1960s and 1970s, fine-grained conceptual analysis and empirical field work on the topic of ordinary sensorial experience of urban spaces and built environments were still lacking, for theorists as well as practitioners. One of the most influential urban planners of all time, Robert Moses, did not seem to consider human perception as a manifold

and complex problem. Rather, he appeared to think of it as a universal and homogeneous element that planning needed to address, among other constraints. Interestingly, enhancing the urbanite's general experience was one of Moses' declared intentions. He aimed to improve the city-dweller's experience by transforming their environment (roads, parks, bridges, beaches). Yet, leaving aside the need for a more explicit and exhaustive approach to the question of a perception-driven approach to urban design, Moses notoriously focused upon the development of a coherent road traffic system at the previously unseen scale of the metropolitan area of New York. While his idea was to improve accessibility to the suburbs, his plans clearly neglected the perceptual impact of the massive infrastructures he had designed. The unprecedented reshaping and modernization of the entire New York region traffic system would eventually appear as 'the fall of New York' (Caro 1975), and famously gave rise to major public movements of protest and opposition, some of which were successful.

What implicit concept or image of human sensorial experience did Moses and other modernist planners had in mind? They most likely had a contextually coherent idea of experience – a functional and positivist view of human perception. During the 1960s, architects, designers, and planners began to address in more systematic ways the problem of the sensorial perception of built space. Following Kevin Lynch's pioneering studies *The Image of the City* (1960) and *What Time is this Place?* (1973), urban landscape analysis progressively emerged with new studies of American cities, cityscapes, and suburbs. Some essayists attempted spatial descriptions of urban settings *as perceived*, ascribing specific functions to architecture and built environments. The methodological principles and findings formulated by Lynch (1960, 1973), Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour (1972), Gehl (1977), and Whyte (1980, 1988) are still used in the training of young architects and planners. Moreover, these groundbreaking books have helped to bring the issue of

². During late Antiquity and the early Renaissance, practical knowledge about perception, particularly visual, found actual theoretical expression (see Vitruvius, Leone Battista Alberti).

the perception of built environments to the attention of urban social scientists. Yet it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the issue of perceived built space really found its way into ethnographic fieldwork.

**Fieldwork in urban ethnography:
involving the senses, finally**

During the last three decades, urban ethnographers and sociologists have approached the issue of sense perception of the environment in more or less direct ways. Ethnographers Elijah Anderson, Lyn Lofland, Mitchell Duneier, Sudir Venkatesh, and Jack Katz in the United States, and Jean-François Augoyard, Isaac Joseph, Michel Agier, and Stéphane Tonnelat in France address essential questions such as: How do city dwellers perceive their everyday spatial environments. A question that many architects, planners, artists, environmental psychologists, and eventually some social geographers had alluded to, with their own intentions and methods.

While these ethnographers remain focused upon social interactions with their rich architecture and infrastructure, urban environments progressively emerged in field work descriptions and analyses. Thus observers of urban social life have begun to turn their traditional introductory remarks on the setting of interactions into actual descriptions of the built environment. This trend is visible in the very titling of their books³. In their detailed accounts, the layout and design of streets, squares, parks, avenues, sidewalks, shopping malls, blocks and individual buildings finally play roles in the organizing processes of public interaction. Getting to know the sensorial properties of streets – their width, their length, their colors and textures, or the type of buildings and activities that typically occur in them in connection with their form and design – is not only the work of an architect or an ethnographer. Everyone must carry on this task in order

to acquire the practical skills to cope with the physical and social environment they live in. A crucial part of the ‘folk ethnography’ (Anderson 2011, xv, 11, 74)⁴ that people spontaneously practice relates, in part, to the physical surroundings and the landscapes they are familiar with. Knowing one’s way around the streets of a city involves these skills, if only to understand what is appropriate or acceptable, or not, in a definite spatial context. For instance, one’s normal appearance and attitude on a subway platform, in a bar, in a commercial building or at a station, or the variations of physical distance between strangers within a market area, a public transportation system, or along a crowded pavement. Among others, essayists such as Jane Jacobs (1961) and Richard Sennett (1992, 2002) had already suggested general observations of this sort, although in ways that were far from systematic. Current urban ethnographers give a new range to these scattered remarks, coming closer to elaborate and test hypotheses. This evolution has led scholars to emphasize how the environmental qualities of settings, for instance, their accessibility or the (in)visibility to actors, play a crucial role in social situations (the importance of the pavement, benches or front steps of a building, for instance). Urban ethnographers have used more perceptual verbs to hint at the processes by which actors learn to cope with the setting, such as:

This street wisdom is largely a state of mind, but it is demonstrated through a person’s comportment. It represents a perspective gained through public interaction, the give and take of street life. This perspective allows one to ‘see through’ public situations, to anticipate what is about to happen based on cues and signals from those one encounters. In essence, a ‘streetwise’ person is one who understands ‘how to behave’ in uncertain public places. (Anderson 1990, 8-9).

According to Anderson, the perspective of the ‘streetwise’ person is not only an image for learning how to deal with people in the street. Since it involves

³ *A Place on the Corner* (Anderson 1978), *Sidewalk* (Duneier 1999), *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* (Anderson 2011).

⁴ See also O. Schwartz (1993).

appropriate behavioral responses, this type of knowledge ('wisdom') exceeds mere intellectual or linguistic competency. It engages all the senses of a living and perceiving body, amid a perceived physical environment which varies according to the architecture and built elements, the temperature and the intensity of light, the time of day or night etc. It involves taking a physical stance, acquiring perceptual habits and dispositions which may also include, in the most literal sense, a capacity to shift perspectives.

Such contributions⁵ help to theoretically frame spatial perception as a complex, concrete, and important issue. The need for a conceptually consistent and methodologically fruitful approach to the perception of urban space becomes manifest. Using what theoretical assumptions do researchers address bodily perception of urban space? Which concepts help us to take into account its ecological factors? Deliberately or not, scholars found their observations and inquiries upon various implicit philosophical approaches to sense perception, from behaviourism to idealism. Classical pragmatism (James 1890; Dewey 1925, 1934, 1938; Mead 1934, 1938), social phenomenology (Schütz 1967; Merleau-Ponty 1945), and environmental psychology (Sommer 1969; Gibson 1979) are three major sources. There are several reasons to focus upon the legacy of pragmatist philosophers, which appears to be the most influential in contemporary urban studies when approaching the question of sensorial experience. It remains to demonstrate the details of such an influence as well as its justifications.

The relevance of pragmatist views of perception to urban studies

Two complementary rationales motivate the relevance of pragmatist views of perception to the urban social sciences. The first is historical and contextual, the second stems from the appropriateness of a pragmatist epistemology of perception.

Historical and contextual reasons: urban mutations

The current diffusion of pragmatist concepts in urban social sciences, and their convenience for the epistemology of urban studies as a whole, has historical and contextual grounding. Over the last half-century and throughout the world, most cities, urban, and suburban spaces have undergone dramatic physical mutations which partly outdate pioneer works on city-dwellers' perceptions (Lynch 1960; Gehl 1977; Arnheim 1977).

The first of these transformations concerns scale. Ever since the postwar economic expansion, individual car use and daily commuting have constantly increased. In just a few decades, this generalization has entailed a significant discrepancy of planning and perceptual scales in most developed or developing countries. Lewis Mumford was among the first scholars to note and criticize the modernist failure to articulate the new urban shapes and the scale of human experience (1961, 525-567). Later, architectural historians and theorists such as Françoise Choay (1969; and 2006, 154-198), Joseph Rykwert (2000), and Albert Pope (1996) also analysed this discrepancy in more anthropological terms. Indeed, a great number of urban infrastructures built during the Cold War era radically exceed our ordinary capacity of perception, not so much for their absolute size as for their disproportion to bodily existence. One can feel excluded or oppressed by over-large avenues, by the highly elevated expressways that enclose horizons and deprive pedestrians of easy access, by sight or by foot, to the countryside, landscapes, and the natural scenery which traditionally surrounded cities. To some

⁵. See also Duneier (1999). Other sociological field works that highlight actors' perceptions of cities include: Augoyard (1979); Lofland (1973, 1998); Joseph (1984, 1998, 2007); Agier (2015), and to a lesser extent Zukin (2010).

extent, this striking discrepancy of scale is also made obvious by the contemporary public status of architecture. In many cases, large publicly-subsidized architectural and urban designs are massive projects, and are tantamount to aggressive programs of renovation. Such projects often propose iconic or landmark renderings in order to promote a sort of gigantism. Yet no one can pretend to clearly identify the limits of our urbanized areas, or define precisely what sort of material thing the term 'city' signifies, without including the infrastructural level and the 'seen but unnoticed' (in Harold Garfinkel's words) forms and context which organize our daily experience.

The issue of scale, therefore, does not stand alone, as it were, as a mere problem of size. Ongoing mutations of built space also affect its perceptions in many qualitative ways, which concern identification, orientation, and psychological well-being. The disarticulation of planning and human scales is thus aggravated by a lack of meaning and singularity, the anonymity of built environments which one may be tempted to describe as 'generic' (Koolhaas 1995). The systematic application of zoning and the separation of activities previously juxtaposed in cities have practically shattered the infrastructural conditions of historic urban experience. As Jane Jacobs (1961) or Melvin Webber (1964) very early diagnosed, planned modernized urban spaces, primarily designed for automobiles, suggest the idea of a 'non-place urban realm' (Webber 1964). Whilst this tendency was already criticized fifty years ago, common practices of regional or metropolitan planning still rarely invoke such concerns. The consequences of modern urban design are so durable, overwhelming, and generalized that it is difficult, to this day, to take the full measure of their impact on sensorial experience. If only to identify and enumerate with sufficient accuracy the recurring features of contemporary urbanized environments, one needs to specify one's view or concept of experience in the light of such transformations, especially those that communication and transportation technologies have entailed – for

instance, in the growing contexts of urban 'sprawl' and 'edge cities', and the decline of perceptible landmarks in the built environment (Koolhaas 1995; Choay 2006; for a striking visual account, see especially Friedlander 1978 and Friedlander 2010).

To answer this need, philosophical pragmatism turns out to be particularly helpful, since the above-mentioned factors make it necessary to re-evaluate the *active* and *practical* dimensions of ordinary sensorial perception. Urban environments change at different paces because local contexts make each situation, beyond apparent similarities, geographically, historically, and culturally different from another. Thus, for the sake of a truly workable urban ecology the epistemology of sensorial perception cannot be reduced to a relatively abstract matter of neurophysiology and cognition. Looking for cooperation between the philosophy of perception and urban studies demands that we enrich cognitive epistemology with social, cultural, and normative approaches to experience. Sensorial perception involves a great variety of references, preferences, and organizational constraints that people who share a public space on a daily basis also have to share, if only in a minimal and implicit way. In particular, Dewey's non-dualistic approach to the normativity of experience is extremely helpful in enlightening this aspect. His concept of 'valuation' (Dewey 1939) explains how, before any conscious expression or claim to values, we develop practical preferences through our gestures, attitudes, and conducts in various situations. In other words, valuations are embedded in our concrete bodily actions, progressively giving the succession of these actions a coherence and continuity which makes it possible to speak of 'human conduct' (Dewey 1922). Rather than conscious judgments or assertions, values emerge from the choices and preferences we manifest when confronted with situations. Little by little, we come to establish hierarchies and formulate retrospective 'evaluations' (Dewey 1939), instead of acting from them. Such a contextual and empirical approach differs from the dualistic view of a conscious subject positioning

themselves before an objective world. Thus Dewey's theory of valuation provides a clear example of how and why pragmatist approaches to sensorial experience can help us to attempt subtle descriptions of ordinary perception. More specifically, philosophical pragmatism seems an excellent resource to elaborate an ecological understanding of perception capable of direct application and testing in urban studies' fieldwork.

Are scholarly uses of pragmatism by urban scholars able to reflect the contemporary displacements and mutations of urban environments, given the latter's impact upon ordinary sensory experience?

The pragmatist epistemology of sensorial perception at work in urban studies

Since the 1990s, a small yet significant number of urban social scientists, especially French researchers and scholars, have referred to James' psychology of perception, Dewey's philosophy of experience and inquiry, and Mead's social psychology (Joseph 1998 and 2007; Quéré 2003; Tonnelat 2012; Thibaud 2015, 255-285).

There may be several reasons for this. The first belongs, to some extent, to historiography. The proximity of American pragmatism to urban sociology apparently makes strong historical sense. Some Chicago sociologists were not only contemporaries, but academic colleagues of these psychologists and philosophers. It is well-known that John Dewey was the first head of the University of Chicago Department of Philosophy, Psychology and Education from 1894 to 1905 and that his colleague and friend, George Herbert Mead, taught classes in social psychology for almost four decades (until his death in 1931), which were attended by several generations of young sociologists of the University of Chicago Sociology Department. Addressing Mead's and Dewey's comparable views on society and experience in general, including politics, has proved to be fruitful. However, the exact range of their influence and the actual measure of their intellectual dialogue with major

academic sociologists such as Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess, and Louis Wirth remains unclear and difficult to establish with certainty. Yet it is all the more interesting to note the specificity and legacy of the combined on-going reception of these two intellectual traditions in the contemporary French-speaking academic world (in France but also in Belgium, Québec, and Switzerland⁶). On various topics, the same authors read, translate, and discuss pragmatist accounts of experience and Chicago's sociological tradition in the search for compatibilities, differences, variations, quotations, shared references, and evolutions of thought.

One of the most promising of these topics is the possible elaboration of a perception-driven approach to urban life in its complexity. Dewey and Mead are often quoted together for their compatible, whilst not entirely similar, concepts of sensorial experience and perception. In order to characterize a pragmatism-inspired approach to perception, requires us to summarize and combine the authors' differing compatibilities. Five main features of such an approach appear to foster a fine-grained inquiry into urban social interaction, while enriching the more general philosophical understanding of perception:

1. The first is the close connection between perception and action. Against any dualistic conception, both Dewey and Mead follow James' *Principles of Psychology*. The act of perceiving is a moment of practical activity, and it involves by no means a separate or autonomous faculty of the mind (Dewey 1925). When we have a sensorial experience, we do not interrupt the practical process in which we are already engaged. Rather, we apprehend the perceived situation through our on-going activity, and the further practical possibilities involved in the current situation. In fact, as Mead puts it: 'sensing is itself an activity'

⁶ For instance, one may add to the above-mentioned names Joan Stavo-Debaugue, Mathieu Berger, and Jean-François Côté.

(Mead 1938, 3). Perception is thus a crucial part of action. It is a dynamic element of our presence in a situation and, in turn, makes for the continuity of this situation as well as the continuity of our activity. Besides the important consequences for the perception of others and the study of interactions, this close connection between perception and action helps us to understand how we deal with our spatial surroundings. It seems especially appropriate to test this view in the context of the experience of urban public spaces and urban life, in which the individual has to deal with multiple simultaneous perceptions yet remains perfectly able, most of the time, to perform consistent everyday actions.

2. Another significant feature of pragmatist views of perception is the explanatory role played by the context. For an empiricist approach such as the pragmatist type, understanding an experience logically involves analysis of the given circumstances in which it takes place. Yet circumstances by themselves do not explain everything. They become part of a larger picture, that is, the situation, which is produced and maintained by the activities of living organisms. Accordingly, the concepts of *adjustment*, *situation*, and *habit* (Dewey 1922; Mead 1934 and 1938) comprise an original contextualist epistemology of experience, anchored in practice (Dewey 1925; see also Frega 2006). This ecological view tends to relate every single perception to its broader physical and meaningful environment, as well as to previous experiences, so that various places and moments may be coherent and compose an experience (Dewey 1934, chapter 3). Perceptual operations are crucial in this process of context-building. Without *adjusting* to one another and relying upon our *habits*, none of us could make sense of the current situation we perceive – for instance, a conference in a room, a show in a

theatre or a busy street, an open market, a meeting, a protest. Extending the scrutiny of perceptual experience to context-dependent notions such as adjustment and habit requires, of course, much more justification to convince philosophers of perception, but it might nevertheless be fruitful to test these explanatory views for their application in urban studies.

3. The third reason why the pragmatist approach to experience is relevant is what Mead himself calls the '*social factor*' in perception (Mead 1938, chapter 9). Since we have been shown and even taught to use physical things in definite ways, we perceive physical objects through acquired and shared '*perspectives*'. Mead even claims that things, in our sensorial experience: 'respond to an organization of attitudes' (1938, 137-138). This means that the necessary selection and abstraction that make our perception of things possible echo the selection and abstraction that others display in their own perceptions and manipulations of these things. In other words, socialization and education play a major role in the tacit learning processes which supports our ordinary perception. As we learn how to deal with the physical world, we acquire and share the attitudes of others towards things, thus we learn to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste *things* rather than meaningless and chaotic stimuli. Whilst this idea requires development, this '*social factor in perception*' (Mead 1938, chapter 9) is not only an interesting hypothesis for the project of an urban ecology of experience but it also throws light on implicit ideas at work in the field reports and descriptions elaborated by urban scholars and ethnographers.
4. As a fourth feature, in Dewey's social and political thought shared perception plays a significant role in constituting and shaping a public through the process of '*social inquiry*' (Dewey 1927, and 1938,

chapter 24). A public comes into existence as a temporary collective practical agent if a sufficient number of people *perceive* a problem to be public. This empirical process fits with the philosopher's encompassing theory of inquiry. It supposes that several people can share a perception of the possible consequences of an actual situation, and of their own actions. In this context, perceiving essentially means being aware of, and has less to do with the sensorial response to immediate surroundings. However, Dewey may also have used the term to emphasize the necessary presence of sensorial experience in the process. The recent popularity of his concept of 'public', at least in the francophone social sciences (Cefaï & Terzi 2003; Cefaï & Terzi 2012), has not yet exhausted its potential uses by urban scholars (Tonnelat 2012).

5. Finally, a fifth instance of classical pragmatism's relevance for a perception-driven approach to urban studies is that James, Dewey, and Mead all conceived sensorial experience as a historical process, concerning both individuals and social groups (no longer distinguished as two different realities). In other words, perceptions not only belong to the 'contextual whole' (Dewey 1938) of a situation, they are also included in diachronic processes according to which perceptual experience, always open to change and alteration, is progressively unified by learning and the formation of habits (Dewey 1922, 'Custom and Habit'). One may call this diachronic feature of perception its 'cultural dimension'.

Thus classical pragmatism promoted an empirical and naturalistic approach to experience, clearly distinguished from theoretical dualism as well as from physical reductionism. With such an orientation in mind, it seems promising to attempt an innovating ecological approach to perception within urban space. Combining Dewey's conceptualization of experience and Mead's 'social

behaviourism' enables us to outline a fine-grained pragmatist account of sensorial perception which is helpful to reopen, to some extent, the Chicago sociologists' program of a human ecology. More precisely, it makes it possible to consider the idea of an urban ecology of sensorial experience. These five features suggest in an already concrete way how this project might avoid the dualistic preconceptions that early Chicago sociologists were themselves eager to escape, although their primary interests did not concern the description of sensorial experience of the built environment or the urban landscape – but rather interactional processes within social groups and between them.

**Pragmatism, bodily experience,
and the contemporary city**

In addition to the five features described above, pragmatist views of perception seem to be highly compatible with specific attempts to merge the social sciences and architectural theory (Rykwert 2000; Sennett 1992 and 2002; Lofland 1998; Choay 2006; Tonnelat 2012). Since they support a context-specific account of the ecological conditions of urban experience, there are two further reasons for their relevance to contemporary urban studies. Unlike the first five features, they may be termed 'external':

6. Based on practical investigations which Dewey formalized in his 'theory of inquiry' (1938), pragmatism's heuristic character is appropriate to address the unprecedented historical evolution of recent and current urbanization processes. Since they do not aim at a 'pure' theoretical conception of truth, separate from action, pragmatist approaches to experience are themselves revisable and context-dependent. They suggest that even the most general forms of sensorial experiences are located in definite historical situations and anchored in socially shared and biographical

memories. The extent of the urban mutations initiated in the 1950s and 1960s called for a complete re-assessment of the active, practical, and localized dimension of perception. Using pragmatist epistemology, it becomes possible to question historically the definition of perceptual experience, commensurate with mobility and the growing complexity of objects (city, urban space, built environment or urban landscapes). Thus urban social sciences can put philosophical pragmatism to use in order to describe the diversity of sensorial solicitations, of social, cultural, political, aesthetic, and psychological contexts – which the encompassing term ‘urban’ tends to conceal. Individual and collective perceptions are heterogeneous, various, and often contradictory. Unlike passive repositories, they serve as interpretative resources and as bearers of normativity. Social movements and local demonstrations contesting large-scale urban projects illustrate this point.

7. Finally, these views of perception are compatible with interdisciplinary attempts, especially those willing to combine the social sciences, psychology of perception, and aesthetic theories of architecture and urban landscape. Recall the essays of Richard Sennett (Sennett 1992 and 2002), the ethnography of urban atmospheres (Augoyard 1979; Thibaud 2015), or the ‘soma-esthetics’ of architecture (Shusterman 2010). Some authors claiming their filiation to the pragmatist tradition have been contributing to this trend. In particular, two interesting texts by John McDermott address urban experience in suggestive ways (McDermott 1976, 179-231). Shusterman’s ‘Soma-esthetics and architecture: a critique alternative’ shows that contemporary philosophers are aware of this potential. In his text, Shusterman explores the various ways in which architecture and building design affect the living body, broadening the usual

meaning of perception. He cites,, for instance, the temperature one experiences when visiting national monuments such as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. as an important sensorial factor in the perceptual experience of a built environment. Cold conveys something of the solemnity commonly attached to the place, leading to a feeling of discomfort. Whilst approaches to perception are too often limited to visual stimuli, many other factors count and sometimes play a decisive role in the ordinary ecology of bodily perception. Across different urban spaces, one experiences the architecture of buildings, the design and layout of streets, through many factors and conditions which largely exceed the visual aspects of cities. These factors include variations of temperature, luminosity and contrast, sound levels, olfactory sensations, topographic variations, textures of ground surface, the intensity of the wind, the humidity of the air. On the basis of such remarks, it should be possible to consider further applications for analyses and inquiries into various urban contexts and situations. The concern for interdisciplinary research has major precedents, especially those between psychology, philosophy, and the sociology of perception. In particular, a renewed pragmatist epistemology of urban experience should address the legacy of Simmel’s idea of a ‘sociology of the senses’ (1908), and recall the crucial importance of this author for generations of urban sociologists trained at the University of Chicago.

Guidelines for future research

The formation of perceptual habits within evolving urban experiences

The program of an urban ecology of perception requires a conceptual clarification that philosophical pragmatism can elaborate. Justification for this claim emerges both from reading the unfinished discussions on spatial and

social conditioning by early Chicago sociologists, and by observing that the pragmatist epistemology of experience has become diffused among French-speaking urban scholars.

On this basis, how can a philosophy of social sciences contribute to on-going and future research on urban life? If one of the main pragmatist indications about sensorial experience is its mutability and constant recomposition, it seems promising to direct future research on urban experience towards the formation of habits. According to Dewey, processes maintaining the precarious unity of each singular experience constitute distinct ways of articulating, coordinating, and connecting the larger 'flux' of sensory experience (Dewey 1922; 1925; 1934). As that description recalls that the emergence of habits is a highly context-dependent process, it should be of particular interest to analyse the formation of such habits in city-dwellers and urbanites in connection with their ecological contexts of interaction. Further study of the perception-based formation of everyday habits in urban life would attempt to capture the empirical grounding of practical skills socially acquired and shared by urbanites – enabling such basic activities as orienting oneself, managing pedestrian activity, or interacting in public among complete strangers. It seems arguable that a number of perceptual habits might result from a certain amount of time, activity, and elementary socialization spent within urban environments. Importantly, these habits are not identical yet similar and compatible, from one individual to another and from one city to another. The crucial point is that city-dwellers can elaborate their conducts by acknowledging, consciously or not, the perceptual *likeness* of ordinary urban situations. This likeness emerges from an open list of perceptible features or qualities of experience, which include the continuous physical proximity of complete strangers, the busy landscapes and soundscapes of street life, or the excessive dimension of cities vis-à-vis the spatial limits of human perception – making the representation of cities as totalities a problematic issue.

As urban scholars have observed, city-dwellers develop 'skills' (Hannerz 1980; Joseph 1984 and 1998) to cope with urban public situations. Perceptual habits are an essential condition for acquiring such skills. These habits are practical, contextual, and dynamic – a living organism never stops to adjust or update their gestures, even in everyday routines. Recurring situations become familiar to city-dwellers through socialization *and* sensorial perception. Whilst instrumental and context-dependent, habits are not entirely reducible to each particular setting or social group, especially since their urban variations involve a distinct degree of capacity to renew adjustments within changing environments. The omnipresence of infrastructure in and around cities might also contribute to coordinate and connect habit-forming processes. Arguably, urban habits might be easier, more quickly mastered, and shared than in other environments, which require much longer and more difficult learning or even training.

All these suggestions for further research call for closer cooperation between philosophy and social sciences. Hypotheses about the formation of urban habits have yet to be confronted with empirical evidence and, specifically, with ethnographic fieldwork and inquiry. Their focus upon concrete and local situations can provide multiple contexts to evaluate the relevance of a perception-driven approach. For instance, there is Mitchell Duneier's study of 6th Avenue vendors of printed material in the Washington Square district of Manhattan (Duneier 1999). His fieldwork accounts and analyses show that acquiring forms of perceptual knowledge or habits in an urban environment is not a matter of 'living there' or 'being from there'. A person acquires urban skills by coping with the environment on a daily basis, which does not mean that they have to actually belong to the neighbourhood in question to understand its functioning and get used to it. One needs to learn habits and skills in order to enhance their own perceptual and ultimately social experience, yet they do not have to become an actual member of a social community in order to do so. Duneier's main

interlocutor, the street vendor Hakim, introduces himself as a 'public character' in Jane Jacobs' sense (Jacobs 1961), rather than as a member of the local community or a resident of the neighbourhood – he lives in New Jersey. The perceptual conditions of urban pluralism, its habit-forming factors, and their impact upon civil life, are still to be explored and scrutinized.

The most common features of urban experience condition the acquisition of specific perceptual habits. Comparable factors, of course, exist in any other milieu or human context. However, urban environments consist of buildings. They are most directly and extensively shaped by human intentions and, more precisely, by the coexistence of multiple and eventually incompatible intentions. Consequently, an inquiry into urban sensorial experience should not only describe the organism's 'adaptation' to its environment. Its purpose is also to ask if and how built space and infrastructure may answer comparable needs, and entail comparable social reactions and uses beyond geographical or cultural differences. No simple formula of these needs and uses can epitomize the sensorial perception of built space since no habits are universal. Yet it might be possible, on the basis of observation, to compare efficiently urban situations with each other using the optic of sensorial perception.

Conclusion

The potential contribution of classical pragmatist philosophy to a perception-driven approach to cities and urban spaces is manifold and promising. It appeals to various practices of urban studies, from ethnographic field work to the planning and design of public spaces. The wide range of possible inquiries supported by pragmatist views exceeds the traditional analyses of interaction at a microsociological level. They may include, among others, studies in the fields of politics, history and aesthetics of architecture, environmental psychology, and the theory of collective emotions and actions. As the paper has shown, pragmatist-inspired views of perception are well-suited to the distinctive instability and mutability of urban experience.

Finally, it should be emphasized that pragmatism can help us to question our shared intentions so as to control our own actions at a collective level. As cities and urbanized environments arguably display more complex cultural and normative influences than they did a few decades ago, it matters to ask what it means to have public or collective perceptions and on what conditions they might serve collective actions. The type of public perception at work in everyday urban public life does not amount to perceiving *together*, nor to perceiving the same things in the same way and at the same pace. People do not share perceptions as they share ideas, and having similar sensorial perceptions does not mean that you belong to a unique community or share a common worldview. In other words, city-dwellers do not agree on what they experience, since nobody perceives in the same way as others. Thus, in the everyday processes of urban life, one must cope with the plurality of habits and conducts in public. This elementary experience plays a crucial role in interactions, as people constantly share the use of places and spaces they do not own. Accordingly, more work on the observation of diverse but comparable perceptual habits should help us to clarify the connections between urban public space and pluralism, civic life and, perhaps, the concrete conditions of cosmopolitanism.

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