



Havens in a Heartless City:

Urban Churches and Experiencing the Sublime

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Abstract

Since the publication of Georg Simmel's seminal essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), the frenetic sensory impact of urban life has been well established. Like a number of cities around the world, Sydney has a large central business district (CBD) that is home to corporate offices and public buildings, including museums and galleries, but few permanent residents. On the other hand, Sydney has a number of successful churches located within its CBD. These churches are open throughout the week and attract numerous visitors each day who attend liturgies or drop in for periods of quiet prayer or reflection. If urban centres in cities such as Sydney are sites for business and culture, how is it that these city churches are thriving? This paper examines three urban churches in Sydney, and how they serve as places of retreat from the frantic pace of the city on a daily basis. The paper will draw on participant observation conducted at these churches, and argue that urban religious spaces are popular and successful because of their ability to offer a sensory experience that is distinct from the frenetic pace and 'noise' of the city, producing sensory experiences of silence and stillness, which in turn encourages a sense of peace and the sublime. The paper argues, using the work of Simmel, de Certeau and others who have written on the city, that urban churches serve as places of retreat for those who utilise them; 'retreat' in the sense of reconnecting with and renourishing the self, rather than escapism.

Keywords Religion; urbanisation; senses; Georg Simmel; Michel de Certeau

Introduction

The relationship between sensory experience and faith in the study of religion is well documented. In Christianity, cathedrals act as symbols of church-state power as well as sensory manifestations of faith, utilising stained glass, statues and bas reliefs to provide visual symbols of doctrinal belief. The French Cathedral of Chartres provides a lesson in theology and spirituality through such imagery, and has done so for both medieval and modern pilgrims (Camille 1996: 71). Today churches and religious buildings of all shapes and sizes from all religions continue to provide spaces for worship while at the same time offering a sensory journey of faith, self-discovery and inner peace. Similarly, the sensory impact of the city has been the subject of numerous studies showing its influence on the mental life of social agents. A classic account is Georg Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life*, and Michel de Certeau (1984) has offered a seminal study of the negotiation of the city in the context of everyday life. This paper argues that urban churches offer a unique sensory experience that is in stark contrast to the sensory impact of the city analysed by Simmel, and that social agents utilise churches in similar ways as city walkers negotiate urban space, as outlined by de Certeau. The paper will analyse Catholic urban churches, giving particular emphasis to the

sensory experience they offer in the context of everyday life in metropolitan environments. The paper will show that the sensory experience offered by these churches counters the frenetic pace and noise of cities. To examine these issues three urban churches will be discussed, located in the central business district of Sydney, Australia.¹

Catholic urban churches are something of a conundrum in the sociology of religious spaces.² They are not affiliated with the Catholic parish system, which relies on a church providing religious services to local faithful, nor are they, in most cases, connected to monasteries or convents providing religious services to an order of monks or nuns. Furthermore, Catholic urban churches are distinct from cathedrals, which although located in major cities, provide administrative and spiritual services to the wider parish system. Contrary to these examples, urban churches which are located within cities, draw on a very small residential population and rely on regular attendees for religious services and for financial support. Yet in many cities Catholic urban churches thrive, and like those studied here, they are typically well-utilised, financially independent, and are lavishly renovated to make them more attractive to visitors. In the next section the social context in which urban churches are located will be examined to reveal how they stand out in the urban environment.

Modernity and Urbanism's Cold Façade

The growth of urbanisation in modernity has for some time been the focus of attention for scholars trying to account for its tendency to undermine human notions of security and belonging, instead promoting alienation, atomism, and meaninglessness for many. For Karl Marx the city was the location of the factory in which human alienation reached its highest point as workers were alienated from their work, from their product, from their fellows, and ultimately from their own species being. City-based factories were also the sites of the most blatant exploitation of workers of all ages (Marx 1990 [1867]: 349ff). Marx's friend Friedrich Engels decried the poor living conditions

which workers were forced to endure when mass internal migration in England saw large numbers of people move from rural locations to urban centres during the Industrial Revolution, his focus being Manchester as he observed it in 1844 (Engels 1978: 579ff). For Emile Durkheim (1979 [1897]) the shift to greater urbanism was concomitant with a rise in *anomie*, which derived from the loss of established social norms in favour of new norms better suited to urban life, and a rise in suicide rates as people struggled to adjust to new expectations commensurate with urbanism, such as a more enhanced division of labour that was part and parcel of organic societies and their reliance on greater levels of human interdependence. Max Weber (1992 [1930]) identified bureaucracy as essential to complex social structures, but the greater reliance on rationality that went hand in hand with complex urban environments had the potential to ensnare people within an iron cage while making things more efficient. Concomitant with this fetishism of rationality was what Weber identified as the irrationality of rationality, where rational systems that begin as efficient and cost effective end up entangling social agents in a web of unintended consequences, whether that be in bureaucratic red tape or the dehumanising systems of the corporate world (Habermas 1986: 181–5; Ritzer 1996).

These early, or 'classical' studies of modern urbanisation understood the city as a backdrop to modern anxieties, and many studies that came after them continued this approach. Christopher Lasch (1979) understood the modern condition as inherently threatening to the psyche and examined institutions such as the family as being "havens in a heartless world". The paradoxes of modern urban living continues to interest scholars, but more recent work has highlighted the role that the city plays in processes of alienation and social division. Mark Davis in *City of Quartz* (1990) analyses strategies such as barricading, gated communities and security technology to enhance class divisions in Los Angeles, and in doing so he brings the city into the foreground as a site of contestation. David Harvey (1990) discusses the impact that postmodern architecture has had on cities, charting the challenge that pastiche, collage and montage

have had on modernism and brutalism. For Harvey, many cities now display a sometimes uncomfortable synthesis of the new and the old, as innovative architecture shares space with heritage protected landmarks; and a sometimes uncomfortable collection of architectural styles, as consumerist themes are copied from the world of marketing to create sterile spaces of consumption along harbour foreshores and shopping malls (Gottdiener 1995). Such projects force social agents to reconsider the permanence of the city, and to question its commitment to upholding a shared past: "Fiction, fragmentation, collage, and eclecticism, all suffused with a sense of ephemerality and chaos, are, perhaps, the themes that dominate in today's practices of architecture and urban design" (Harvey 1990: 98).

More broadly, Charles Taylor has made important contributions to the subjective experience of modernity. In the *Ethics of Authenticity* Taylor describes how modernity encourages a form of individualism which emphasises personal fulfilment and self-expression. But although some drive towards individuality is normative in all societies, what is different under modernity is that this drive towards self-expression and a life lived for personal meaning is now expected. Today we are encouraged to put the self before the social, and a life well lived is one which has been imbued with meaning through a personal narrative of decision making for self-improvement (Taylor 1991: 2–5). A reliance on instrumental reason is one explanation for this problem, as well as a corrosion of social bonds. This is one aspect of what Taylor calls the "malaise of modernity" (Taylor 1993: 59). Furthermore, in Taylor's opinion, modern society has created the conditions for this self-absorbed form of individualism through the mobility and social fragmentation that comes with industrialisation and new forms of production based on technology and the factory system. As people move from the land to the city, as they move from manual work to intellectual work, and as they move from stable work and family life towards flexible employment and relationships based on self-fulfilment, individualism is further entrenched: "Old ties are broken down. At the same time, city dwelling is transformed by the immense concentrations of pop-

ulation of the modern metropolis. By its very nature, this involves much more impersonal and casual contact, in place of the more intense, face-to-face relations of earlier times" (Taylor 1991: 59).

We will return to these issues, bringing in Georg Simmel's and Michel de Certeau's work to assess the implications of the metropolitan way of life for social agents and their interactions. We will focus on Simmel's *Metropolis and Mental Life*, and sections of de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* to help map out some elements of the experiential and phenomenological understanding of city life that social actors employ to navigate complex urban spaces. Simmel argues that the city creates a greater degree of anonymity between individuals, which has the twofold consequences of creating a greater sense of freedom while at the same time increasing the possibility for social isolation and atomism. De Certeau is also aware of the potentially alienating impact that the city can have, and outlines this through his discussion of walking in the city. He explores the ways in which social agents employ a range of strategies to navigate the city and its unique forms of social interaction, with mixed results for how successfully this can be done. Before considering these theorists in greater detail, the sense-scapes of three urban churches will be explored. The purpose of this fieldwork is to outline how these churches offer an alternative social space that is located within the city, providing a contrast to the alienating impacts of metropolitan social life examined by Simmel, de Certeau and Taylor.

Three Urban Churches

In this section three inner-city churches will be analysed in an effort to understand how they function as havens of the sublime in a large city which renders the subject largely anonymous. The city in question is Sydney, which is a centre of commerce and public administration. Bell and de-Shalit (2011) argue that all cities have a particular ethos, which is a way of life celebrated in that city contributing to "the diversity that makes human social life so valuable and interesting" (2011: 6). A city's ethos is promoted through investment in civil infrastructure, such as public

transport, roads, ports, and recreational spaces, and through public policy, which embeds laws to enhance the city's ethos, such as provision for green spaces, cafés, buskers, or cycle ways. The values of its citizens, the built environment and how it is cared for, and the treatment of inhabitants of all social strata – each of these imbue a city with a particular ethos. For Bell and de-Shalit, some cities have an obvious ethos for which they are internationally renowned, such as faith in Jerusalem, which they call the City of Religion, or opportunity for material advancement in New York, which the authors call the City of Ambition. Sydney also has an ethos, which could be called the City of New Beginnings for the high levels of immigrants who call it home, and who have come from all corners of the globe to make a new life in Australia.

St. Peter Julian's Catholic Church is located in the heart of the city, on George Street in Sydney's CBD, near the Chinatown precinct, an area that is home to a number of large hotels, shopping arcades and retail businesses. The church is a space which has been designed to take the visitor out of the mundane world and into an environment where the sublime can be experienced. As one approaches the church the noise of passing traffic can be overwhelming. Many hundreds of pedestrians occupy the sidewalk nearby at most times of the day and well into the night, making their way to or from Chinatown to metro stations or to other parts of the CBD. The church is entered by mounting a flight of stairs and entering a porch, and already the sensory difference between the city and the church is discernible. Thick walls provide a buffer between the porch and the traffic outside, and the dim light inside means that one must pause here to let the eyes adjust to the change in light. Located in the porch are the church's gift shop and a noticeboard. Double glazed doors lead the visitor into the church. Inside the noise of the city is replaced with silence, and except for the loudest of vehicles going by on the road outside, the church is extremely quiet. A Mass is offered at midday and this attracts on average 50 congregants per day. Throughout the day the church remains open, and approximately 30 people per hour visit, some staying for only a few minutes, while others remain for up to half an hour. Some visitors sit

while others kneel in a posture of prayer. The motivations for why these people utilise the church during weekdays is a subject for future study, but in quantitative terms, the church is well attended.

After sitting in the church for a few minutes one begins to experience a sense of calm and peace. Observing the physical space and the acoustics of the church helps to explain how these feelings are produced. The thick walls and the double glazed glass in the doors and windows helps to reduce outside noise, so that it becomes easy to forget that one is in the middle of a major city. Ambient lighting is provided by lamps placed on the columns, and by a skylight directing light to the sanctuary. The interior of the church is finished with a liberal use of wood, in the pews, ceiling, and covering the internal pillars. This natural product, along with a colour palette which consists of earthy browns, is conducive to relaxation. Furthermore, potted plants, mainly ferns, are placed around the church in strategic locations and enhance this natural theme. Inside the main entrance is a holy water font that is in continuous motion, powered by a small electrical motor, producing the sound of a bubbling spring. This sound of gently running water, along with the wood finishes and potted plants, completes the impression of a natural environment, located within a congested city of concrete and steel. The major sensory experience of St. Peter Julian's, therefore, is auditory, and the contrast between the noise of the city outside and the quietness of the sacred space within provides an unmistakable sense of stillness and peace in the midst of industry and commerce. Kalekin-Fishman (2010) highlights the importance of sound as offering sensory cues demarcating different social spaces that are used in specific ways at specific times. For example, she describes the auditory rhythms that coincide with different times of the day in Israel during the summer months. In the mornings the sound of people moving off to work, the noise of automobile traffic, and the slamming of doors reverberates, but this gives way after the rush hour to "a stillness that seems to admonish the occasional passing car. A baby's cry cuts into the air, and is followed by a hush" (Kalekin-Fishman 2010: 24). These changes in sound mark the tempo of different social practices

– noisily commuting to work to fulfil the needs of capitalist production, contrasted with the quiet routines of the domestic sphere where the work of human reproduction takes place. Similarly, the contrast in sound evident in St. Peter Julian's demarcates a change in tempo in specific social practices, as visitors move from the noise of the city with its emphasis on commercial trade and work, towards a sacred space of recollection. We will return to St. Peter Julian's Church in the next section to analyse in more detail how its sensory impressions can be understood through an examination of the work of Simmel and de Certeau. Before that, two other churches will be discussed to reveal the sensory experiences they provide.

The second church considered here is St. Patrick's Church Hill, which is one of Sydney's oldest churches and is located near commercial towers occupied by major corporations including banks, finance houses, and national and international companies involved in insurance and investment. The area also features hotels, shopping arcades and various retail stores and eateries. The entry doors to the church face a busy street which leads to the off-ramp lanes of Sydney's Harbour Bridge, meaning that a great deal of traffic passes by the church each hour. Entering from the street one enters a porch, a similar arrangement to that found at St. Peter Julian's, which immediately reduces traffic noise from outside. Solid wooden doors provide access to the church's interior, and once these doors are closed the noise from outside is minimised. Low writes of "sensory disturbances" and "sensory transgressions" which constitute "sensory violations" that need to be overcome if sensory "order" is to be reinstated in urban environments (Low 2013: 226). Low's focus is largely on smells in the city, but noise can also be the source of sensory transgressions that need to be ameliorated. This is achieved in both St. Peter Julian's, and in St. Patrick's, through the use of soundproofing.

Like entering St. Peter Julian's, the visitor to St. Patrick's could again be forgiven for forgetting that one is in the middle of a major city with the headquarters of global financial institutions only a stone's throw away. The floor of the church is carpeted to reduce the sound of footfalls, and the pews are finished

in wood, providing a soft and earthy palette. The silence in the church is in stark contrast to the noise that the visitor experiences outside, of traffic, pedestrians, and the jackhammers at building sites. The church interior is painted in pastel greens and blues, and mounted around the walls are coloured bas reliefs of the Stations of the Cross, and above them painted statues of saints of the Catholic Church. Sitting in the pews the visitor's attention is directed towards the sanctuary, where candles are lit around the altar and the ornate reredos, and the area around the tabernacle is finished in gold, which reflects the gently flickering candle light. Ambient lighting is created by dimly lit bulbs suspended from the ceiling, and soft light comes from a number of colourful stained glass windows. The effect of the gold finish around the tabernacle, stained glass windows and candles provides a focal point for the senses, especially the sense of sight, and if St. Peter Julian's emphasises an auditory sensory experience, then the principle sensory experience at St. Patrick's is visual. The sensory impact of St. Patrick's is enhanced by the four visual reference points mentioned: (1) the coloured Stations of the Cross; (2) the coloured statues of the saints; (3) the stained glass windows; and (4) the high altar and reredos. As one sits in the church the silence of the surroundings fade into the background as one's focus is drawn to these visual cues, all of which are designed to impart spiritual lessons to the faithful, such as devotion to the church and the saints, and the reassurance of a God who resides in a place covered in gold. For the non-religious visitor, this sensory focus remains but with a different emphasis, the message perhaps being to promote the idea of the grandeur of the Church and the security of faith. Regardless of the beliefs or thoughts of the visitor, however, this church provides a place of peace and focus in contrast to the hectic and frantic pace of the city environs outside, and in fact the church describes itself in its Bulletin as: "A spiritual oasis in the midst of the city." St. Patrick's offers a number of Masses throughout the day, aimed at city workers and shoppers. The sacrament of reconciliation is also available, and at any one time there are usually a couple of priests on duty at the church. At the weekday Masses numbers average at about 50

persons per Mass, and outside of Mass times there is a steady stream of visitors, approximately 30 per hour, some of whom come for reconciliation, others who drop in for anywhere from 5 to 30 minutes. About half of the drop-ins will kneel in a posture of prayer, while others sit in silence.

The third church to be discussed here is St. Benedict's, again one of the oldest Catholic churches in Sydney, and located in a busy university precinct in the Western part of the inner city, called Broadway. The church is surrounded by three university campuses, two shopping malls, a number of high rise apartment towers, and a large number of retailers. The church is located on the same street as St. Peter Julian's, and the rush of buses and other traffic continues here. Because the entrance of the church faces a university campus, rather than the road, the issue of noise is not as problematic as at St. Peter Julian's or at St. Patrick's, and less work has had to be done on the church to soundproof it. During the non-teaching period between university semesters the church attracts only a handful of visitors each day, on average about 10 to 17 per hour, but this increases during term time when the surrounding universities are busy with students. The church also serves as the chaplaincy to the University of Notre Dame, Sydney, which is situated close by, and a number of students and staff attend the daily Mass.

The church does not have the temperature controlled environment on offer at St. Peter Julian's or at St. Patrick's and so can be somewhat cold in winter, but cool during hot Australian summers. The church has been renovated in the last few years, but its pre-Vatican II features have been retained, which include an ornate stone high altar and side altars, and stone statues of Christ and saints. Some coloured plaster statues have been added. The church features stained glass windows, and it has been carpeted throughout to reduce noise. The coolness of the interior, the silence, and the stonework, along with the statuary all combine to provide a sense of timelessness and a separation of the self from the mundane concerns of the world. This experience of the sublime, similar to that produced by the other churches discussed above, but

reached via a different sensory pathway, reinforces what this church offers to those who make use of it: quietness and simplicity as opposed to the frenetic pace and relentless stimulation of the city. A powerful sensory experience on offer at St. Benedict's is tactility, the sense of touch. The worn pews, the feel of the cool wood of the hand rail as one settles into a pew, the cool, fresh air that pervades the skin; these are intermixed with the visual and auditory cues of the stained glass windows and statuary, and the silence of the interior space. On some feast days incense is used in the Mass at St. Benedict's. The use of incense is another sensory device reinforcing the contrast between the secular, profane world of everyday life, and the sacredness and special character of the space found within the church. Incense in this instance is used as an olfactory cue to signify the sublime, and research has shown connections are sometimes made in social settings between smells and moral judgements (see Low 2013: 230).

The sensory experiences offered in these churches can be understood through a number of categories. One is a sense of surety offered to the visitor; another is the impression of time standing still; and a third is the notion of stability, of the permanence of the structure that one is sitting in, and by association the permanence of the institution which built this space and its claims to perennial values and to truths that transcend postmodernist notions of relativism and superficiality. This contrasts with the world outside this space, which is rendered fleeting, fickle and focused on things of this world rather than the eternal. A pronounced shift in how time is measured enhances this sensory experience. Upon entering the church and sitting in silence for some time, one's sense of time begins to alter; outside each church is the world of clock time, of public transport timetables, lecture times, deadlines, lunch breaks, and the structure of the working day. This time is precisely measured, with watches, clocks and mobile phones. Inside these churches, however, a different sense of time is made apparent. This is eternal time, devoid of deadlines or timetables, where time and motion slow down to a crawl, or seem to not exist at all. Inside the usual

markers of time going by are absent: ringing phones, buses and cars sitting at traffic lights, clocks ticking over the minutes. Here one is in an open field of time, where it is hard to measure and goes by unnoticed. This new experience of time reinforces the contrast between the permanency of the built structures of the churches discussed, and the fluid world of capitalism outside. This is the experience of the sublime that each church conveys through sensory experience, to the visitor who might wander in and remain within for a few minutes or more. In the following section we will analyse these sensescape through the work of Simmel and de Certeau who were keenly aware of the myriad challenges which urban environments produce for modern individuals.

Urban Churches in the Metropolis

The three churches described above offer a sense of the sublime in the midst of the city, where mundane commercial interests occupy a central place. Each church does this by pervading the senses, but one particular sense is the focus in each of these sacred spaces. St. Peter Julian's offers an auditory experience of silence and a connection with nature; St. Patrick's is a visual encounter of spirituality in contrast to capitalist materialism; and St. Benedict's draws the visitor's attention to the tactile nature of the environment and the transcendence of everyday life. These experiences are potential reasons for the attraction of these churches to those who visit them throughout the day. By investigating three churches in different parts of the city we can see that these issues are not particular to only one church, or reducible to a specific location, but are instead experiences across multiple religious sites. How do these sacred spaces, which offer a sensory encounter in contrast to the busy city outside their walls, aid our understanding of the challenges of modern urbanism and capitalism, and the ways in which social agents navigate these sometimes depersonalising social spaces? In what ways are they acting as havens in a heartless world?

In the *Metropolis and Mental Life* Simmel argues that the unceasing sensory stimulation induced by the

city gives rise to a series of pathologies for individuals exposed to them on a constant basis, ranging from reserve to a blasé attitude. Reserve comes about when social agents move away from rural environments where they know their neighbours and understand how they fit into the interdependent social and economic networks that are essential to survival in such settings. In the city, on the other hand, "one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd," (Simmel 1964: 418), and others are reduced to being anonymous faces with whom reciprocal relationships are rendered opaque by each person's alienated contribution to an amorphous division of labour. The blasé attitude arises from overexposure to the constant barrage of novelty and innovation that is a part of the metropolis. New ideas and technologies, a constant stream of information and events - all of these threaten to overwhelm the individual who tries to take them all in, understand them, and fit them into their worldview. Constant exposure to this influx of sensory stimulation and novelty results in a blunting of the senses, and over time the endless stream of stimulants appears to "the blasé person in an evenly flat and grey tone; no one object deserves preference over any other" (Simmel 1964: 414). The blasé attitude serves as a circuit breaker for the need to be constantly processing new information, and the city-dweller finds it easier to cope with novelty by developing an attitude of nonchalance towards the constant stimulation of the senses. The city excites the intellect, Simmel contends, and the implication of this is that without developing a blasé attitude the metropolitan individual would go mad. But there are consequences to this self-protection: "The self-preservation of certain personalities is brought at the price of devaluating the whole objective world, a devaluation which in the end unavoidably drags one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness" (Simmel 1964: 415).

For Simmel, therefore, the drive towards banality might protect the intellect from the constant barrage of variation concomitant with city life, but at a cost, and this cost is the increased feeling of self-banality. We develop reserve, towards ourselves and towards

others, in an environment where every new thing is rendered routine by the fact that it is new, and each social agent is rendered routine by being yet another new face, a face that is the mask of a subject to be interacted with via market mechanisms of calculation and money exchange. Time and place reign supreme in the metropolis in Simmel's opinion, not people, and the need to be somewhere else rather than where we are, and to live by the exacting discipline of the clock and the watch, leads to ever greater levels of the atomism that Charles Taylor decries in *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Social bonds fragment to the degree that collective action becomes impossible, and individuals now become an easy target for the machinations of global capital and its destruction of communal and ecological environments (Taylor 1991). Simmel reinforces his point that those who live in the metropolis become aliens to their neighbours, and the contrast with the idyllic image of rural life is made glaringly evident, "it is this reserve which in the eyes of small-town people makes us appear to be cold and heartless" (Simmel 1964: 415). Sennett (1992: 39) describes this as living in a "milieu of strangers". The feeling of being lonely in a crowd is now complete, and the fragmentation of social bonds is only noticed once the lock of Weber's iron cage has been snapped shut (Taylor 1991: 98–9). Simmel contends that reserve enhances social fragmentation because of the way in which it generates attitudes of indifference between metropolitans and their individual concerns. The consequence of this is the impact that it has on social groups and associations, which can be impeded in their development by atomism, a point underlined by Robert Putnam's (2000) work on the widespread dissolution of civil associations in American public life (Miles 2000: 16). But at the same time these attitudes of indifference of one city dweller towards another gives rise to greater levels of individual freedom, as metropolitans are not subjected to the close scrutiny of their daily lives which takes place in more close-knit social settings, such as the small town where social agents are known to each other (Simmel 1964: 416; Honneth 2012: 155). But, of course, metropolitan freedom is largely negative freedom, the freedom to be left alone to do what one wills within the con-

finer of common decency and the law, and as Honneth points out, such forms of freedom are not conducive to the maintenance of social bonds (Honneth 2012: 165–6).

Although Simmel makes a number of interesting points about the social fragmentation that the city engenders, his insights on the impact that the city has on the senses are also important. Simmel's account of the sensory impact of the city has established itself as the classic account, and has not been surpassed, but instead is utilised as a point of departure for further investigations on the topic. The metropolis that Simmel observed has now become intensified in terms of its sensory impact on the individual. Simmel's cities were those of the omnibus and the gas lamp, whereas today's cities, although essentially the same in form as those studied by Simmel, are sites of hyper-stimulation driven by digitisation and ever more refined methods of marketing and advertising (see Hahn 2007). Moreover, today's cities dwarf the metropolitan centres of Simmel's day, with the list of those being assigned the title of mega-city growing steadily. However, because the underlying structures of the city that Simmel identified remain in place, such as the money economy, market exchange, and anonymity, his discussion of the blasé attitude, reserve and limited forms of freedom remain valid.

Seen in the light of Simmel's work on the sensory impact of the city, the churches discussed above offer an obvious reprieve from the overstimulation of the metropolis. At St. Peter Julian's, for instance, the drastic contrast between the barrage of advertising and commercial signage in the city, and the quiet, still environment inside the church, reveals the limits of capitalism. In these churches social agents can find reprieve from capitalism's never ending marketisation of goods and services. Such forms of retreat from the world could be said to constitute an "escape attempt" from this aspect of everyday life. As Cohen and Taylor (1976) point out in their classic study, social agents will seek ways of escaping from the routine patterns of their everyday experiences, and do this through a number of strategies, such as pursuing entertainment, therapy, holidays, art or drugs. Religion may be another way for attempting to escape everyday life,

although further research would be required to determine this in the case of the visitors to the three churches discussed here. In short, these churches offer a place of retreat from commercialisation, which goes some way in explaining their continued use in an environment of corporate and bureaucratic values.

How social agents navigate the dehumanising environment of Simmel's sensory overload draws attention to the ways in which individuals make sense of, and create meaning within, everyday life (Bourdieu 1977). Michel de Certeau writes of "tactics" employed by individuals to circumnavigate the "strategies" of institutional domination (Kalekin-Fishman 2013: 717). These tactics draw on the creative use of space and everyday life practices for the successful management of daily life in environments which defy simple explanation. Like Simmel, de Certeau is also aware of the alienating impact of city life. He emphasises the "spatial practices" that social agents use to negotiate the urban matrix, which are manifested in "a rhetoric of walking" (de Certeau 1988: 100). This takes place in two ways. On the one hand individuals interacting with space mirror or correspond to how a constructed order may be manipulated by a person or group; on the other hand there is a mismatch (or a play on words) between the space and how it is used – "deviations relative to a sort of 'literal meaning' defined by the urbanistic system" (de Certeau 1988: 100); in other words walking individuals are similar to singular verbal enunciations, which when not "read" literally can be interpreted as rhetorical. The city for de Certeau is a site of displacement, and in the act of walking social agents highlight themes of absence and dislocation engendered by the city (de Certeau 1988: 103). Each individual's movements adds to a grammar of rootlessness, symbolised by the language of graffiti painted on the side of New York subway cars – moving texts in search of a contextual linguistic structure in which they can be interpreted (de Certeau 1988: 102). Displaced individuals walking the city's pavements exhibit a similar singular reference point that is only made comprehensible within the context of the mass displacement that the city is a backdrop for: "To walk is to lack a place....The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the

city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place" (de Certeau 1988: 103). What we have in the city, therefore, is a loose collective of citizens of unequal social standing interweaving past one another in an ongoing flow of pedestrian traffic of nameless passers-by who have no set place in the environs located between featureless office towers (de Certeau 1988: 103). This anonymity and displacement stands in contrast to the kind of space and social practices found within urban churches. Within these sites we see individuals who have found a secure space, albeit temporarily; a space which is a retreat from the relentless walking of the city's lost inhabitants outside its doors. In St. Peter Julian's, for instance, the centrality of the altar, and the natural themes of the décor and interior, provide the city walker with a place to centre the self in a space that conveys themes of transcendence and permanence – a transcendence of the city and its pace, and a permanence expressed by the fact that each day the church is open, is the same today as it was yesterday, and the rituals that take place within its sturdy walls will continue regardless of the fickleness and fleetingness of the capitalist rush outside.

For de Certeau the city is a structuring space of organisation based on rationalised principles. The city dweller is placed under the control of "a technocratic power" which arranges space and maps out contours along which social actors form their own paths, but with limited choices. Agency, therefore, becomes contested in the city in a tug of war between the individual and the metropolis and its creators, and the city takes on the qualities of Foucault's panopticon (de Certeau 1988: 103–4; Foucault 1977). However, escape from this situation is possible, and de Certeau highlights the importance of the home as a refuge from the harshness of the city, a haven from the anonymity and media stimulation that barrage the individual day after day (de Certeau 1988: 106). The home is a countervailing source of permanence in contrast to the changing nature of the city. The city is a changeling – transforming itself year after year as buildings are demolished or refitted for new uses; it is a palimpsest text which is constantly being rewritten and leaves memories of who once lived where, and what buildings where once used for which purpose

(de Certeau 1988: 108–9). In a similar fashion to the home mentioned by de Certeau, urban churches provide an antidote to the fluidity of the city and its ever changing contours. Cities are like oceans, under constant movement and change, but in form remaining essentially the same; the flow of crowds along the sidewalk are like waves, made up of individual instances that are forever being replaced by another, but in their form remaining the same when viewed as a totality. A metropolitan crowd, viewed from afar, looks the same whether it is located in New York, Singapore or Sydney.

The interior space of the church, in contrast, counteracts this transitory nature of the city. Inside the church time stops, and movement is reduced to a minimum. Inside St. Benedict's, for example, the visitor is confronted with the timelessness of religious stories conveyed through stained glass, images, and icons representing a connection with eternity. A statue of St. Benedict stands in the centre of the church, located within a space that is quiet and still, and conveys a message of permanence. The monastic traditions that the statue symbolises, based on the authority conveyed by the staff that Benedict holds, and the religious habit that he wears, all of this emphasises how time stands still here, how the fleeting nature of the world outside is an illusion and that what is important is to be found within these walls, which with their construction from heavy stone suggests that this building will not succumb to the will of property developers or real estate agents seeking to rezone urban space for the principles of profit. Inside this space social agents can experience a contrast to the temporary nature of city life and connect with a sense of timelessness. During the daily Mass the priest re-enacts the scene of Calvary which took place two thousand years ago in real time, but which according to Catholic theology takes place right there on the altar. In comparison, the transitory desires of the city outside appear shallow. This is highlighted by the way in which Simmel and de Certeau analyse everyday urban life within the context of secularisation, a rationalised practice of everyday life that has come after the forces of modernisation have been established, as examined by Weber in his study of the disenchantment of everyday

life. Modernity has emptied social life of its recourse to the supernatural as a causal explanation and the site of meaning for individuals. The city, in its modern and secular manifestations, becomes the site where the economy and bureaucratic efficiency reign supreme, and where social agents must find coping strategies to counteract the barrage of metropolitan stimulation, while also seeking sources of resistance to counter the power of capitalism's, and bureaucracy's, drive towards an iron cage of rationality. Charles Taylor theorises that another way of looking at this form of rational behaviour is the ascendancy of ordinary life which took place after the Reformers' renovation of religious orders and monastic houses (Taylor 1989: 211–18). For Taylor, "a secular age" is identified by a novel approach to living everyday life, one that sees religious belief as one interpretative option among others (Taylor 2007), and an option that Habermas (2006) argues social agents should have the right to express fully in democratic liberal societies that emphasis secularism in political and cultural life. The use of urban churches, it could be argued, constitutes the use of these rights in practice.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the sensory experiences offered by three urban churches in an effort to understand why they continue to thrive in an environment of capitalism and bureaucracy, which pervades the senses with constant stimulation focused on commercial consumption and the concerns of everyday secular life. As we have seen through a discussion of the work of Simmel and de Certeau, the metropolis is the site for sensory overload leading to reserve and a blasé attitude on the one hand, and a site of power differentials and normlessness on the other which encourages the notion that city dwellers are solitary walkers trying to negotiate the urban landscape as best they can. Charles Taylor's work on modernity and secularism underscores the importance of what Simmel and de Certeau have identified, especially through his argument that in the context of the modern malaise social agents are seeking greater levels of meaning and interconnection.

The three urban churches discussed here help to fill this void. In spaces which pervade the senses with feelings of peace, security and calm, these sacred sites offer an alternative experience to that of the city. Where the city offers speed and novelty, these spaces offer stillness and a feeling of permanence; where the city overloads the senses with consumer directed media and messages, these spaces offer silence in which the mind can be recollected. The steady stream of visitors which these churches attract each day of the week suggests that the sensory experiences they offer go some way in explaining their success, although further research is required to substantiate this more rigorously. In any case, that these churches exist in the city to offer a haven in a heartless urban world reveals that social agents seek a greater variety of sensory experiences over and above the constant barrage of consumer advertising and marketing offered by capitalism.

Notes

¹ This analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork carried out at these churches. The findings at this stage are not intended to explain the motivations of those who attend these churches, rather to verify that the churches are utilised by specific numbers of people throughout the week. The data presented here represents the preliminary findings of an ongoing research project. The conclusions presented in this paper are garnered from the first phase of this research which consists of participant observation and the collection of quantitative data. The research took place throughout 2015. As well as participant observation and quantitative data collection at the churches the author has utilised printed publications from each church, as well as the church's website where available. The author kept fieldwork notes as the research progressed and collated a file of information for each church. The research method of "strolling" was also employed to gather data on the ethos of the city, in line with the work of Bell and de-Shalit (2011). Furthermore, auto-ethnography has been relied on to a certain extent to assist with understanding the sensory distinctions between the city and the churches under discussion. The

second phase of this research will consist of structured interviews with visitors to urban churches, to more clearly ascertain their motivations for attending these religious sites, and the sensory impact of such visits on participants.

² Catholic churches were selected due to their generous opening hours and because of ease of access not always found in other religious spaces due to security or privacy concerns. Furthermore, these churches were researched during week days rather than Sundays, which is the day that Catholics are required to attend Mass.

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