

EMPATHIC CITIES

A comprehensive guide to understanding the
relational means of designing enchanting places

"A story about
affects, atmospheres
and the reality
that we don't see"



The research was developed by Manuel Portela. The thesis title is “Geographies of Empathy: Affective Reconfigurations of Cities, Places & Objects” for the Joint Doctorate in GeoInformatics GEO-C Programme. 2015-2018. <http://geo-c.eu>.



This work was funded by the European Commission within the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (ITN-EJD). Grant Agreement num. 642332 - GEO-C - H2020-MSCA-ITN-2014.



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This work describes the contents of my thesis in a different way. It is a comic strip that pretends to communicate its findings in a way that non-academics and others forms of humans could appreciate it better.

Sometimes, concepts have complex stories to tell, and if we want to make them work in the world, we should ask ourselves “what does it look like?”.

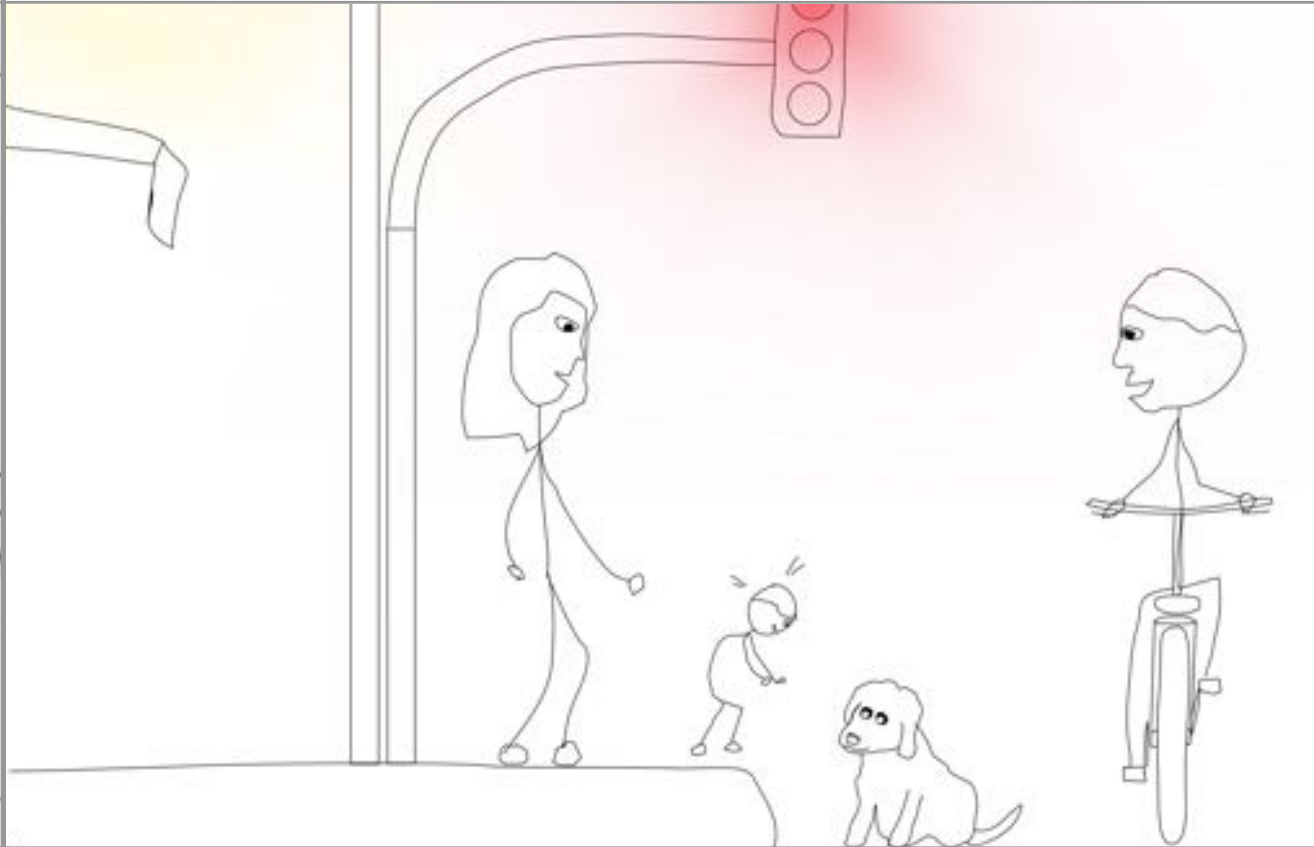
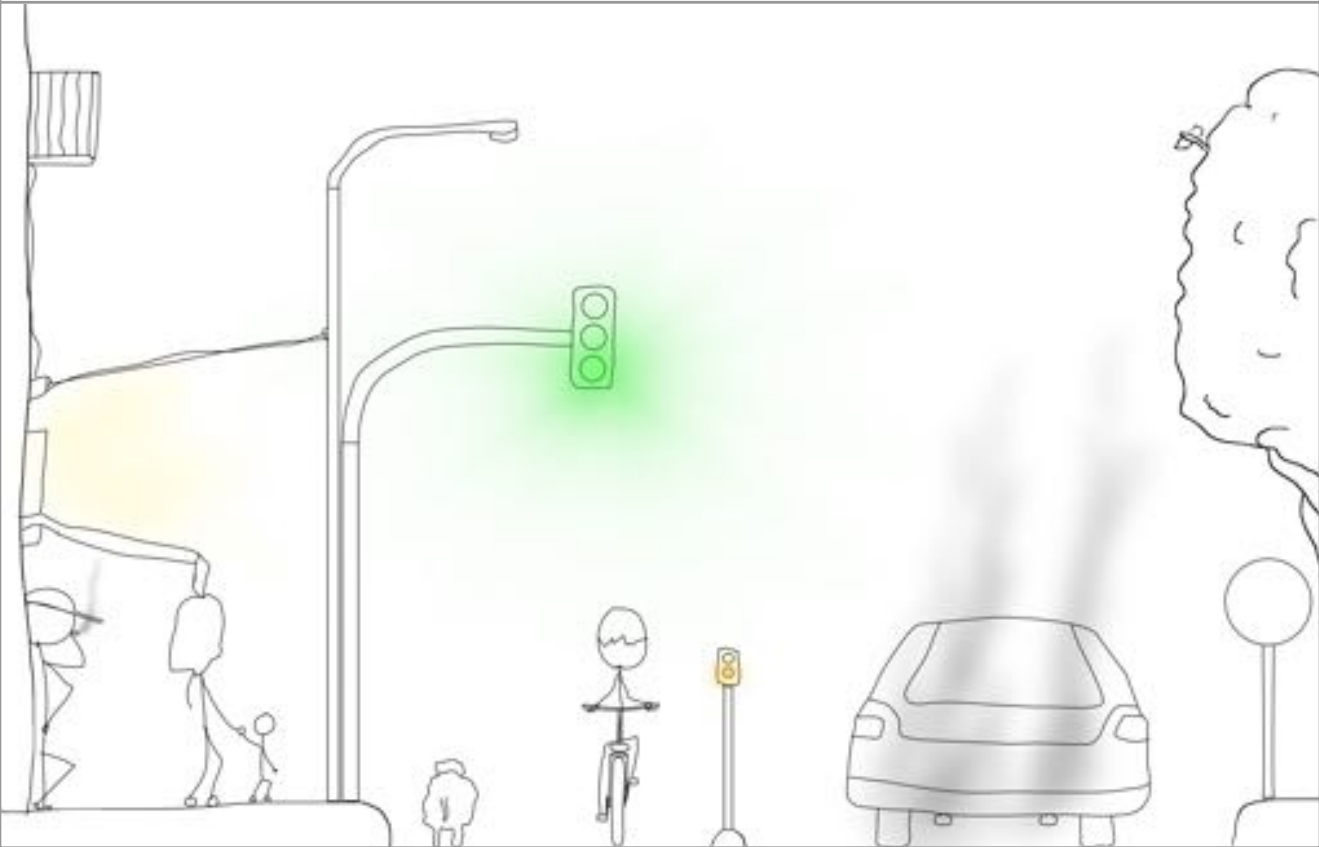
Designing for cities has direct ethico-political consequences that change our collective experience in subtle ways.

Empathy refers to how we live collectively our daily experiences.

How do our urban practices
are mediated by technology?

Life in cities is seen as complex and chaotic,

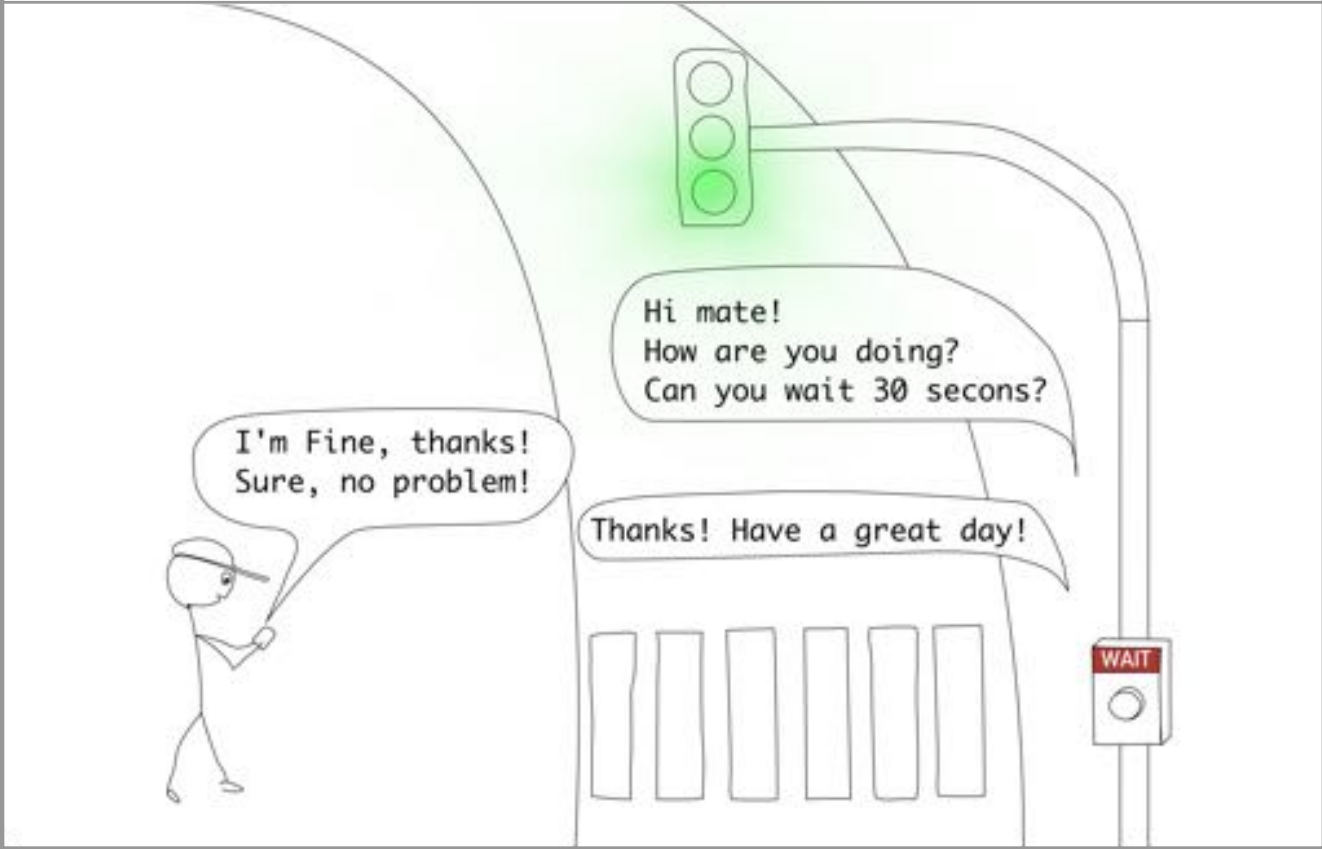
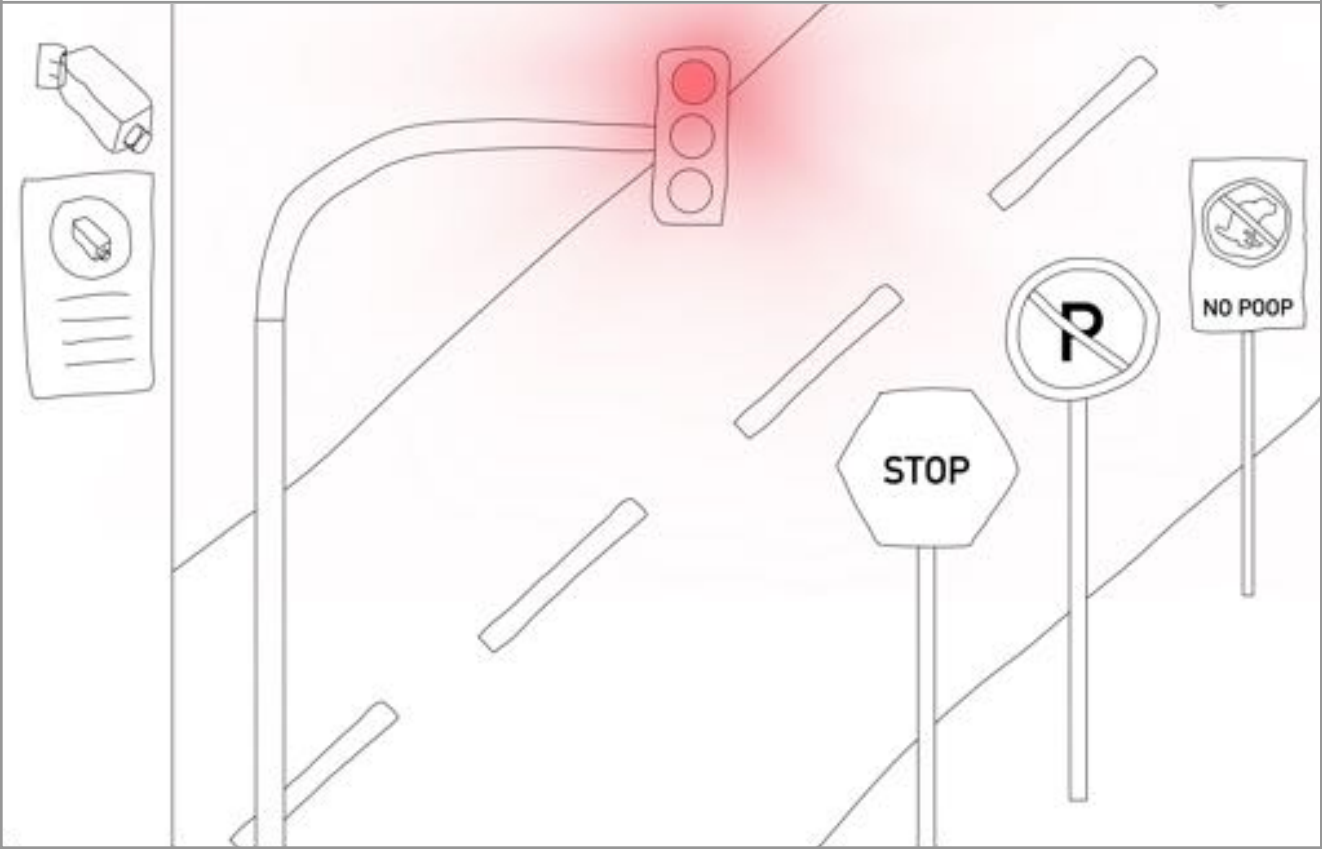
That complexity gives life to new experiences.



However, the introduction of technology can be seen as a form of
social control.

Even when technology can contribute to new rich processes of
liveliness.

Let me show you some examples...

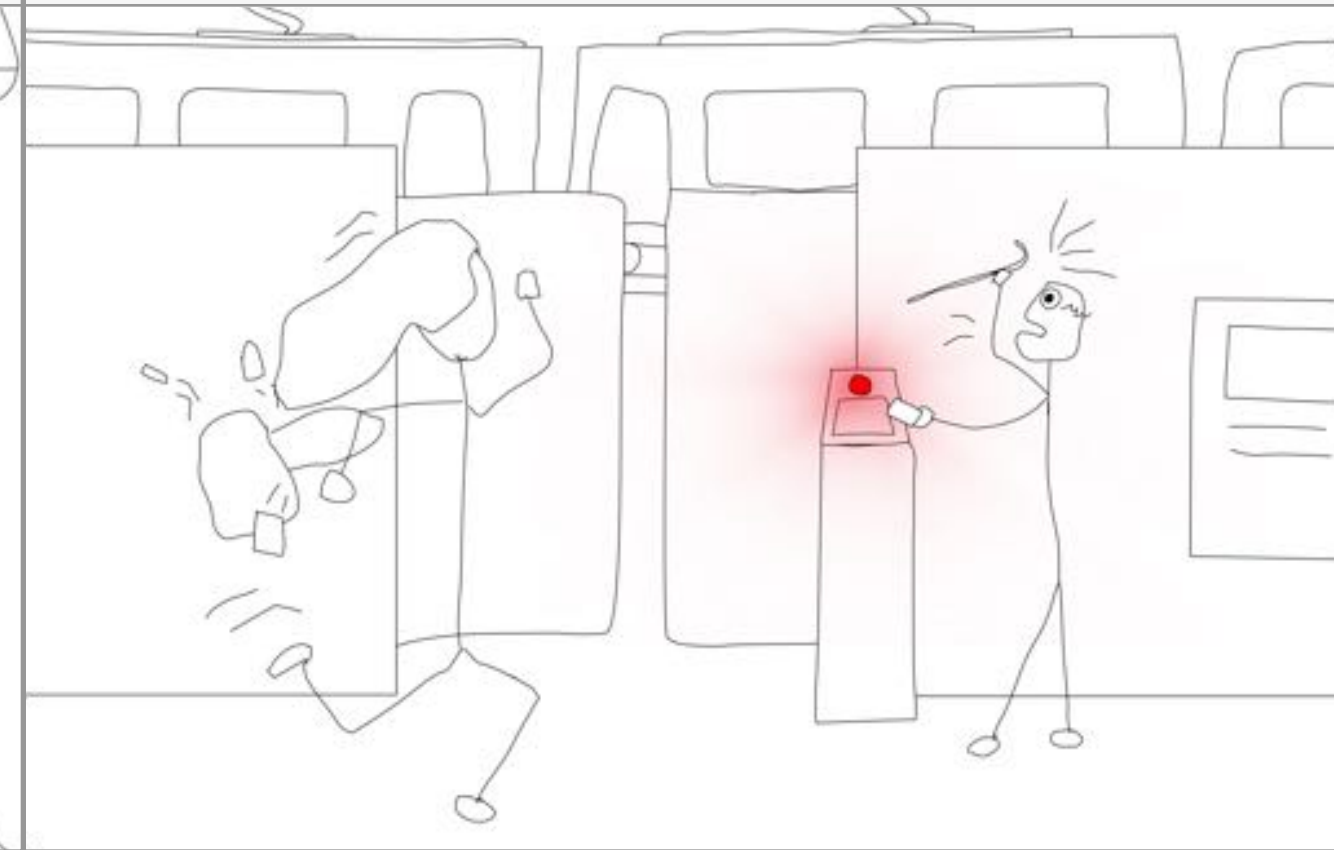


interactions

Smart technology promises to make interactions easier and smoother.



But sometimes, we experience frustration and rejection when interactions fail.



These failures create orderings that cause difficulties in our lives.

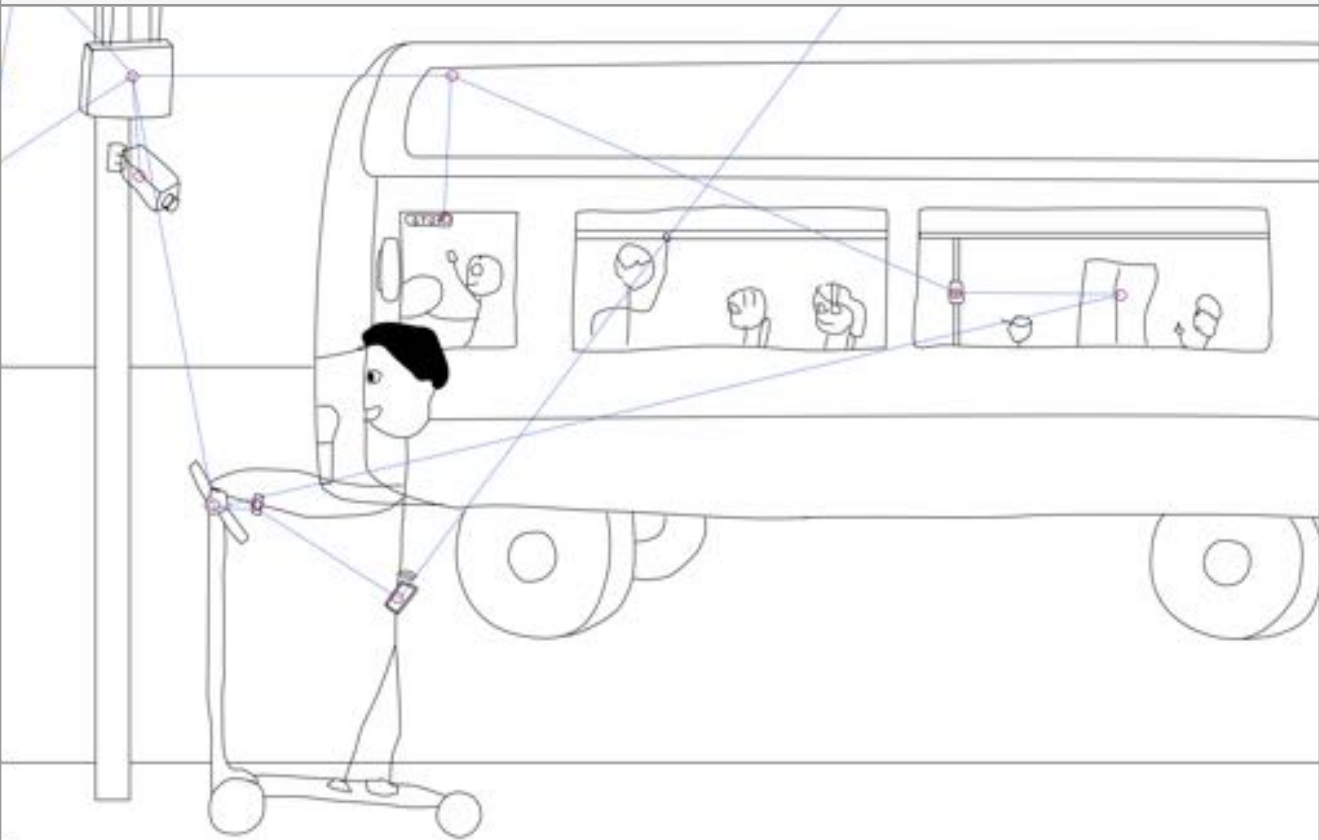


Structuring feelings of dispossession and exclusion.



We should understand interactions as lived experiences always in-mediated and in-information...

Stabilized technologies are invisible in our ordinary practices.

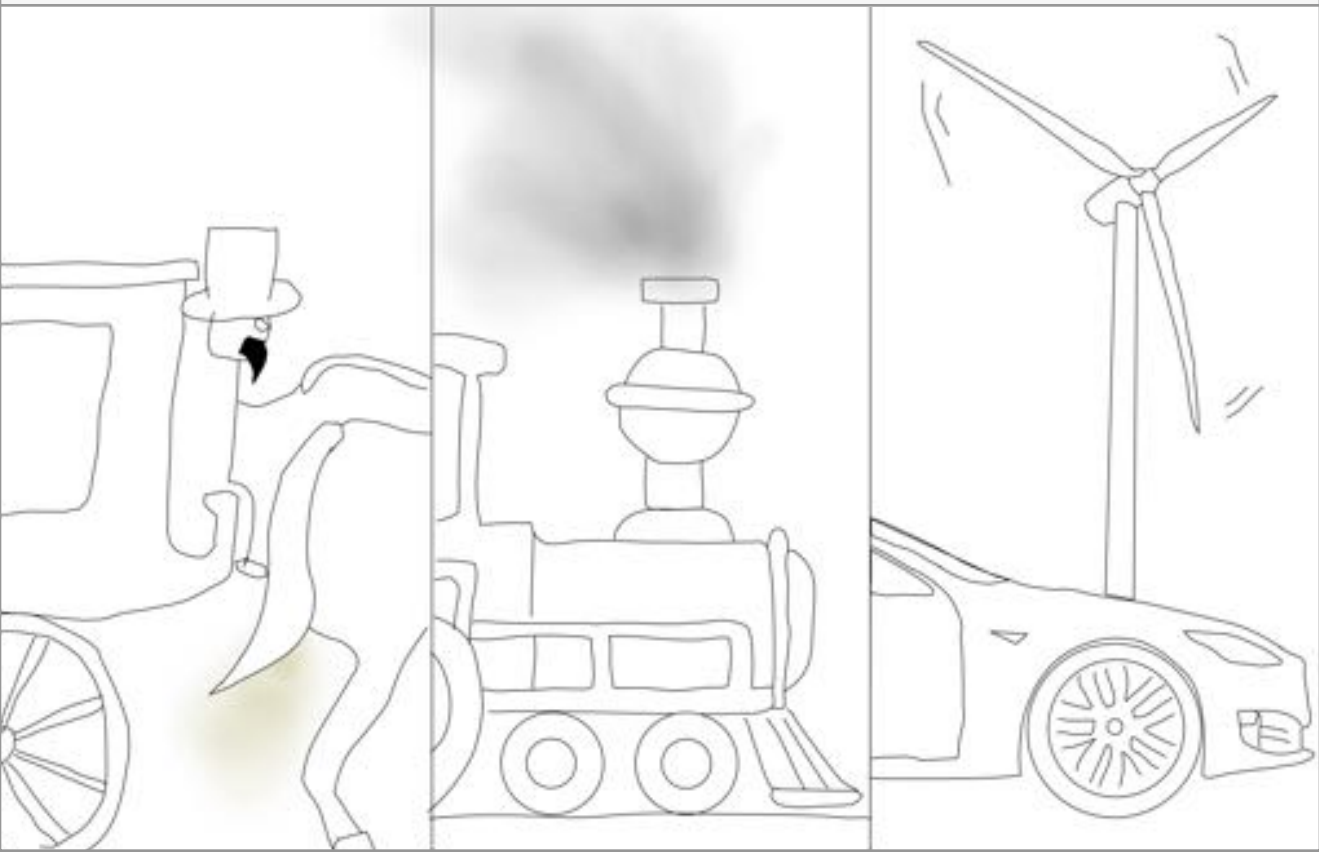
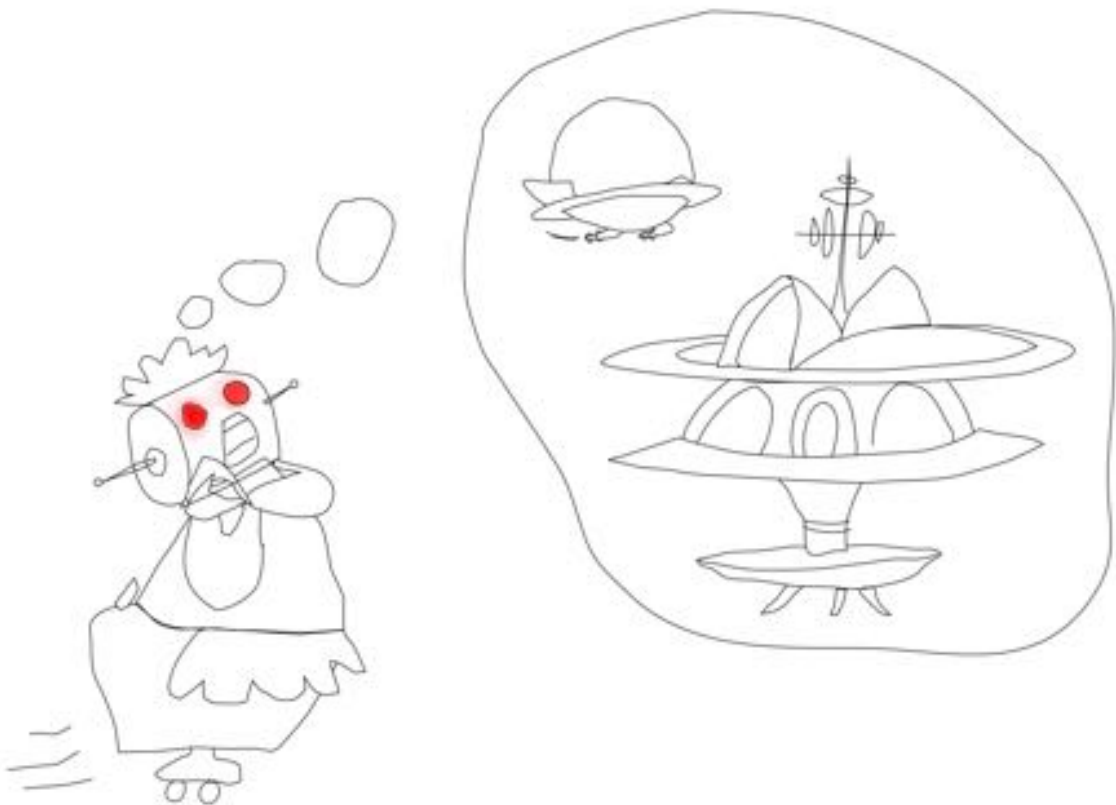


But novel technologies are open to new relational arrangements.



Therefore, people orient their expectations to social imaginaries,

...adapting their practices toward collective narratives and discourses.



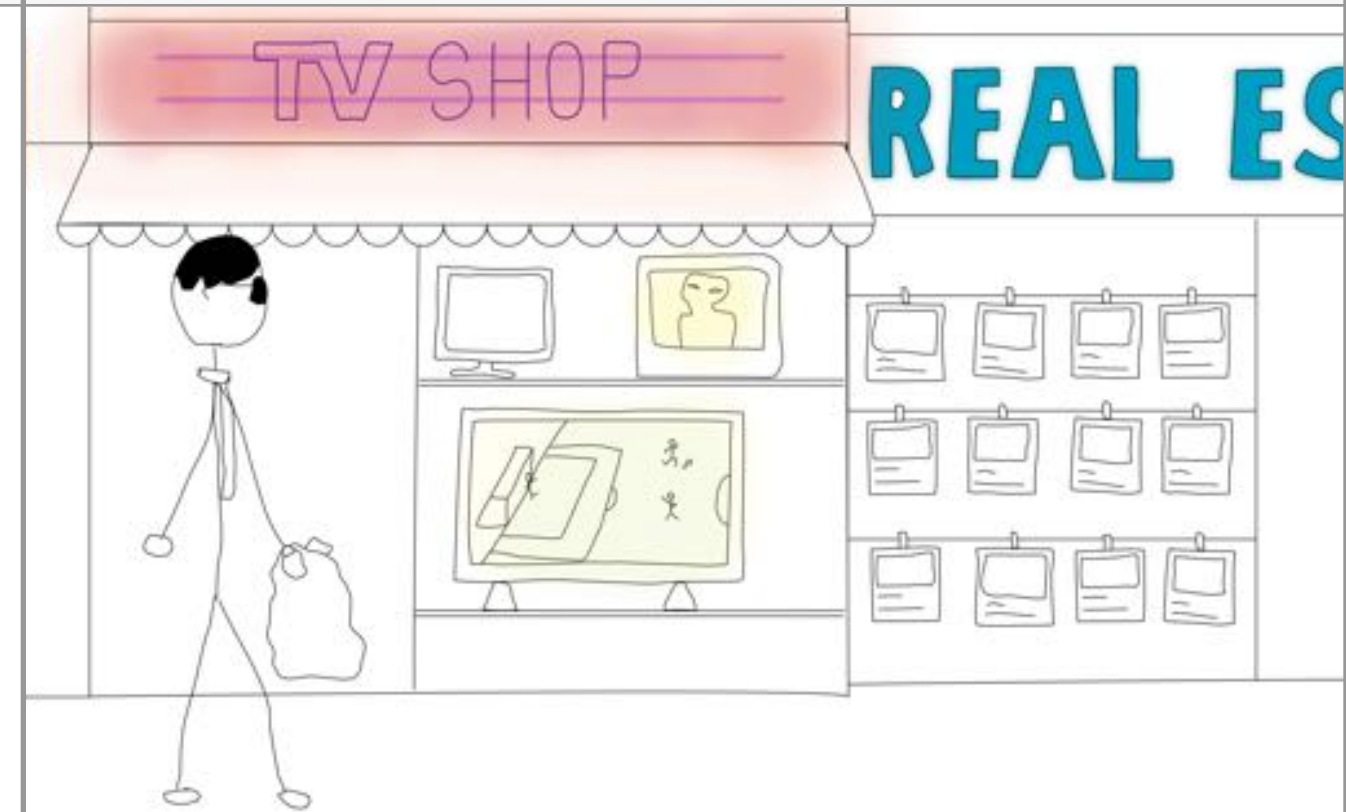
Interactions work at many levels, from non-conscious to conscious stimuli, affecting how we get attuned to our environment.

senses

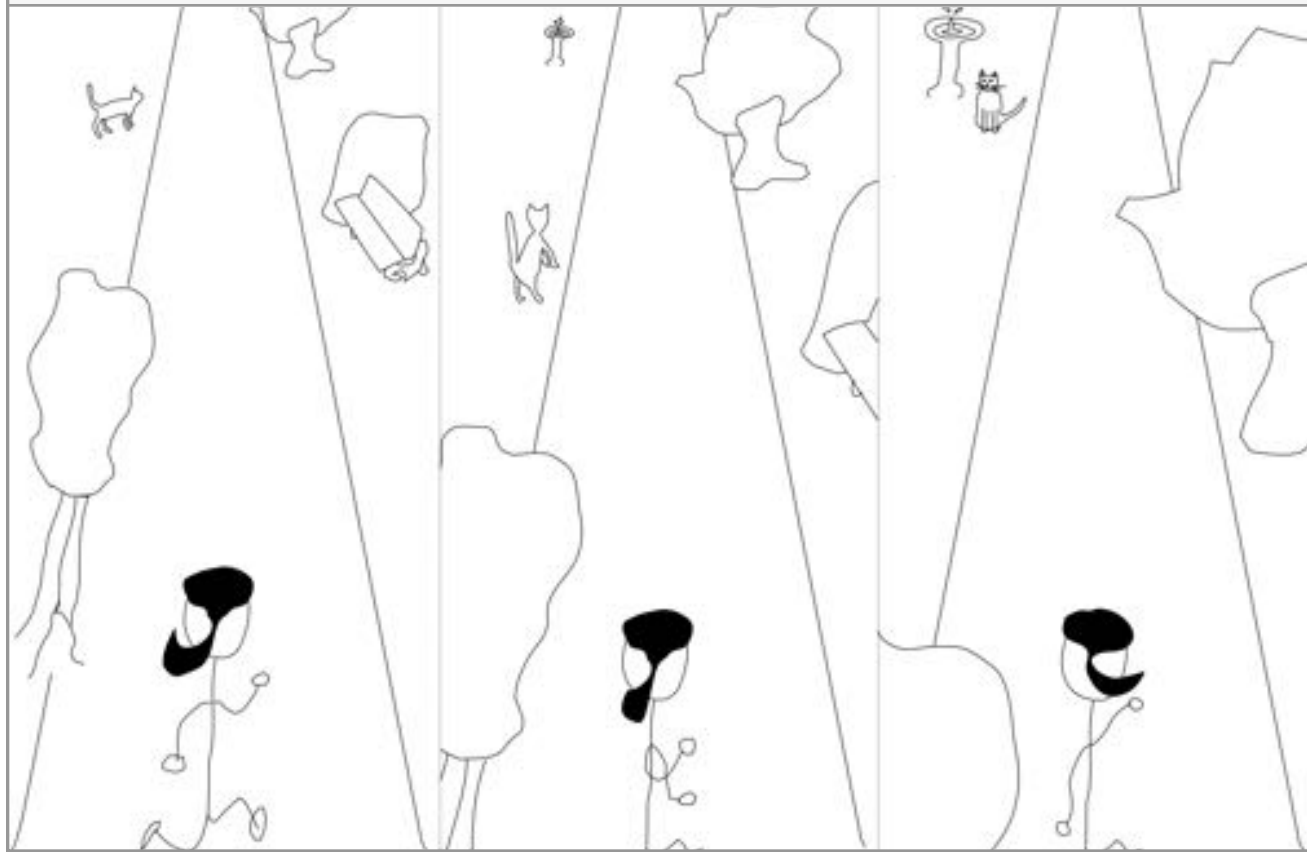
Our spatial sense is built around multiple sensory stimuli.



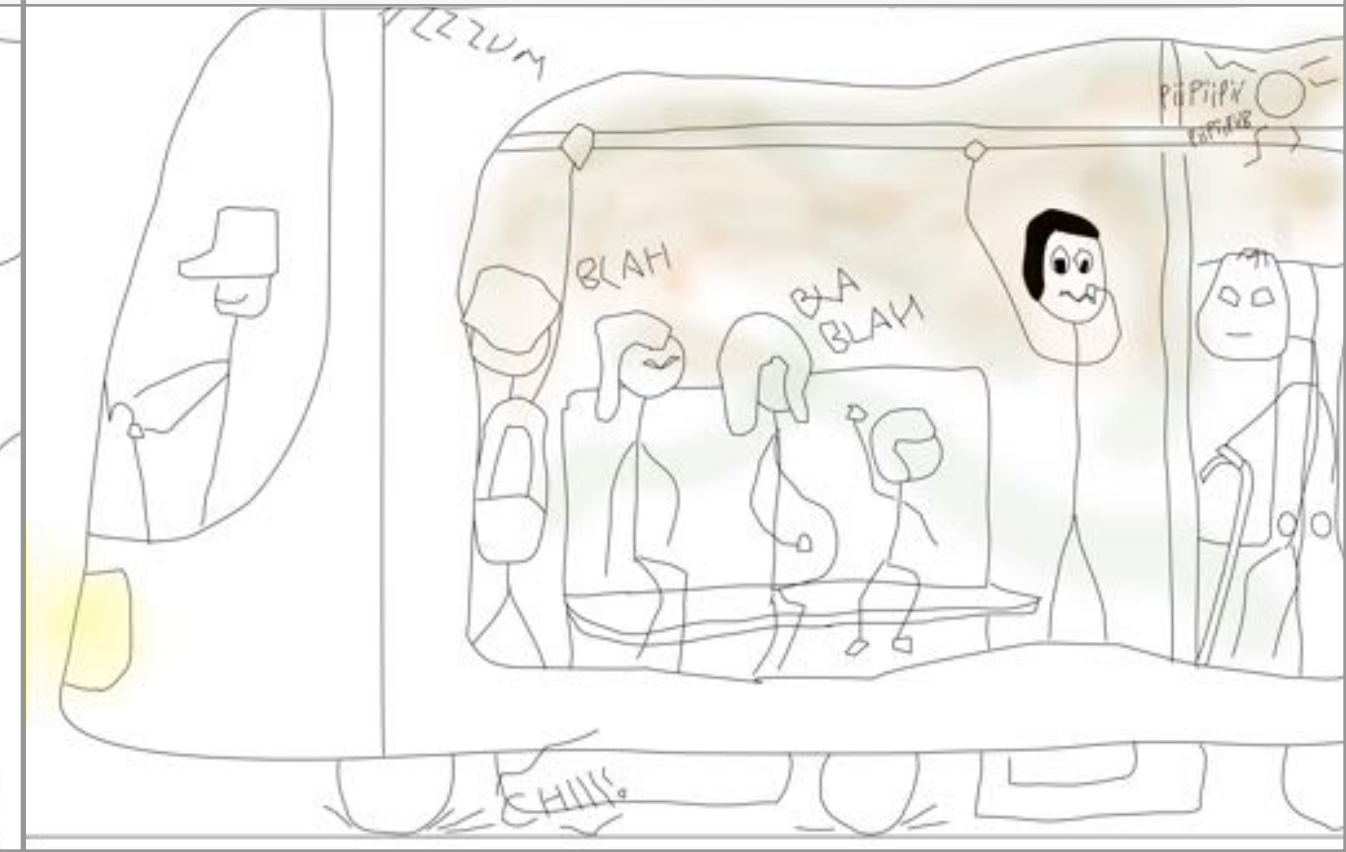
But, western society moved towards to a culture of the visual.



Where the sense of sight is thought in relation to linear time,

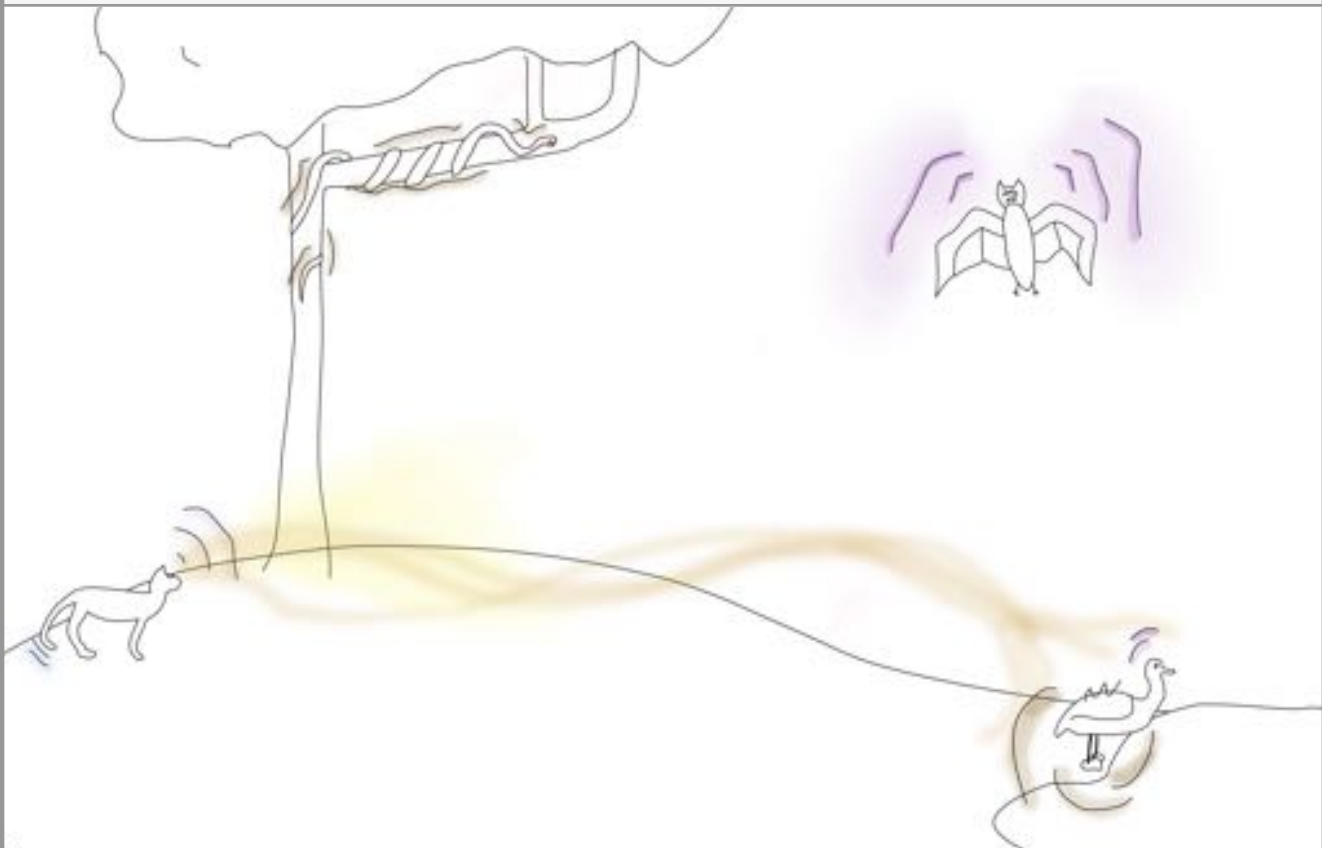


...making other senses looking more chaotic and annoying.

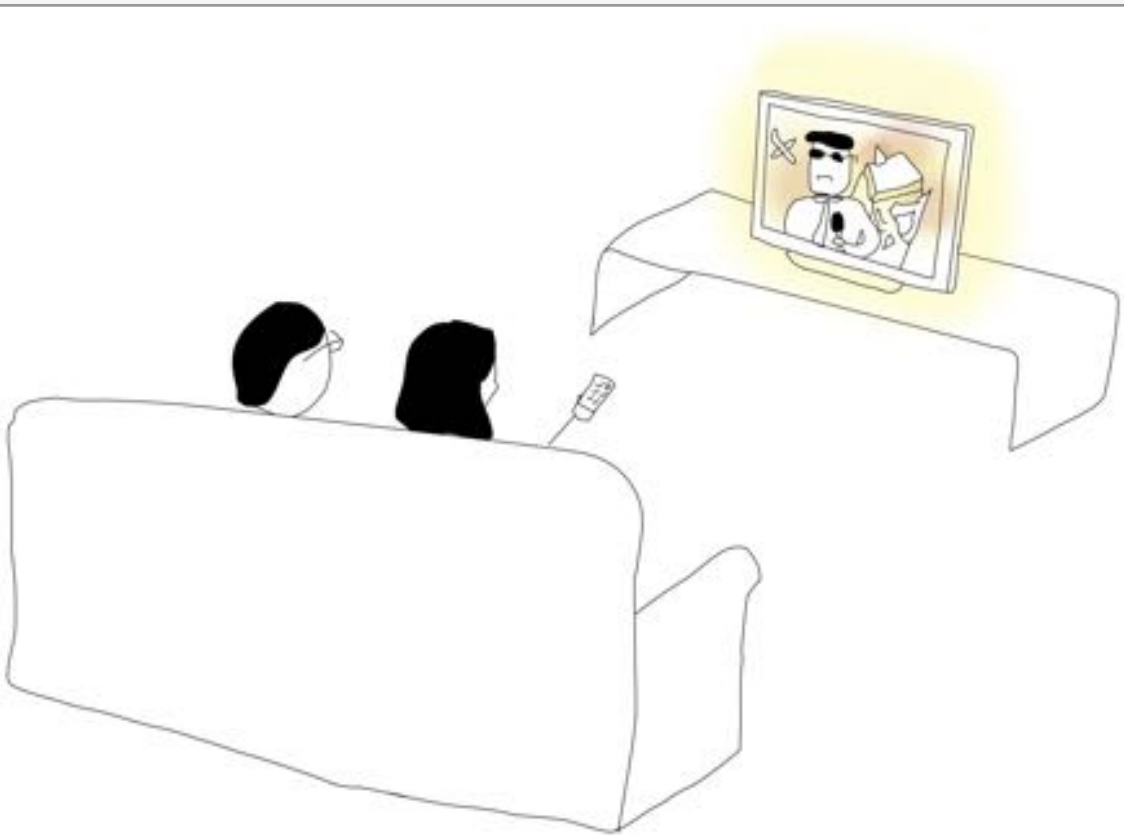


We should think of new forms of relating our senses to our lived experience...

Other living beings use senses to understand the non-linearity of the reality.



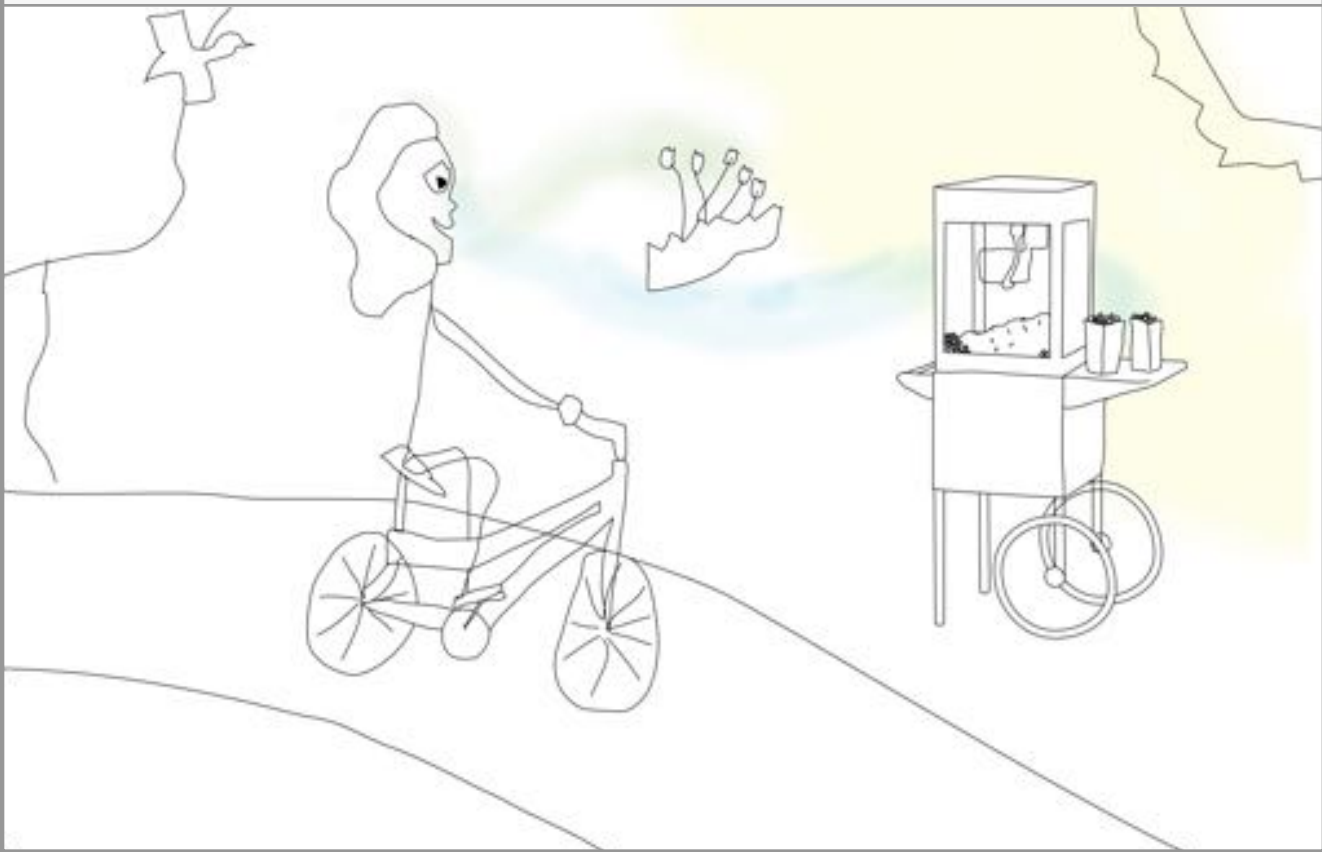
Our cultural history taught us to only pay attention to few of our senses.



However, daily emotions and moods are conditioned by many unconscious stimuli.



By changing the relations between senses, we can enhance our life experience.

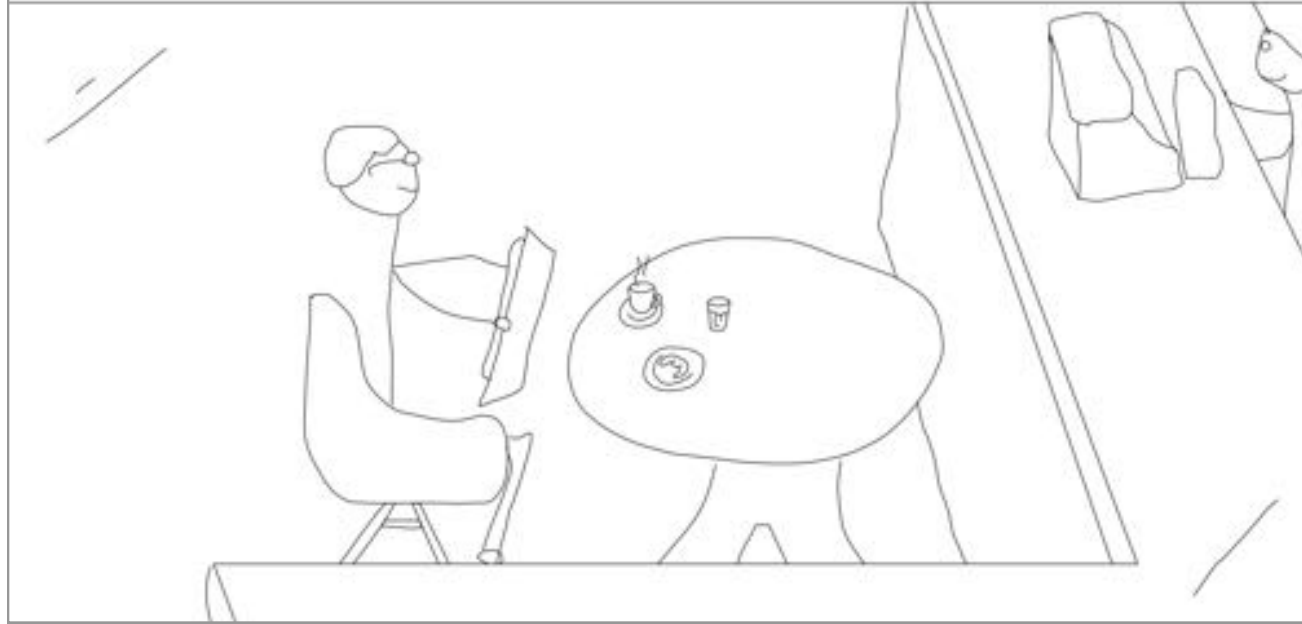


Our sensory experience is linked to the places where we develop our main activities.

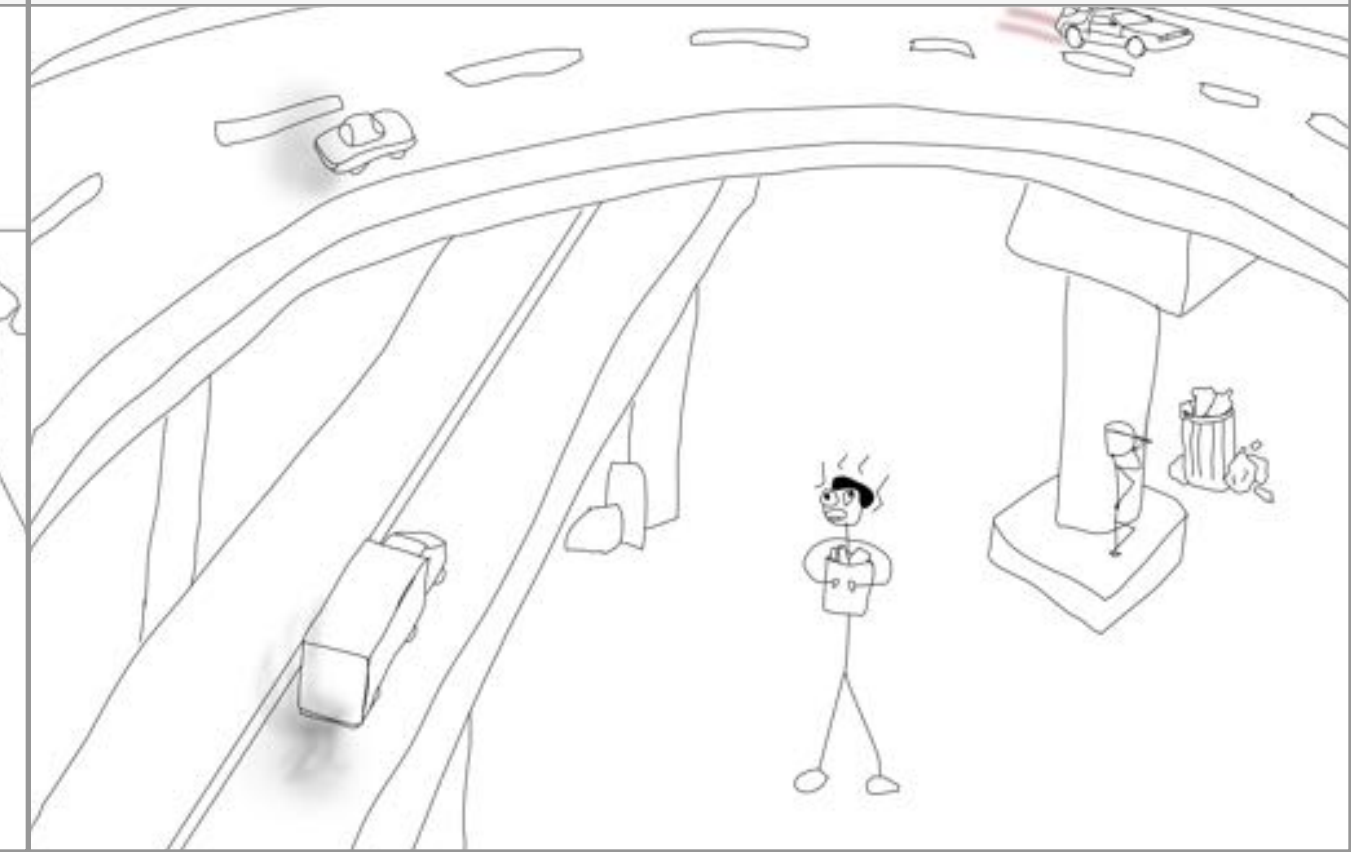
places

Some places are felt familiar and cosy as home.

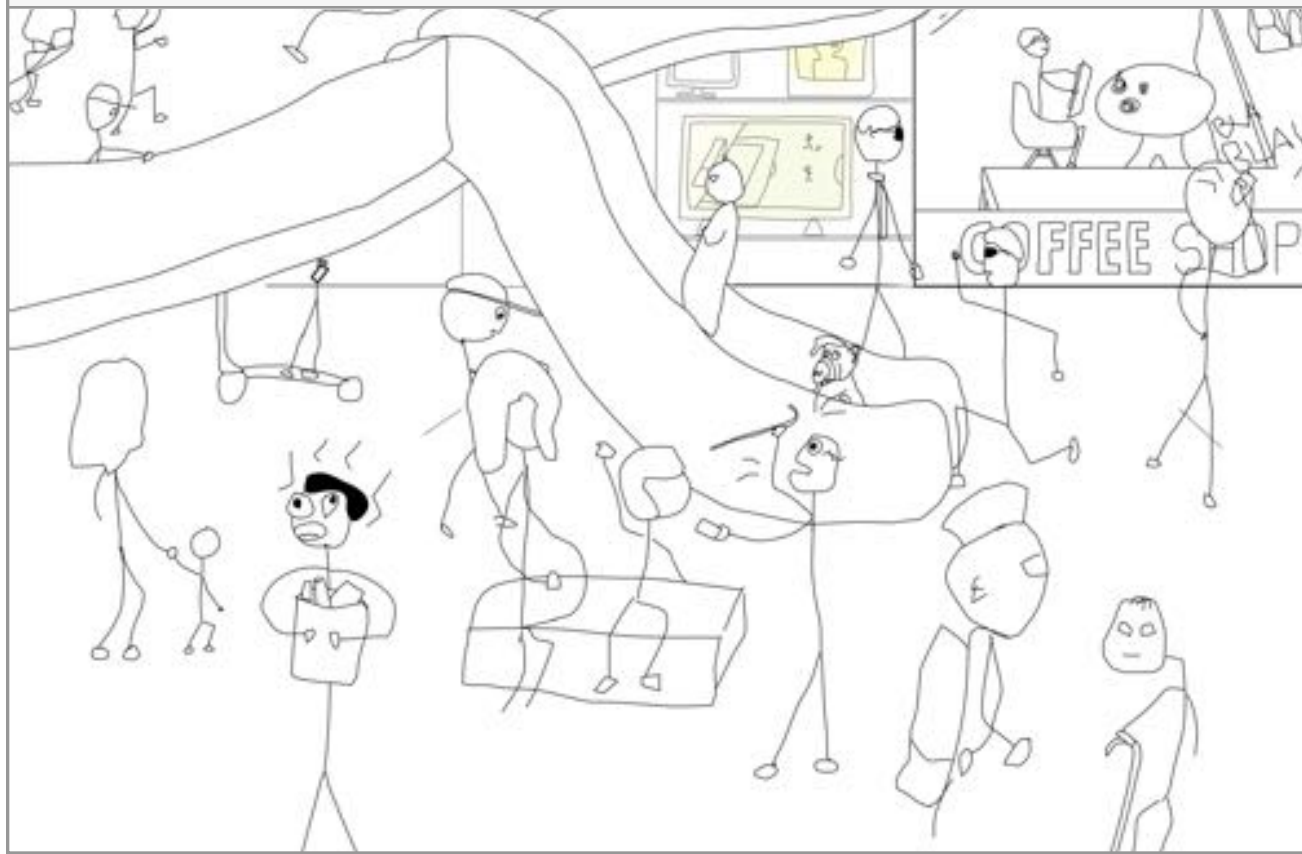
COFFEE SHOP



However, other places can be felt strange and insecure.

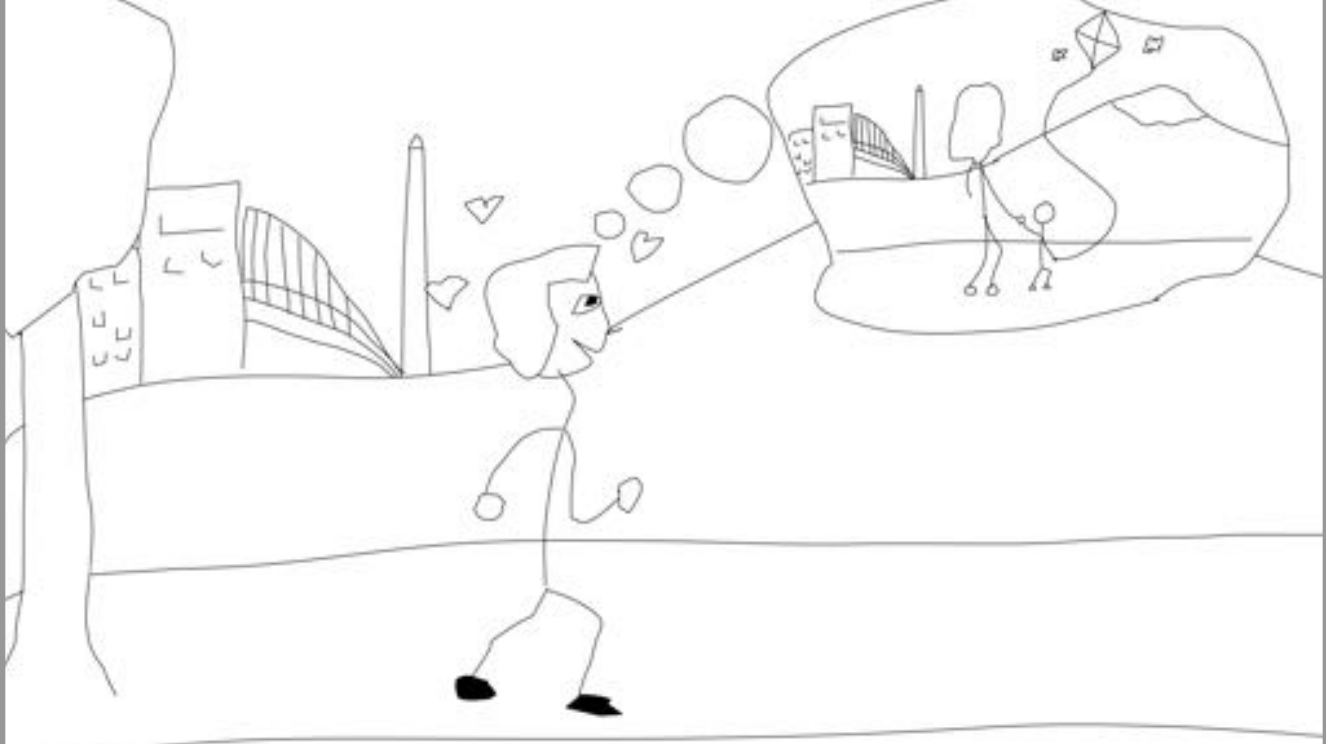
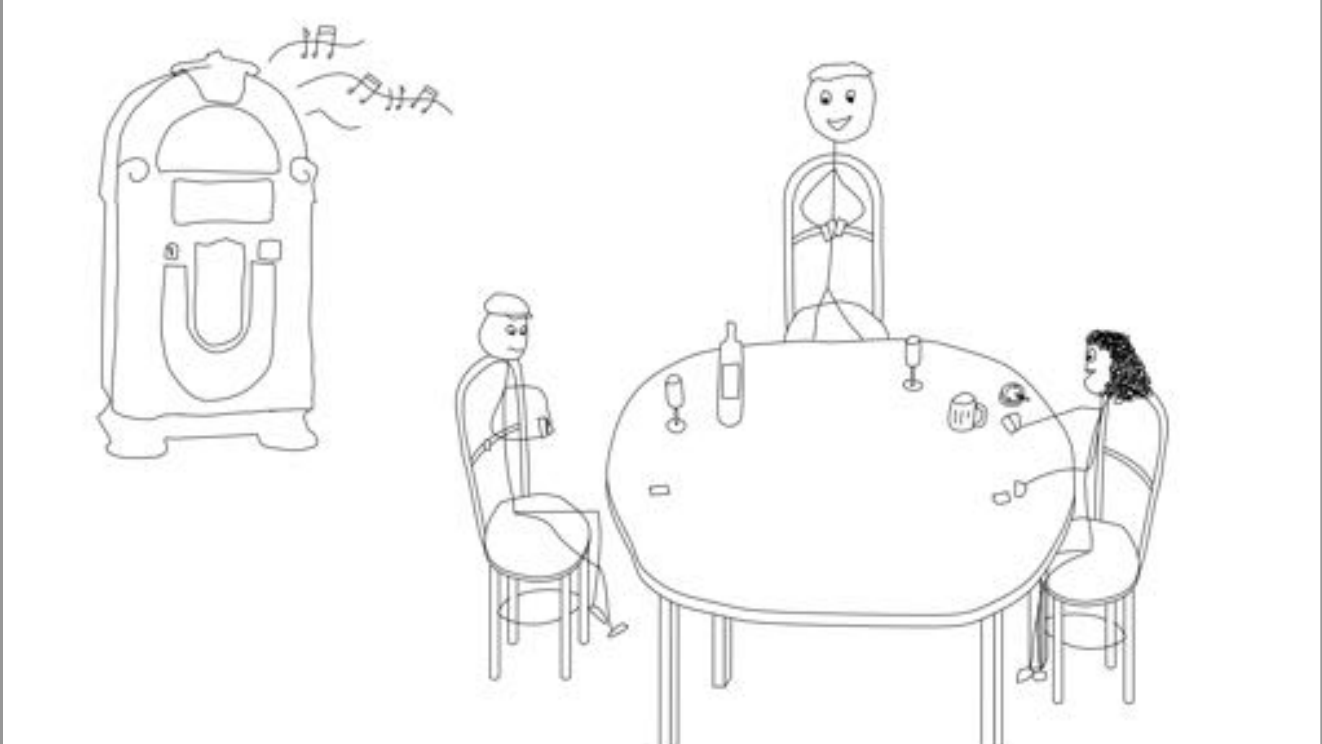
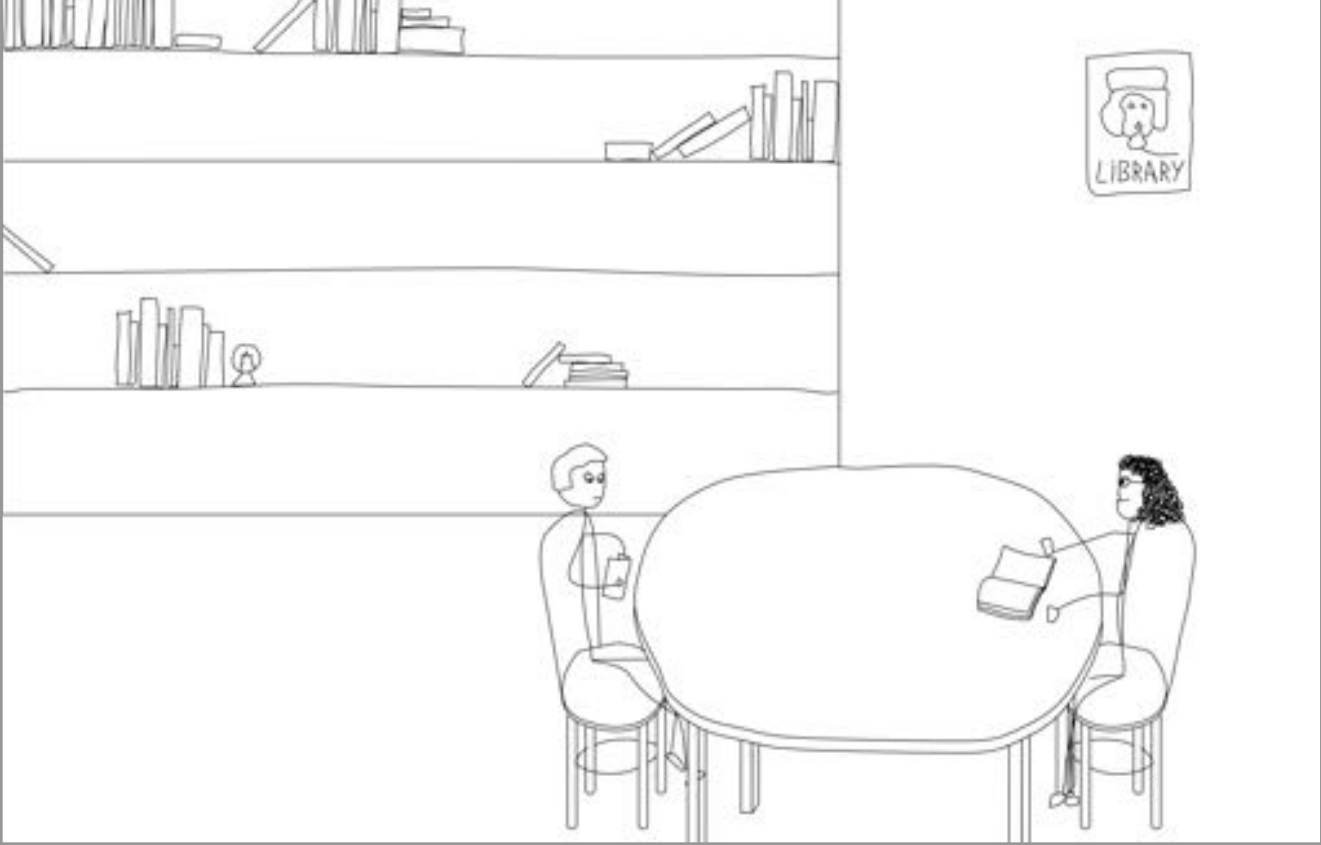
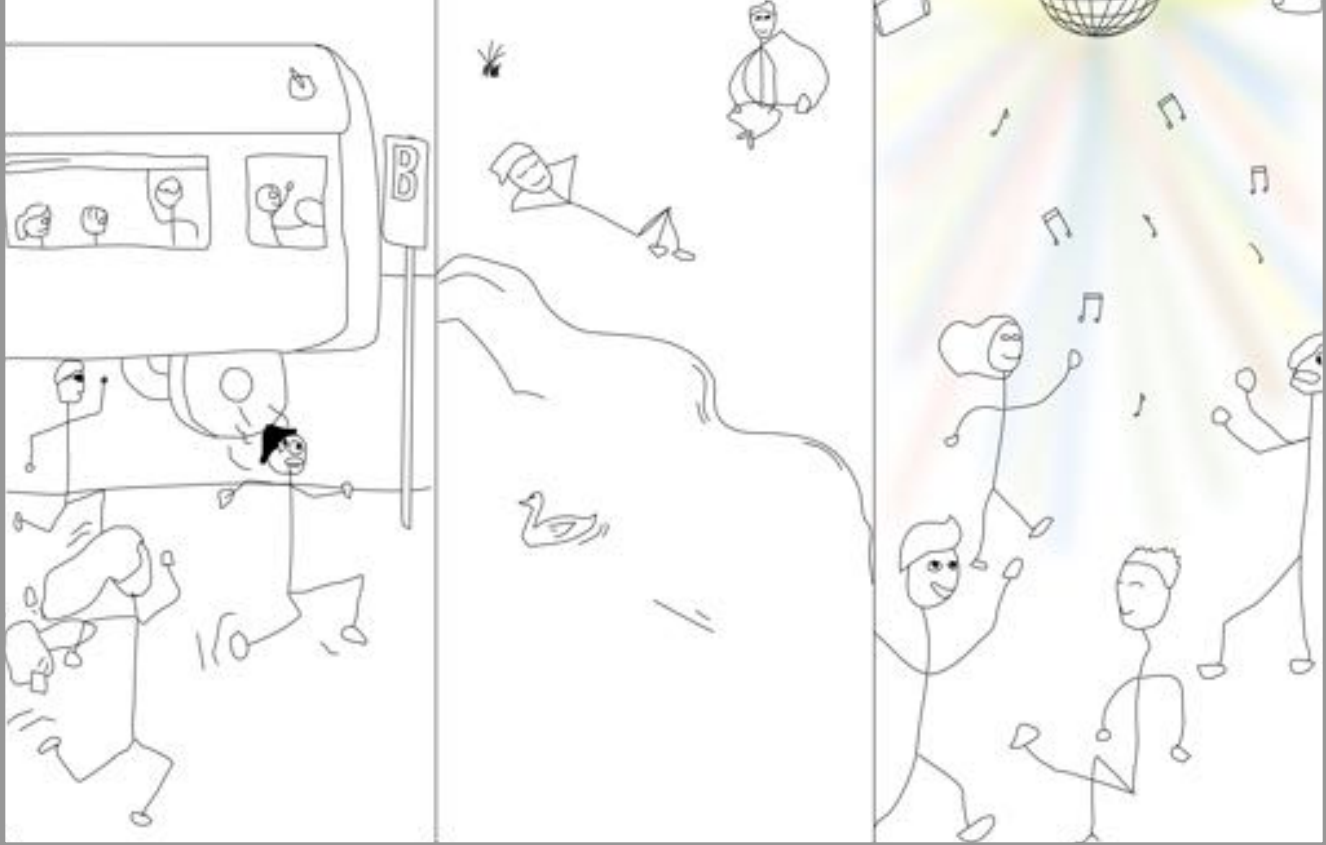


Even crowded and popular places may give us anxiety and grief,



...dragging us to a sense of alienation and solitude.



<p>We should create places to generate new interactional, sensory and affective relations...</p>	<p>Remembrance or recollection of memories can raise our sense of belonging.</p> 	<p>Also, we feel that we belong to a place if it is related to people we are close to.</p> 
<p>Further, we can also be attuned to places' atmospheres,</p> 	<p>...synchronizing ourselves to others' intensities of feeling</p> 	<p>These insights can be summarized in four characteristics that every city should pay attention to...</p>

Addressing empathic cities



Attentiveness

With the strong agency of objects in our lives, we should think about how do we use them and for which purpose. Considering that by developing technologies we are always developing a double awareness (technical and fictional) we have to consider the situations and the narratives that these objects are part of and, which networks and assemblages are articulated in their socio-technical relation.

The narratives that are constituted in relation to physical objects transmit not only aesthetic appreciations but also interacting with other human and non-human bodies in building positive imaginaries and generating certain feelings of togetherness.

We suggest paying attention to which arrangements and publics are made in different forms. In this scenario, new media systems are not only driven in forms of standard messages but more human-like responses, having an impact on the affective realm and their visceral response. The resulting narratives would break through on how citizenship experiences organize the life in cities.

Delight

The task of urban planners and architects is to find new ways to provide essential changes to urban environments. However, what is required is a better understanding of how technology provides a unique opportunity to change the material conditions through different operations in time and space. Instead of sensing and transmitting emotion, systems should support human users in understanding, interpreting, and experiencing emotion in its full complexity and ambiguity. Even more, we should consider that place attachment is not always considered to be positive, as it may lead to conflicts in the urban sphere and negative emotions. Because of the multiplicity in object relationships, it is not possible to build a fit-for-all place.

Senses can change our perception through variation and transformation. These variables become important in designing spaces and to augment the possibilities of delight local customs or preferences. But, not all senses respond equally to the same pattern of variation. We argue that stimulating the sensory realm of places, enhancing the affective capacities of bodies and, the ability to transform, reshape, mesh, destroy and dislocate atmospheres, we can look forward the creation of new spatialities. A city of delight is a city with diversity, that changes, provide stimulus and open possibilities. However, a city of delight is not free of negotiation, contest, and struggle. A space in transformation is, nevertheless, a space for collective and individual change (for good or for bad). A constant transformation that changes how things are organized, while body capacities are altered.

Meanings

In this world of constant adequacy to technological innovations moves towards a more connected and socially exposed life. Individual and collective stories are reshaped by social network platforms, standardized forms of data visualizations and common codes of design and representations. Nowadays, the necessity of making common characteristics and coincidences between people visible opens the door to exploit individualities and personal differences, producing societal values based on the abuse of those in weaker positions.

A meaningful city is that one that allows us to embrace and to clothe its spaces to find its meaning, but at the same time, it covers us with meaningful experiences. In a world of diluted places, there is a necessity to explore the in-between of spaces as a mode of experience with affects and atmospheres and, to cultivate temporary thick places. Contrary to fomenting the creation of permanent meaningful places (that structure the relations of powers), we encourage practitioners to play with the capacity of the technology to potentially create a multiplicity of virtual enactments.

Intensities

An intense city is one that accounts for the multiple relations that take place in the city. For such an intense city, we should first recognise the role of time and space. We should examine how time and space constitute these intensities, movements and transitions, which can be studied through reconfigurations.

Any speculation about our reality comes up with new forms of co-performance. The power and intensity that orders life would determine present and future relations, with enough consequences to be considered an important issue. Focusing on the other, whether a user or a volunteer, can unveil how designers and researchers rule the presences and absences in order to build our own judgements. For that reason, a city of intensities (in plural) is a city that pays a particular attention to reconfigurations at multiple levels.

Intensities are shaped in forms of collective affects and, one such forms are structures of feelings. These phenomena reflect not less than the societal values and the reproduction of its inequalities. A city of intensities should force us to think also about the characteristics of attentiveness, delight and meaning, described before.

Glossary

Affects: Coined by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza as the body’s ‘capacity to affect and be affected’, where a body can in principle be anything (human or non-human). Capacities are always collectively formed - a body is always imbricated in a set of relations. But these relations never determine body's capacities. Because capacities are dependent on other bodies, they can never be exhaustively specified in advance. (Anderson, 2014, p. 9)

Atmospheres: Atmospheres are forms of collective affects that pertain to specific situated events. A backdrop of everyday life that conditions and are conditioned in the ways we inhabit spaces. (Anderson & Ash, 2015)

Intensities: Brian Massumi (2015) uses this term as a replacement for affects, alternatively to refer to the non-conscious bodily emotions or affective experience. It can be also thought as the halo effects surrounding moods or emotions. Anderson also refers to intensities as ‘how the effects of power come to form and are present/absent’ (Anderson, 2017, p. 501.

Liveliness: This expression suggests that experiences are not already defined but in a process of emergence, taking affects as forces of vitality. Qualities of liveliness are felt experienced and is what we can be transformed into conscious emotions. (Massumi, 2002)

Structures of feeling: Another form of collective affects that are shared between people, dispersed and distributed across sites and come to condition emotions and feeling. Collective moods have a real effectivity and as such mediate how ‘capacities to affect and be affected’ emerge. This notions invites to focus the exploration on the workings of mediation, and the attention to collective processes of organisation. (Anderson, 2014, p. 117).

Technological stabilization: For social constructivists like Pinch, Bijker, and Elzen, stabilization occurs when and if a social group and an artifact meld together. Closure mechanisms, then, can stabilize social groups as well as artifacts. A rhetorical closure occurs if a controversy ends not when a neat solution emerges but when a social group perceives that the problem is solved. Closure through redefinition occurs when an artifact stabilized incompletely by one social group is stabilized more completely through association with a larger or more powerful social group. On a larger scale, stabilization may bring the social processes by which large technological systems shape their own growth and appear to become autonomous. (Bijker & Law, 1992, p. 110)

Material arrangements: Geographers usually refer to the emergence of events and encounters as a form of expression of what is arranged in precarious forms. Because affective life is always-already mediated (it is never given in a specific way), how actions take place in the world is a matter of paying attention to them, and to looking for causal powers. In that sense, it is considered that events and encounters put things in-relation. Usually methods to unveil the position of bodies on such relational fields, are followed by the question of ‘what bodies can do’ and ‘what bodies stand in for’.

Remembrance, recollection and anticipation: ‘Anticipation and recollection of atmospheres are at the extremes of these temporalities in the staging of atmospheres’ (Bille, 2015). However, some memories work upon you without being translated into explicit recollections. (Pedwell, 2014)

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