Chapter 18
The City as a Mode of Perception: Corporeal Dynamics in Urban Space

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ABSTRACT
This chapter investigates the notion of corporeal contraction and expansion, a dialectic that philosopher Hermann Schmitz identifies as the primary movement of the felt-body. This alternation is influenced by what the subject encounters in space, and thereby articulates his overall corporeal experience. Different environments, such as natural landscapes or urban spaces, provide distinct types of experiential frameworks that the felt-body habitually responds to with different modulations of the dialectic. For the subject, the typified response of the felt-body to certain environments represents an element of constancy, defined by a set of expectations of events that are likely to occur. The chapter first analyses some key elements of corporeal dynamics then uses two first-person accounts of specific urban situations to describe how the contraction-expansion dialectics underpin all spatial experience.

INTRODUCTION
In his 2015 essay Landschaft als Wahrnehmungsweise (“Landscape as a mode of perception”), German philosopher Hermann Schmitz sets forth the intriguing thesis that the experience of landscape poses the subject in a specific perceptual condition, characterised by the suspension of the constantly acting dialectics between corporeal contraction (‘Engung’) and expansion (‘Weitung’). This special state is not entirely natural in origin, for it has been culturally acquired starting with the “landscape revolution” of the 18th century. Today, this “way of seeing” is incorporated in our interaction with the natural landscape, and it allows us to actually enjoy its restorative capacity, typically expressed by the “lightening” of our corporeal condition (Schmitz, 2015, p. 127).
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The far-ranging implication of this thesis is that the pleasant feeling we usually experience in a natural landscape does not directly derive from the presence of vegetation or of picturesque views, but from the subject’s culturally trained corporeal response to such environments. It is not nature that provides the pleasure of being in the landscape; rather, it is the learnt ability to relax the body’s ever-present tension between the poles of contraction and expansion. This condition can also be experienced in designed spaces: as Wolfgang Meisenheimer observes, “Architectural space, with its contraction and expansion, is a representation of the elementary tension which defines our body’s feelings” (2004, p. 42, author’s translation).

What both Schmitz and Meisenheimer are proposing is a weakening of the causal principle that considers subjects as being influenced by the environment in a one-way relationship. Attunement to a specific space, be it natural or artificial, happens through a form of resonance between the feeling body and the contingent situation it experiences (Pérez-Gómez, 2016, pp. 156-157). Although important, the material qualities of an environment are only a part of what sparks this process: space is given by the (at times dramatic) interrelation between what affects the subject and the way he responds to it. Only through the feeling body, charged with its emotional capacity, can the environment be apprehended as space (Böhme, 2006).

Common experience of cities shows that in some cases they can elicit a sensation of bodily “lightening” comparable to the one arising in a natural setting. If it is possible to credit the thesis that bodily states are not strictly defined by the environment, but rather articulated by a reciprocal mirroring of corporeal dynamics and encountered situations, then it could be argued that the mode of perception Schmitz describes in relation to landscape can sometimes be found in urban settings as well. This chapter, therefore, intends to address a central question arising from this consideration: can it be claimed that the city brings about a specific mode of perception?

There are many different things which go under the term “city”: a thriving Asian metropolis, a small European historic centre, an informal development in Africa or a gated community in an American suburb, despite their fundamental differences, all receive the same denomination (Hasse, 2015, p. 124). Nevertheless, all urban conditions share some basic traits: the man-made supersedes the natural; they are home to people, becoming the theatre of human activities and interaction; their open spaces are in some way or another used for walking and mechanical movement. Although differences could be more than similarities, it is not the intention here to classify cities according to their typological or functional organization, but rather to understand how the subjects inhabiting them come to experience them as space.

This chapter investigates the issue in three steps. The first part addresses the topic of corporeal dynamics, with a focus on the contraction-expansion dialectics put forth by Schmitz. Secondly, the possibility of identifying distinct modes of perception related to typical urban situations will be discussed. In the final part, the description of two “promenades” in very different city contexts will serve to assess the validity of the theoretical considerations as the basis for a deeper analytical understanding of urban space.

The general goal of this chapter is to clarify the relationship between corporeal dynamics, the experience of urban space and its physical structure. Such greater awareness is an important prerequisite for any design action on the existing city, both when it comes to analysing its conditions, and to forecasting future transformation. As a tool providing a deeper understanding of urban reality, its relevance is for designers in practice as well as in education.