

The Sensory City Workshop: Sensing the City through Touch and Taste

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As part of the ABC: Montreal project, which ran from October 2012 to March 2013 at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the Centre for Sensory Studies was invited to stage a Sensory City Workshop. The workshop, which fell on the closing day of the exhibition, was dedicated to “sensing the city” (Howes 2005). Following a roundtable at which a range of social science methodologies for dressing a sensory inventory of urban life were discussed, such as the soundwalk (McCartney 2013), smellwalk (Henshaw 2013) and rhythm analysis (Edensor 2010), two experiments were conducted which explored the insights that can be gained through employing the modalities of touch and taste. The touchwalk was led by two invited guests, Martha Radice of Dalhousie University, and Kim Morgan of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. The tastewalk was led by David Szanto of the Individualized Program, Concordia University. The following pages report on the conceptualization and findings of these two highly innovative methodologies for understanding the city through the senses.

PART I – SKIN: Surfaces of the City

Martha Radice & Kim Morgan¹

The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Even in the thick of a Montréal winter, bundled up in toques and mittens, we can sense a great deal of the city through our skin, but we tend not to notice it much, favouring urban sights and sounds instead. This report describes a tour that we led through the urban landscape near the Canadian Centre for Architecture, which aimed to draw participants’ attention to what we can perceive of the city through our sense of touch. We called this ‘touchwalk’ *SKIN: Surfaces of the City*, because we wanted to play with the metaphor of the city as body, and to think about the interface between the surface or skin of the body and the surfaces or skins of the city. We divided the tour into three parts, or layers. The first had people reaching out to stroke the surfaces of the city; the second had them sensing the movement and rhythms of the city; and the third had them focusing on the subtleties of air and atmosphere that they

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could perceive through their skin. We also wanted to experiment with ways of expressing and recording sensations of touch, so we began with warm-up activities to help participants find vocabulary for describing the feel of surfaces, and concluded by handing out little booklets of newsprint with crayons for participants to make rubbings of surfaces that caught their attention on the way home.

Neither of us regularly uses this format of guided walks as a method, but walking and touch are important to both of us in our research and artistic practice. Martha, an urban anthropologist, entered graduate studies at a time when anthropologists were thinking carefully about the relationship between observation and experience, and the commensurability of the researcher's versus the research participant's worldviews. As a result, some scholars were delving into their own sensory experience during fieldwork as a way of understanding the worldview of the people they were working with – for instance, learning to play a local musical instrument and making that embodied learning part of their investigation. So, during her fieldwork in Montréal, Martha deliberately paid attention to what it felt like to be in the city, focusing on 'objectively' perceivable things – heat, cold, wind, dust, smells and so on. She reproduced urban journeys that research participants had said were important to them, retracing the steps that one had taken to school as a child, or walking round the old neighbourhood of another. And the senses continue to play into her broader studies of how the material configuration and constraints of urban spaces shape the activities, meanings and social relations that unfold in them.

As a site-specific installation artist, Kim's research processes involve approaching the site as the material for creating the installation. For example, when the location was the pedestrian concourse at the University of Regina, she spent extended amounts of time hanging out there – observing, listening, and walking – at different times of the day and night. Through this process of field research, she learnt how the various elements of that site, such as the ebbs and flows of movement and sound during specific times of day, affected the use of that space. There were early morning crowds of determined people running to make their classes or meetings. Lunchtime had groups of people lingering in the concourse, talking, walking and eating – sometime simultaneously. In the evening it was dead quiet with students studying or sleeping on the sofas, with the occasional cell phone conversation echoing through the empty hallway. Kim was then able to use this information to make a dynamic interactive art installation that could only have been created in, by and for that particular site. So, when asked to think about sensing the city, the choice of walking as a method was familiar and appropriate. It is through our lived body experience that we connect to the city and to its inhabitants. As a group, we moved through a small section of Montreal, discovering textures, surfaces, and airflows, sharing these experiences and investigating yet more layers of the city.

Warming up and setting out

Although the walk took place in Montréal at the end of March, we were lucky with the weather: it was a glorious sunny afternoon of around 12 degrees, the perfect temperature for strolling and stopping to talk on street corners without getting too chilly. About fifteen participants gathered in a circle outside the CCA to take the touchwalk, and we began our warm-ups.² For the first, 'Say Hello,' we asked participants to draw a piece of paper from a bag, and then introduce themselves to another person or two in the manner of the texture written on the paper.³ They were then asked to come up with a situation to which the two or three textures would apply – so if 'grimy' met 'oily', they could think of, 'my hair after three days without shampoo in Manhattan.' This worked to get participants thinking about

² Thanks to Susanne Shawyer, a scholar and practitioner of street theatre, for generously sharing warm-up ideas.

³ The introductory textures were: gritty, smooth, oily, cracked, slimy, slick, rough, flaky, downy, gummy, spiky, grimy, fuzzy, peeling, silky, ribbed, sticky and torn.

different textures and our learned social responses to them. For the second warm-up, 'Feel and Guess,' the group gathered together again and one person put their hand in a large opaque paper bag to feel one of the objects it held (coffee cup lid; coffee cup stirrer; cotton ball; packet of small squidgy soft gummy-bear-type candy; plastic bottle; long metal screw; bubble wrap...). The person described its texture, using as many adjectives as possible, to the others, who had to guess what it was. What was interesting here was that some of the correct guesses were based more on the sound of the object being palpated, rather than the verbal description of it. We rarely depend on just one sense to perceive our environment, especially when vision is out of the way.

First layer: Skins of the city

There's a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*

As we approached our first site of the tour, we asked participants, what do the surfaces of the city – the skins of the city – reveal about the city? The skin of a person reveals a great deal about his or her history. Their scrapes, scratches and scars have stories in them. One wrinkle reveals – or conceals – loss, stress or



trauma; another is a line made by joy or concentration. By analogy, if we think about the city as a body (a metaphor we are not alone in adopting), then we can scan and skim the surfaces of the city to learn about its past. It is easy to imagine the urban landscape as having bumps or bruises from recent damage, scars from damage healed over. We often speak of a street or a building getting a 'facelift' through revitalization or renovation. Could graffiti be a tattoo? Are those gaps where buildings were suddenly demolished like phantom limbs? How are new appendages incorporated? What stories lie just under the surface of the city?

The site for this part of the tour was a back alley just near the CCA, running between Fort and Seymour, which we had found when scouting out our route the day before. What was special about this alley was its astonishingly broad range of surfaces, in all kinds of

juxtapositions: flaking paint; crumbling mortar; concrete imprinted with the grain of the wood used to set it; those mysterious numbers burnt into telegraph poles; the last fragment of a corrugated plastic sign nailed to another pole; makeshift foam buffers taped to a garage door to protect exiting cars; fences made from all manner of materials. The ground beneath our feet in the alley was also quite uneven, a patchwork of materials full of bumps, abrasions and potholes, suggesting other urban souls under our soles... . We invited participants to investigate the surfaces they saw, encouraging them to touch them in all kinds of ways: touching tentatively, and touching with intent; poking, patting, caressing, stroking, tapping, smacking, stomping, shuffling, brushing, pressing, hitting, scratching, pinching, slapping; with a heavy hand or a light touch...

It is striking how rarely we deliberately use our hands to explore the city. There is a great taboo against touching out-of-doors urban objects with our hands, even though it's so easy to wash them afterwards. While some



participants eagerly poked their fingers into loose mortar and picked at peeling paint, others kept their hands in their pockets. Even though post-industrial cities are probably the cleanest they have ever been, it's hard to shake off the feeling, compounded by centuries of anti-urban, pro-rural or pro-'nature' writing and public health and hygiene campaigns, that the city is deeply and permanently dirty.

This, then, was participants' chance to get up close and personal, to get intimate with the skins of the city. We suggested that as participants explored the alley's skin, they could also think about the stories under the surfaces. They could find a crack, a scratch or a smoothness, a juxtaposition or an impression



and then imagine how it got there, or why it was that why (an accident? availability of materials? weather?). As we went through the alleyway, we shared some of these detected or imagined stories. A section of glass bricks in a garage reminded one participant of old Montréal taverns: the bricks let in the light, but still hide whoever is inside; they also look as if they would be wavy and uneven to the touch but they are in fact absolutely smooth even planes. Another person interpreted contrasts in materials as signalling social contrasts: clearly, some residents had the means to renovate and repair their buildings, while others did not. Indeed, one of the things that made this alley such a rich patchwork of surface sensations was that it seemed to be such a social mosaic, with cheap 1960s apartment buildings cheek by jowl with expensively renovated old stone homes.

As luck would have it, towards the end of the alleyway we passed a man using an electric hand-tool to sand out the old pointing from the brick wall of an apartment building. We must have looked like an odd bunch coming through the alley, and he was as curious about what we were doing as he was about us. His dusty, noisy work was a reminder of how it is human labour that congeals into the surfaces of the city

We gathered at the end of the alleyway to discuss what we had touched – or what had touched us. It quickly became apparent that this city's skin called up memories of other cities participants had known. We had a very international crowd of participants, many of whom had lived in other cities and other countries, and they were comparing what they felt here to what they felt there. One woman remarked that whereas this alley had a very diverse range of surfaces, she remembered the surfaces of Beirut as mainly being concrete. A man recalled the different set of surfaces found in Tokyo. So, different cities have different skins. And we can never claim an 'objective' touch of the city; rather, it is as if we are always touching the city through a filter of our urban experiences elsewhere.



Second layer: Flows and disruptions – moving through the city

Under the seeming disorder of the old city, wherever the old city is working successfully, is a marvelous order for maintaining the safety of the streets and the freedom of the city. It is a complex order. Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance – not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off en masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and

ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. The ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations.

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*

The next stage of the tour changed the focus of sensory experience, from the city as body to bodies in the city. At busy times on a commercial street like Rue Sainte-Catherine, an ‘intricate street ballet’, as Jane Jacobs called it, is always unfolding in the rhythms of people’s movements through the city and their relation to other people’s bodies as they move. Somehow, people manage to pass each other often very closely, but without touching, and without bumping into each other. We stopped on Sainte-Catherine at the corner of Saint-Marc to describe this dance, drawing everyone’s attention to the close and largely subconscious coordination that it requires. Lynn Lofland, a keen observer of urban public life, calls this ‘cooperative motility,’ more descriptive but less lyrical than Jacobs’s ‘sidewalk ballet.’ We invited participants to make their way along the sidewalk through the crowd to the next corner west, paying particular attention to how we move and weave past other people, rubbing shoulders with other bodies, almost touching, but – usually – not quite. (What chaos might be triggered if they did touch?) If they were feeling brave, they could try disrupting the rhythms of the sidewalk ballet, by playing with going faster or slower than the people around them to see what would happen.



Sometimes, the flow gets disrupted. People stop to talk, to text, to window shop, to coordinate a tricky food-to-mouth journey, to point out unusual sights and signs or anomalous beings like small children and animals. Yet still we navigate, and the flow does not come to a grinding halt. So perhaps it is better to speak of interruptions than disruptions. Ironically, we discussed this while interrupting the flow ourselves, gathered in a circle on a broad street corner. One man voiced his impatience with people who move at a much slower pace than he does. Another said that the sidewalk ballet wasn’t always a fluid coordination: in his experience, it often involved a tacit competition as passersby jostled to see who would give way to the other first. So the flows of the bodies in the city can feel like so many confrontations, too.

Urban rhythms can also be interrupted by changes in the material of the city – the momentary confusion as our feet strike a new surface (concrete to cobblestones), a sudden gradient, or an obstacle such as uneven paving, a stone or chunk of concrete, a tree enclosed in its little square of mud or ring of metal, or a pothole. Some cities smooth these obstacles over more than others, putting up ‘health and safety’ barriers at the slightest sign of construction work. Others leave you to navigate deep holes in the road and piles of brick at your own risk. It seemed appropriate to be discussing the weaknesses of concrete and tarmac in a city infamous for its shady construction history. But one participant said that when she came back to Montréal, where she had once but no longer lived, she didn’t sense the grime and crime and grunge of the city. Instead, her urban landscape was riddled with memories of the personal experiences, relationships and emotions the city gave her. The city touched her, and now she touches it through a veil of nostalgia.

Third layer: In our own skins

...in the skin, through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border. Contingency means mutual touching: world and body meet and caress in the skin. I do not like to speak of the place where my body exists as a milieu, preferring rather to say that things mingle among themselves and that I am no exception to this, that I mingle with the world which mingles itself in me. The skin intervenes in the things of the world and brings about their mingling.

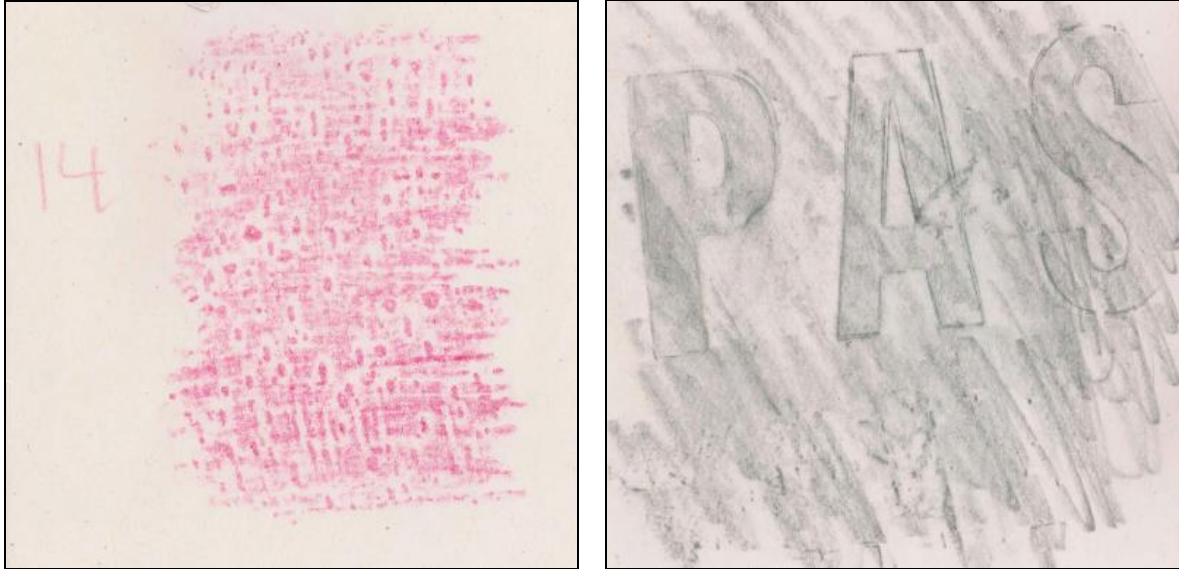
Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*

The last layer of the tour turned the focus back to what we feel through our own skins, through which we can usually sense things like temperature, shade or sun, dampness or dryness, wind or shelter. Think of the delightful sensation of cycling into a park in the height of a Montréal summer: the air temperature falls a couple of degrees, and the cool shade is almost palpable. It is as if the park is breathing. There are other places where we suddenly sense the breath of the city on our skin. In this tour, we played with this sensation just briefly, ducking into a mall, the Faubourg Sainte-Catherine, to feel a rush of hot air in the vestibule. This entrance let us feel contrasts between indoors/outdoors, warm/cold, dry/dampish, and shaded/sunny, some of which were subtler than others.

The built environment affects the city's 'breath' enormously, in ways that often seem to be unanticipated by architects and designers. Participants brought up the familiar design flaw of the Montréal métro, its double doors pivoting around a central axis, which create a very heavy resistance of air that is hard to handle for anyone feeling less than muscular. The city can expose us or protect us. In some streets we are bowled along wind tunnels; in others, we are sheltered from the wind. The architecture of the city can take us under its wing or throw us out into the elements. Some city-dwellers have to be attuned to taking cover, whether they are smokers trying to light cigarettes out of the wind, or people who have to find adequate shelter to sleep in the streets. These are examples of how architecture can enact a certain social ordering. Different material configurations have different 'affordances' – they let us, or sometimes make us, do different things or use our body in different ways with or against the urban landscape. These affordances interact with your internal state (how you are feeling) and external activities (what you are doing), setting up a dialogue between two skins, if you like. So, a sudden outside-to-inside temperature change will be exacerbated by exertion.

A building's skin doesn't always tell us much about its insides. The exterior and interiors of buildings are always changing due to construction, renovations, and rebel interventions such as graffiti and vandalism. Sometimes what's on the outside is reflected on the inside, as with newly constructed buildings or abject, boarded-up stores. But perhaps the most interesting experience is when the outside does not inform the inside. Going in, our expectations are confounded, and we suddenly feel the gap open up between the outsider's and insider's perspectives. There has been a great deal of change in the streetscape along Rue Sainte-Catherine near the CCA, as buildings are closed, renovated, demolished, rebuilt, reopened at almost dizzying speed. All these amputations, prosthetics, tattoos and piercings, reconstructive and cosmetic surgeries turn the city into someone we barely recognize any more... until both the city and we ourselves get comfortable in our own skins – *bien dans notre peau* – once again.

Rubbing down



Outside the Faubourg Sainte-Catherine, we introduced a last activity to draw the tour to a close. We handed out small booklets of newsprint, crayons and pencils, and a sheet of instructions to ‘Make a rubbing of three of the following surfaces, or more if you want... If you have a camera on your phone, you might like to take a photo as well as make a rubbing.’ A list of twenty descriptions of surfaces followed,⁴ and participants set about making rubbings as they made their way back to the CCA, where we collected the booklets (two examples are shown here), along with participants’ email addresses, if they wanted to find out what we would do with their booklets (we’re not sure what, yet...). The materials we used need to be tested and adapted for tough city textures. We could have used stronger paper, and perhaps conté or charcoal instead of pencils and crayons. With the materials we had to hand, the textures are hard to distinguish, and most are not labelled with the number of their inspiration. But some are quite beautiful, and people seemed to enjoy making them.

Afterthoughts

Largely thanks to the interest and goodwill of participants, not to mention the excellent weather, this inaugural touchwalk was a great success. The variety of themes worked well together, although we had a lot of activities for the time allotted and could easily have shed the second or third layer and still had a rich and touching experience.

⁴ 1) This is a surface that reminds me of my childhood. 2) This is a surface that speaks to me. 3) This is a surface that I didn’t expect. 4) This surface is like a mother to me. 5) This is a surface that supports people. 6) This is a surface to play with. 7) This surface needs a shave. 8) This surface is young at heart. 9) This is a surface is for sleeping. 10) This is a surface is for exploring. 11) This surface reminds me of my childhood. 12) This surface is like the skin of my lover. 13) This surface is the road after the first winter thaw. 14) This surface is welcoming. 15) This is a living surface. 16) The surface of my skin in cold temperatures. 17) This surface is my skin after a hot shower. 18) This surface is trying hard. 19) This surface has aged well. 20) This surface is telling me to stay away.

As leaders of the walk, we regretted not building in more time to find out who the participants were. Some of the best moments of discovery for us were in the casual conversations we had as we moved from one layer of the walk to another. Our group was an enthusiastic, generous and forthcoming bunch with plenty of tales of the city to share, and it would have been nice to tailor our approach to suit this group. A group walk gives the opportunity to generate conversation, as well as content.

We got some useful feedback for improving the walk. One suggestion was that each participant could keep in mind the word he or she pulled out in the introductory 'Say Hello' exercise, seeking out that texture in particular as they went along the touchwalk. If they had smartphones, they could take photos of those surfaces. So if someone picked the word 'fuzzy' out of the bag, throughout the walk images of 'fuzzy surfaces' could be collected and shown back to the rest of the group at the end of the walk. Also, a general collection of interesting surfaces could be photographed during the walk and shared with the group for a final discussion. Another idea was to be more explicit about the emotions that surfaces inspire. These suggestions underline the relevance of 'translating' the senses from one form to another when we want to pay particular attention to them – touch to sight (images), touch to affect (feelings), touch to audio (words). To fully appreciate one sense, it often has to be transmuted into other senses.

We are often too keen to reform the surfaces of the city, demanding that all rough edges be smoothed over and all damage repaired. But what would Montréal be without its cracks and crinkles, its potholes and wrinkles? In a lot of ways, it is in the gentle decay of the city that we find its character. In the quest to tighten and lift the sagging skins of the city, we risk losing that sense of distinctive character. Of course, there is a tension between letting the city keep its craggy or crumbly character, and making it just too difficult to navigate: at some point, uneven surfaces become dangerous and make the city inaccessible. But a diverse sensory landscape of touch also gives us another way to apprehend the social diversity of the city. *SKIN: Surfaces of the City* gave us and our touchwalking participants a new experience of what the streets and strangers of the city offer up.

Photos taken by Martha Radice during preparation for the touchwalk, March 29, 2013.

Rubbings by two anonymous participants.

PART II – TOURING TASTE: Intersections of Tongues, Temperament, Terroir, and Taters

David Szanto¹

In designing the Taste Tour for the Sensory City Workshop at the CCA, my intention was to explore a number of questions, including the material and discursive framings that come to establish themselves around such apparently simple notions as *taste* and *place*. The issue of *touring* also became relevant when thinking about probing the subtleties of the sensorium, given that it muddles the self/other duality and also poses ethical challenges tied to colonialistic histories of ‘going out into the exotic.’ In the larger project of my work in and on the (nascent) field of gastronomy, I propose that food phenomena—including taste—are emergent, rather than pre-given. It seems useful, therefore, to let go of objectivist interpretations of things like taste and place, and to spend a little more time just seeing what happens. All this to say: my Taste Tour was an experiment. It was aimed at playful experience and thoughtful observation, quite far from the analytics of ‘scientific’ practice or any attempt to isolate senses and predict individual responses.



Taste, as a sense, is conventionally framed as taking place on the tongue, with ‘the basic tastes’ understood as sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. In the last decade or so, the Japanese notion of *umami* has crept into Western discourse and been named the ‘fifth taste’, while in 2005, a team of French scientists² named *fat* as a sixth. Yet non-European food cultures also consider *acid* and *pungent* to be among the basic tastes (among others), and a whole range of textural and other mouthfeel experiences contribute to what we describe when food enters the oral cavity. These include heat and cold, as well as the trigeminal sensations of astringency, piquancy, and metallicness. What is more—and as anyone with a cold will tell you—the sense of smell is intimately linked to our perceptions of taste. Odours enter the olfactory system through the throat and the palate, but also of course via the nose, and so tasting might be said to initiate significantly before opening our mouths. So too do sight, touch, and even hearing precede taste, and each with their own combinatory effects. As recent research has shown—across fields as disparate as psychology, French history, and food marketing³—text and its symbolic representations

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² From l’École Nationale Supérieure de Biologie Appliquée à la Nutrition et à l’Alimentation and the Centre Européen des Sciences du Goût.

³ See discussions of synesthesia in Belkin, K. et al. 1997. “Auditory Pitch as a Perceptual Analogue to Odor Quality.” *Psychological Science* 8 (4) and Gilbert, A. et al. 1996. “Cross-Modal Correspondence Between Vision and Olfaction: The Color of Smells.” *The American Journal of Psychology* 109 (3). Additionally, Chandon and Wansink demonstrate the effects on food choices and taste perception that pre-consumption text can engender (in Chandon, P. and B. Wansink. 2011. *Is Food Marketing Making Us Fat?* Hanover, MA: Now Publishers and in Wansink, B. et al. 2005.

of meaning become interwoven with taste, long before any food may even have been prepared. How then can we extricate taste from what might be called the *ecology of the mouth*? And perhaps more importantly, should we?

In a similar vein, the ‘sense’ of place can be considered not as immanent, but produced by a dynamic system of interactions, between both material elements and those more abstract. Social theorist Michel de Certeau has linked physical environments and their ‘placeness’ through the element of *practice*—that is, milieus become lively and perceptually interesting when something is enacted within them.⁴ Like taste, then, place might be viewed as an ecology of actors (both living and non-living) that come to produce effects—effects that are then perceived as stable and definite rather than temporally variable.

Taste and place come together within the notion of *terroir*, a construct rooted in the histories of French winemaking, but one that has recently spread to a variety of regions and food products.⁵ Linking the physical properties of a food-production environment (its topology, climate, and geology) with human practices (their traditions, tools, and recipes), terroir must necessarily be viewed as an ecology itself—a coming together of things that are both material and processual, as well as human and non. The “the taste of place”⁶ thus becomes a performative effect, rather than a quantifiable and predictable result. Indeed, as some authors have pointed out, terroir is likely far more malleable and fluid than many food marketers would readily admit. Somewhat ineffable, and with a genesis linked to protectionist marketing efforts, it plays multidirectionally, both *producing* local taste as well as *being produced by* the collective tastes of a locale.⁷

It was with this swirl of parameters in mind that I approached the prospect of designing a taste-related walkabout in the vicinity of the Canadian Centre for Architecture. Situated in a part of the city that is both central and yet oddly *between*, and with a mandate to examine and present the stabilities and ephemerality of the built environment, the CCA’s placeness is enigmatic. What would its taste-of-place therefore be? Would such a terroir be an amalgam of those of the more definable neighbourhoods that surround it? Or might it, like certain parcels of land in established grape-growing regions, have a distinctive quality that—for reasons multiple—represents a break from expectations? And, because taste moves within spaces both objective and subjective, how would a group of gustation tourists variably perceive or produce that terroir? It became evident that a pseudo-non-scientific ecological food experiment was in order.

“How Descriptive Food Names Bias Sensory Perceptions in Restaurants.” *Food Quality and Preference* 16 (5) (July): 393–400.) Similarly, Viktoria von Hoffmann discusses the entwined nature of rhetoric and taste, and the performative nature of language, in her work on the history of taste in France (Von Hoffmann, V. 2012. “The Rise of Taste and the Rhetoric of Celebration.” In *Celebration: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2011*. Prospect Books.)

⁴ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell, Berkeley: UC Press, 1984. Note that de Certeau’s statement, is that “space is a practiced place” (117), and so my rendering therefore transposes his *space* and *place* (or *espace* and *lieu* in his original French). For this writing, however, I use “place” as the activated physical environment.

⁵ Including such divergent foods as Vermont cheeses, Italian honeys, québécois maple syrup, and Japanese wasabi.

⁶ Trubek, Amy B. 2008. *The Taste of Place*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁷ Heath, Deborah, and Anne Meneley. 2007. “Techne, Technoscience, and the Circulation of Comestible Commodities: An Introduction.” *American Anthropologist* 109 (4) (December): 593–602.

With the 1978 publication of a lecture series given two decades earlier, John Langshaw Austin introduced a wide audience to his concept of the *performative speech act*.⁸ Such an act comprises a discursive utterance made in the context of a set of felicity conditions so as to produce an effect in the world. (A common example is that of a religious leader pronouncing two people as wed during a marriage ceremony.) Drawing on this model for my CCA tour, I chose to set up a number of what might be called *performative taste acts*. Rather than things coming out of the mouth within felicitous contexts, I would make it possible for things to go into the mouth, namely a number of potato-based foods. A discussion of what they ‘tasted’ like might then help us view how the spaces around us contributed (happily or unhappily) to the sensory experience.

Gazing virtually upon the CCA from the elevations of Google Maps, it appears at a kind of crossroads.⁹ To the west lies the Town of Westmount; to the north, the Concordia student ghetto; to the east—suspending geographical strictness for a moment—Griffintown; and to the south, the neighbourhoods of Saint-Henri, Pointe-Saint-Charles, and Verdun. I chose these four urban divisions as my terroir-testing grounds, and proceeded to identify appropriate foods that might¹⁰ effectively represent their tasty placeness. Myriad possibilities emerged, yet within the ecology of this tour, a number of key actors became limiters: budget, portability, reheating equipment, serving logistics, and food preferences and intolerances. For variety, simplicity, and accessibility, I opted for the potato as primary ingredient, a common point of departure into gastronomic exploration. As was pointed out both during and after the tour, the potato is both neutral and contentious, with a series of histories that link it to migration, biodiversity, power structures, economic imbalances, culinary propaganda, and other significant questions.¹¹ Rather than shy away from this foodish baggage, I engaged with it, welcoming all those awareneses (or lack thereof) into the cognitive and pre-cognitive mix that I believed would come to produce the ‘taste’ of each food in the perceptions of the tour participants. The menu, then, was as follows:

Standing on exposed dirt, under trees, in the sun, near a park bench, glancing toward the easternmost edge of Westmount (NE corner of Tupper and Atwater); eaten from Ziploc® SmartSnap™ containers using potato-starch biodegradable forks; one participant abstaining, allergic to milk products; peeled,

⁸ Austin, John Langshaw. 1978. *How to Do Things with Words*. Harvard University Press. Along with other writings, this work contributed to the now widely examined field of performativity theory and distributed agency, an important influence on my framing of gastronomy.

⁹ Following the tour, I learned that the CCA sits in what is known as Shaughnessy Village, bounded by Guy, Atwater, and Sherbrooke Streets and the Ville-Marie Expressway. (See “Shaughnessy Village” in *Wikipedia*. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Shaughnessy_Village&oldid=545720150. Referenced 4/10/13.)

¹⁰ Here I fully acknowledge that the foods I selected and then prepared are subjective interpretations of these neighbourhoods, based on partial knowledge and a desire to express place through abstractions and symbolic representations, as well as historical references. Critics of this approach might consider that ‘more rigorous’ research would likely be dependent on printed documents and/or oral accounts, which are themselves most usually produced by individuals. Despite those humans’ no-doubt honorable intentions to produce objective and clear-eyed records, they must nonetheless be construed as incorporating a degree of subjectivity. I therefore claim the right, in my accounting of various montréalais terroirs, to also be viewed as both honorable and subjective, and to have my recipes be considered thoughtfully, subject to both credulity and criticality.

¹¹ Including potatoes’ origins in South America, their transport to Europe, the post-industrial reduction in commonly grown varieties, the resistances to eating potatoes by the working classes until adopted and promoted by the French royal court, the blight in Ireland, their use as filling and inexpensive sustenance, etc.

boiled, riced, and mashed Yukon Gold potatoes, with lotsa butter, chives, 2% milkfat yogurt, salt, Tellicherry black pepper, and nutmeg grated with a Microplane®; reheated for 45 seconds on high in the CCA staff kitchen's three microwave ovens.

Straddling a gravelly sidewalk, in the shade, blocking pedestrians, just off Ste-Catherine in the Concordia Student Ghetto (NW corner of St-Marc); poured from a brown-paper-bag-sheathed glass bottle into plastic cups; a thin soup of new potatoes and plain vegetable broth, immersion-blended and seasoned with sriracha, hoi sin, and chopped cilantro; served at backpack temperature while cars drove by and a street person yelled something.

Under the sodium lights of the St-Marc tunnel, midway so the exit wasn't visible; cars moving at their top tunnel speed, drivers occasionally glancing at a group of taste tourists not speaking but chewing in silence; plain steamed *rattes* (québécois fingerling potatoes), drawn from a President's Choice® Double Zipper Large Heavy Duty freezer bag; still slightly warm on the inside

[Close to] the same potatoes, a few minutes later, in a sunny patch near the ventilation tower of the Georges-Vanier métro station.

Grouped in the alleyway between boulevard Georges-Vanier and rue Dominion (actually avenue Blanchard), under the sun again, staring at the melting snow water going down sewer grates, avoiding a single car with occupants staring nervously; three varieties of potato chip: plain Lays®, rippled President's Choice® World of Flavours™ Buffalo Wing and Blue Cheese (flavoured), and Miss Vickie's® Balsamic Vinegar & Sweet Onion (flavoured); large handfuls and single chips taken from three unlabelled President's Choice® Double Zipper Large Heavy Duty freezer bags.

[Close to] the same chips (mostly crumbs), a few minutes later, halfway up the du Fort tunnel, light coming in from both ends, many passersby; empty mylar chip bags on the ground and an increasing urgency to get back to the CCA for our 4:30 pm end time.

In each of our terroir-testing grounds, I discussed the location briefly, and we tasted the food.¹² I gave my reasoning for the links between tastes and places, and prompted others to describe what they were tasting, to comment on what they were sensing otherwise, and to explore the environments around them as well as the combinatory effects of the stimuli both inside their mouths and elsewhere.

Westmount, I proposed, is historically anglophone yet with a contemporary mix of anglo-, franco-, and allo- that continues to evolve as the city absorbs new arrivals and ongoing socioeconomic and geographic migrations occur. A throughline of wealth, however, characterizes the place, as well as a feeling of home—hence a dish that incorporates domestic-food qualities as well as costly ingredients like good butter and expensive spices. Mashed potatoes have an important place on the British dinner table, but also appear in French country cooking—a precursor of québécoise cuisine. So too are they common in many of the European cultures that also now make up the Westmount demographic mix.

¹² Each participant had previously signed a release of liability form, indemnifying both myself and the CCA and drawing attention to the low-but-ever-present risk of ingesting food. Participants agreed to alert me to any existing food allergies, intolerances, or preferences, and I in turn explained, prior to tasting, the ingredients in each sample. One participant signed the form without reading it and later complained that I had not read it aloud to him; one participant failed to tell me about her dairy allergy; a number of participants found the buffalo-wing chips too spicy and/or disgusting. Participant Liability Forms, downloaded from the internet and modified by event organizers, typically have little or no legal value.

In the Concordia Student Ghetto, inexpensive food dominates, including a preponderance of Asian cuisine, notably *phó*. My terroirist take for this area: a thin soup made from potatoes, cheap vegetable broth, and highly flavored but low-cost condiments—and then drunk quickly on a street corner from disposable cups. The intent was also to show both similarity to and divergence from the Westmount mash: flecks of green, a lot of flavour, and a smooth potato texture characterize the two, yet one is ‘rich’ and one is ‘poor’.

For the Griffintown taste of place, I picked the humble steamed potato, yet a variety for which one pays a premium price (four dollars for a single *chopine*, holding a scant dozen spuds). Founded as a working-class Irish neighbourhood, Griffintown now counts barely 50 long-time residents, increasingly surrounded by new high-rise constructions and old factories being converted into loft condominiums. While the Ireland-and-potato connection is evident, the priceyness of the *rattes* manifests the area’s current-day gentrification. Eaten in verbal silence but overwhelmed by the bone-chilling tunnel, glaring yellow-orange light, and compounded blare of car tires and engines, the taste of the potatoes was meant to be . . . what? Soothing? Intense? Repressed? Under the sun again, and in the relative calm of the métro plaza, we were no longer huddled together as a tight group. Now we were in other people’s ways as they crossed the space to and from the station doors. Was it more or less comfortable to taste the taters outside?

Finally, in the back street of Saint-Henri that nonetheless has the front doors of homes facing onto it, we munched on a variety of potato chips. The neighbourhood is often considered lower-income, overshadowed by wealthy Westmount and not-so-distant Downtown. The Ville-Marie Expressway has cut it off from the rest of the city (but not really, after all—we wandered down from there in a matter of minutes), and the fresh food options seem meagre. Is it a food desert?¹³ In some parts, perhaps, but a short walk from where we toured stands a giant Super C grocery store, a high-end SAQ, and the whole of the Atwater Market. This fourth urban place, like the chips, is diverse in both taste and economic capacity; its terroir is simultaneously *dépanneur*, industrial, and gourmet.

In each place, a range of actors participated in what we perceived as taste. Of the material variety were the food I made and the built and natural environments from which and in which we ate; material as well were the human hands and mouths and palates and other sensory organs. The gestures of serving, sharing, eating, passing, collecting (enactments of agency or agents themselves?) produced invitations to other action as well as affective and emotional responses (much as the food did itself). My narratives about taste and terroir, my description of the processes of tour design, our verbal articulations of maps and their symbolic representations—all of these formed an audible and agential discourse in the moment. Silent but perhaps even louder in our heads were the personal histories and habituses that each of us brought to the tour—those experiences that enabled us to “precognize” the potential phenomena that every situation was capable of producing.¹⁴ Within and because of this assemblage, I witnessed taste coming to be performed as all performances are: differently for each participant and, in

¹³ Generally defined as an area where access to fresh food is more than 500 metres away and therefore farther than is feasible for individuals with limited mobility. Food deserts are generally studded with *dépanneurs* where the available food is highly processed or, if not, then not so very fresh. Counter-intuitively, many parts of Old Montreal are high-income food deserts.

¹⁴ Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

my analysis, because each participant occupied a different ecology of taste, a unique intersection of the material, the discursive, and the processual.

Did the mashed potatoes taste of home, of richness, of Westmount? *Not my home*, some said, but an imagined home where food is flavourful and made with care. *Home, perhaps, but not Westmount*, said another person. *Westmount's terroir is English, and mashed potatoes are francophone fare—poor food for poor people. There's nothing Westmount about that.*

What about the thin potato soup? *This is elegant, served to me from a bottle and drunk from a cup—like a beverage, not a soup.* A potato smoothie! one person suggested, healthful and quick, but not fast food. Whereas the terroir of warmed mashed potatoes eaten from shared containers using a utensil was clouded by our standing in a mangy park and exposed on four sides, hovering by the painted stone wall of a magazine shop was more exotic, and therefore perhaps more . . . elegant? Nonetheless, some tasters found the street noise challenging to the senses, diminishing their capacity to taste and interpret the soup.

Upon emerging from the St-Marc tunnel and tasting a second *ratte*, the flavour was deemed different by one tourist: *It's sweeter than the first one* (eaten in the sodium-lit gloom). Another person said he tasted no difference, but was happier to be eating outside, rather than in. One woman suggested that by not talking in the tunnel, she was better able to sense the texture of the potato, and also to contrast it to the sensory textures of the tunnel space itself. And, while less related to taste, a final comment was that it felt better to eat the potato in the tunnel, in the relatively protected community of the group, rather than out in the open, exposed to the comings and goings of the métro users.

We entered the alley-like street known as avenue Blanchard, just south of rue St-Antoine, and ate potato chips. The plain chips were visibly simpler—thinner, pale gold, flatter. The other two, however, were more dramatic in appearance—rippled and red or darker brown and with the typically folded thickness of “kettle-cooked” chips. While one participant commented that they carried the taste of childhood—a gang of kids standing around eating chips in the common space behind their houses—most people played guess-the-flavor. One woman immediately identified the plain Lays potato chips: *These are plain Lays potato chips.* (Are their taste and their name so coupled?) But the buffalo-wing flavour and vinegar-and-onion flavour were less evident. Spicy? Ketchup? Mustard? Not evident, that is, until I announced the flavours and all was then obvious in retrospect. *Oh...! Yeah, of course.* The taste became the taste when identified by and associated with language—prior to naming, the chips' oddly artificial flavours were just that.

The taste tour was aimed at prompting an engagement with the ways that both taste and place come to be perceived and named, yet its central question remained unanswered: What is, or would be, the terroir of the Canadian Centre for Architecture? Having returned to rue Baile, we stood at the west-side gate of the institution. In the context of taste and place, the building suddenly presented itself as an elegant, understated French château. A terribly subtle panel, mounted to the left of the gate, announces this place only as “CCA” (in a simple sans-serif font), while a sweeping drive brings visitors towards its geometric entry. Knowing that the building's lower floors descend deep into the ground, housing the Centre's impressive archives, we could imagine a series of architectural tastes acquiring depth, roundness, and perceived value through the long, slow processes of aging. Is the terroir of the CCA characterized by “mustiness,” as one tour participant proposed? Is it “architectural” or “linear,” according to others? Does it have its own unique qualities, or might a tongue of geologically distinct earth run under Shaughnessy Village, streaking silently east from Westmount, or creeping up the slope from Griffintown? And what of the human element of terroir—does language and gesture from Saint-

Henri or Concordia penetrate the CCA's spaces, or is it more insular, more unto itself? The terroir of the CCA remained, and remains, elusive.



Walking, as a methodology, is coming to be recognized as an effective way of attuning our senses to the world and producing knowledge through participatory and democratic processes. My event should perhaps only partially be characterized as a *walk*, then, for its directedness was not meant to leave a great deal of space for equanimity. Rather, it was designed to engender some thoughtful attention to place and taste, and to invite participants to tour their own selves, as well as the ways that the self is incorporated into the environments around it. Even more, it was a proposal to imagine a self-other *continuum*, and that our 'realities' are based not on clearly delimited senses, but through the combinatory effects of whole, indivisible systems. While it is undeniable that we have mouths and taste buds and histories and preferences, the explanation that these are independently responsible for producing finite and consistent sensations is, I believe, too causal and deterministic to leave unchallenged.

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