

WALKING, ONE SENSE AT A TIME

#smell by Iryna Zamuruieva

Iryna is an artist, arts activist, researcher and project manager, who has developed an urban walking experience project for the CBD neighbourhood. She has designed a series of walks that will encourage the participants to re-experience city in a playful way.

“The idea is based on the game I designed and played with people in Kiel, Germany - [Urban Nature Orientation Challenge](#) - where the participants had to navigate the city using 'natural' navigation (shadows, water, plants etc.) and afterwards had a discussion on human-nature dichotomy and urban planning. What I'm currently after is focusing on sensory ways to experience the city - smell, listen, touch, look at - and designing the routes for people to focus on each sensual way of paying attention in the city. After each walk I will host a participatory sensory mapping session and create an 'alternative map of Auckland' with the outcomes of all the walks.”

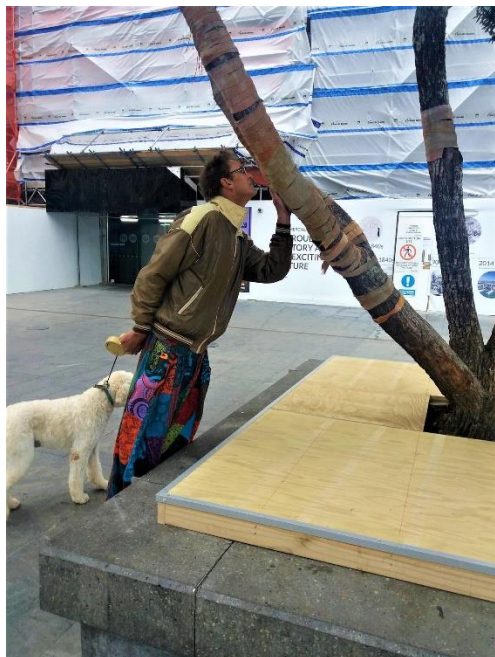
Humans and dogs came together to investigate the smells of Auckland city centre on June 2nd. If it was a competition probably dogs would've won but alas, we couldn't understand what they were trying to map.

Hence on to the humans: after a brief round of introductions and sharing favourite smells with each other, Myers park found itself full of diffused individuals with their maps and pens, sniffing and noting, wandering into all its corners.

Walking in the city may not appear to be the most exciting experience (especially when the walks in nature are a short drive or a ferry ride away): watching out for cars, waiting for the traffic lights, inhaling all the traffic exhaust fumes. All that, surely, paints one side of being in the city.



I would like to believe there is another way – a deeply attentive one, the one where the smells are sniffed, sounds heard, textures touched, and tastes are tasted. Walking this way transforms the city space from a transit zone where a route may be just a way from one destination to the other, into a place where a different kind of experience is co-created, different kind of relationships with material or abstract things are made and maybe even curious questions about the way things are emerge.



Take a burning trash bin, for example. We were very lucky that day to witness such an occasion on Queens Street. It was smoking 15 metres away from our 1st meeting point. By this time, people have somewhat adjusted to paying attention to smells, after learning to catch them in the past 15 minutes. The smoking trash bin therefore now presented an opportunity: tracking down the odour of smoldering plastic. Although another hour later, someone became slightly concerned: “What bad citizens we are, so immersed into this sniffing that we just let it smoke there without thinking maybe to call someone.” These was a lot of laughter and humour all along the smell-walking. During the 3rd stage, where people in groups or individually chose the topic of their interest to make a smell-portrait of, one of the pairs chose ‘ocean’ as their theme. Interestingly they did not make it down the waterfront to do the sniffing there but went into a luxury jewellery store and got the assistants to show them the pieces that contained pearls in them and sniffed those.

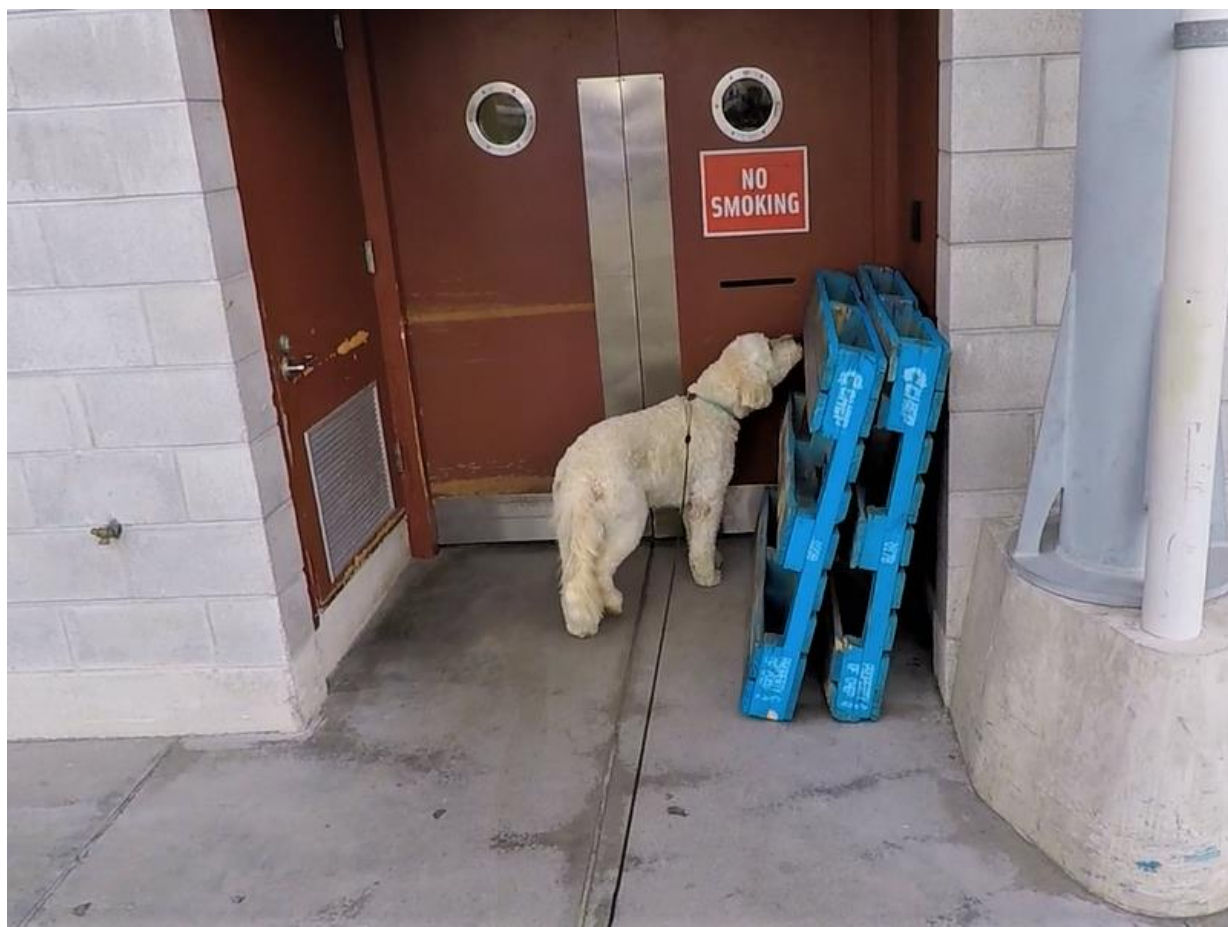
This smell-walk was part of the “Walking, one sense at a time” project series. In this series of creative city exploration, we focus on one specific sense per walk: smell, sound, visual, tactile, taste. Somewhere on the intersection of arts, research and community activating, the question we set off with at the start of the exploration was what changes when you try walking more attentively, making use of your senses?

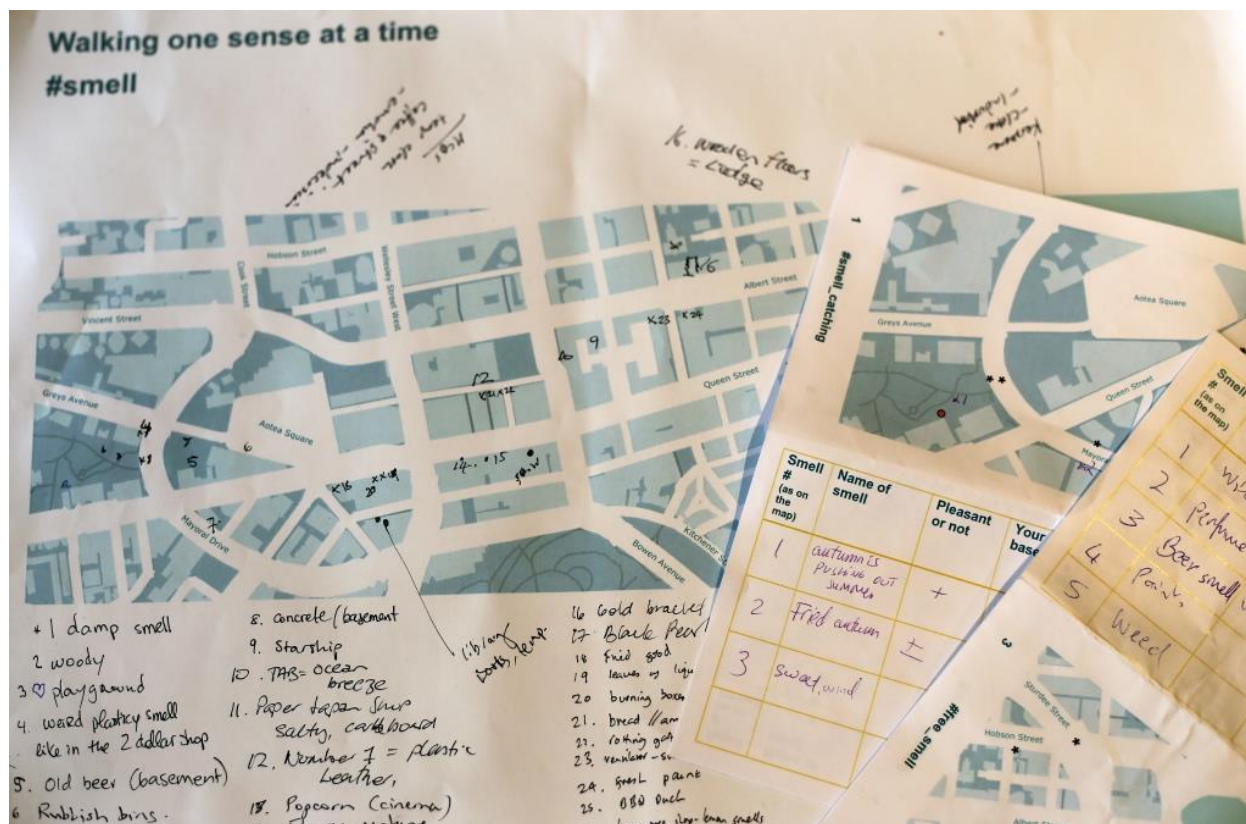
Beside reframing a burning trash bin as a rich source for smell investigation (surely legitimate and exciting occasion), a few things regarding broader topics have emerged. For one, the smell exploration has brought some axis to the table: as someone has mentioned that the dress hanging rack they stuck their nose into smelled like luxury – the question ‘can you smell expensive?’ followed immediately. While we did not find a definitive answer, speculating on whether it might smell like scented aroma candles at massage salons,

there must have been a difference between that and the “two-dollar shop smell” someone detected at one of the road intersections. What does cheap then smell like and what does it mean that in certain areas one or the other smell can be traced?

Understanding smells through the ‘money’ lens has evolved as someone mentioned one of the smells made them want to spend money. Ironically, when they set out to investigate whether the shops were luring their customers in with smells – it was disappointing – even bakeries didn’t have any bread aromas. Someone else observed how commercial cookie stores smell different from where they are baked from scratch, because of an overwhelming chocolatey sweet smell.

These seemingly innocent findings speak to a broader concern over homogenization of cities and the globalization processes. Behind the curtain of construction dust smell wafting from a numerous construction sites in the city center we may discern the smells that are no longer part of the Auckland’s smellscape. We were lucky to have some participants who have been living in Auckland for decades and witnessed its change sharing their memories of the extinct smells: the cloves and cinnamon from a factory around Wolfe Street, where they as students would hang around occasionally because it smelled so great, or the smell of vinegar - when everyone knew the exact day they were distilling it in the city center; the breweries with their yeasty touch.





Remembering the smells that are no longer in the Auckland's air was not an exercise in a nostalgic contemplation – rather an effort to be conscious of the processes of change in the city and how those processes may be understood better through say, smell sense. Detecting and keeping track of city smells is part of the small but growing practice in academia as well as some urban development communities. Kate McLean, for example, has created smell-maps of the cities around the world, using some comprehensive data visualization techniques (aggregating the data from her participatory research on the intensity, proximity, duration and personal associations that accompany the detected smells). Victoria Henshaw is another instance of a researcher taking olfactory experiences seriously attempting to see the bigger picture of urbanisation processes through them. Having written a book “Urban Smellscapes: Understanding and Designing Urban Smell Environments” she was primarily concerned with how an interrelationship between urban smell and place perception are determining sense of place. In designing this smell-walk, both McLean's and Henshaw's findings have proved to be incredibly insightful. What connects these creative ventures of smell researchers and enthusiasts, is the search for other ways of knowing the environment. This as a result creates a richer basis for decision making, not least the policy ones.

Discussing the smells also reveals the personal connections people hold with their environments and sharing those can be a way of a very meaningful exchange with the fellow walkers/neighbours. People brought up how the smell of fresh paint carries an 'I'm putting my life together now' meaning. They spoke of their childhood and homes. People talked of how for some the city smelled so unnaturally but how for others it was in this unnaturalness and the mixture of Asian food and cigarette smoke scents they felt at

home. Smell can be a way to connect with the fellow human beings, essentially. And in that joint process of discovery what smells mean to each of us we can create a common understanding of the streets we share.



Surely, our Saturday's walk was highly dependent on the weather (thanks wind for leaving at least some smells in the air!), the participants' personal backgrounds and experiences, the random chance of certain smell being there at the particular point in time, when one of us happened to be passing by and detecting it. Nevertheless, it was clear that having experienced this smell-attentive way of being in the city brought to the surface a few important topics: the cost of things in the places around us; the ways the things are being produced; the process of change in the city and the relationship between the personal stories and city histories. All those topics, if smelled carefully, are manifested in the city. Using our senses to dig in and discover them is an integral part of an ongoing attempt to understand the living processes surrounding us and co-create a just process of change.

This walk was designed and brought into being by [Iryna Zamuruieva](#) with a kind support of [Splice](#) team.

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