

Abstract for the Summer Colloquium «Urban Aesthetics»

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Kin/aisthesis and Urban Affordances

The question how a city can be an aesthetic object, or a beautiful object, can be posed in a more fundamental manner: how can a city be an object of aisthesis, i.e. perception, in the first place. We never perceive a city as a whole—we never contemplate *Paris* as such—but only snippets of buildings, sidewalks, the smell of pollution, etc. Therefore, it is not accidental that urban aesthetics have traditionally been associated with the figure of the flaneur, a leisurely stroller through urban landscapes. The impression of the city is one of a series of fragmented images unified by the act of walking. In fact, as Alva Noë—one of the main proponents of enactive and embodied cognition—has argued, *all* objects of perception are too complex to be observed all at once. This is why the body in its motor function has such an important role to play in perception: we experience the hidden side of an object as potentially perceptible because we can move our eyes, the head or the whole body in order to view this other side.¹ According to enactivists like Noë, the kinaesthetic sense of the body in motion and locomotion is an inherent component of perceptual experience—and we might add—including the experience of the city. Many enactivists refer to James J. Gibson's theory of affordances (1966 and 1979) and this helps clarify the role of skillful navigation of one's environment in perception. Gibson explains the perceptual system of animals as coupled with salient features of their environment that afford possibilities for actions.² In my paper I will consider how certain practical and symbolic features of the built environment serve as affordances that encourage or prohibit the circulation of pedestrians, and therefore shape urban experience on its basic kinaesthetic level.

¹ Alva Noë, *Varieties of Presence*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 20.

² James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, (Hillsdale, NJ/London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 1986), 127