

Book Review

Title: *Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City*

Editors: Patrick Devlieger, Frank Renders, Hubert Froyen, and Kristel Wildiers

Publisher: Antwerp: Garant, 2006.

ISBN: 90-441-1739-4, 372 pages

Cost: \$97.50 USD order@coronetbooks.com

Reviewer: Michael L. Dorn

Accepting the call of the European Disability Forum, the city of Leuven, Belgium and its University (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in Dutch) embarked on a “modest project” that grew larger and deeper in time, to consider the experiences of persons with disabilities in historic cities and find ways to achieve greater levels of inclusion (p. 11). Led by an innovative interdisciplinary team comprised of anthropologists, architects and planners, the city engaged in a deliberative process in preparation for the 2003 European Year of Persons with Disabilities. In the interests of building upon existing strengths and addressing a population all too often neglected in academic discussions of universal design, the stakeholders decided to focus on the experiences of blind people and those with visual impairments. In the book that documents this immense project, *Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City*, editors Devlieger, Renders, Froyen and Wildiers draw together the insights of a stellar group of interdisciplinary scholars and activists—anthropologists and geographers, psychologists, designers and architects, employees of the World Bank, the Leuven government, and volunteers with advocacy groups. The resulting volume is a multi-sensory joy. It contains eighteen essays and nearly 30 authors, ample provision for color photography, as well as an enclosed digital version on CD.

The book is divided into eight sections, two chapters typically per section, on themes such as mobility, tactility, competent tourism, education, and spatial analysis. Chapter by chapter, readers consider a variety of different theoretical and practical ways of re-conceiving or revising the relationship between the blind person and the historical city. The largest of the eight sections in the book is devoted to the studies and projects of multi-sensory design. Here, four different visions by architects or firms are represented. The visionaries are Peter Howell and Julia Ionides of the Dog Rose Trust (Ludlow, UK); Marta Dischinger (Florianópolis, Brazil); Seema Malik of Avanish K. Malhotra Architects (Manhattan, New York); and Vinko Penezic and Krešimir Rogina of Penezic & Rogina Architects (Zagreb, Croatia). The works presented in these chapters run the gamut from audio and tactile interpretations of national historic treasures (Dog Rose Trust), to analyses of ‘spatial mental representation’ that offer new strategies for universal design (Dischinger, and Malik), to a critical exploration of the new digital environment that offers a glimpse of a future audio-tactile culture (Penezic & Rogina).

There is much to recommend this book. The editors express a firm dedication to cross-cultural exploration of the environmental conditioning of disability experience. The twenty-seven different contributors for the volume draw on their unique cultural viewpoints as well, hailing from across Europe, the United States, Brazil, and Australia. The passion of shared exploration can be felt throughout the work, as high theory is

joined by pragmatic reports on workshops and tangible outcomes, including a recently published guide to the city of Leuven. Sometimes this can result in a clash of international perspectives, such as differences over the choice of terminology between the English (“disability”) and the Dutch (“handicap”). In other places this can result in a minute investigation of particular environments, as in David Mellaerts’ chapter on ‘Hearing, smelling, touching and moving as an alternative way of beholding,’ a process of discovery where visually impaired and able-bodied people collaborated in writing a multi-sensorial text *Leuven Horen en Voelen* (Hearing and Touching Leuven), selecting and producing tactile plates, and developing the city’s audio guide.

The overall effect of reading the book is transformative, challenging Westerners in general, and architects and designers in particular, to reconsider definitions of rationality and their ocularocentric focus on visual perception in common public spaces like museums. Laying the groundwork for these alternative imaginings and experiencings, a select group of designers and architects share projects that explore avenues for insight and offer keys to recognizing and enhancing non-visual sources of information. This book offers a generous range of examples of the sort of engaged normative research-and-education that can transform lives. These engaged scholars offer themselves as cultural brokers for the rest of us. The question remains: will other cities follow Leuven’s lead and move beyond the dialectic of historic city vs. blind visitor to consider the already available means for making contact and constructing new spaces and encounters?

Blindness and the Multi-Sensorial City offers a stimulating introduction to the connections between disability studies and sensual cultural geography and is recommended for social science and humanities scholars who are interested in engaging in cooperative projects at urban redesign, as well as planners, city administrators, and designers. For scholars interested in learning more about the history, anthropology and psychology of non-visual perception, the references alone are worth the price of admission. The publisher Garant is to be commended for inclusion of the entire text on digital CD, which is unfortunately still all-too-rare for publications in this field.

Michael L. Dorn, Ph.D., Clinical Assistant Professor of Urban Education, Temple University, holds a split appointment between the Department of Educational Leadership and the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University. A cultural geographer by training, Mike has served as guest editor with Deborah Metzel of two special issues of *Disability Studies Quarterly* on Disability Geography, and is currently one of the editors of the blog Disability Studies, Temple U., <http://disstud.blogspot.com>