

# Conceptualising aesthetic power in the digitally-mediated city

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## Abstract

Aesthetics, generally understood as an intensified emphasis on the sensorial look and feel of urban environments, has become an important perspective through which urban scholarship is examining the economic, social, political and cultural processes of urban regeneration projects across the globe. Much of this aestheticising work is now mediated by many kinds of digital technologies. The entanglement of digital technologies with the sensorial feel of urban redevelopments manifests in many different ways in different urban locations; it is deeply reshaping the embodied experiencing of urban life; and it enacts specific power relations. It is the focus of this paper. Drawing on the work of Lefebvre and Jansson, this article develops the notion of ‘textured’ space in order to offer an analytic vocabulary that can describe distinctive configurations of urban experience at the intersection of specific urban environments, bodily sensations, and digital devices. Analysing embodied sensory politics is important because various aspects of bodily sensoria are central to human experiences of, and relations between, both self and other. Hence bodies are enrolled differentially into different expressions of these new urban aesthetics: while some are seduced, others are made invisible or repelled, or are ambivalently entangled in digitally mediated aesthetic atmospheres. The article offers some examples of the power relations inherent in the textured aesthetics of three of the most significant, and interrelated, processes of contemporary, digitally mediated urban change: efforts to be seen as a ‘world-class city’ and to facilitate gentrification and tourism.

## Keywords

aesthetic, digital, embodiment, sensory, social difference

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## 摘要

美学通常被理解为对城市环境的视觉和感觉的重点强化，已成为城市学术研究考察全球城市复兴项目的经济、社会、政治和文化进程的重要视角。现在，大部分这种美学工作都是通过多种数字技术来实现的。数字技术与城市重建的感官体验的交织在不同的城市地点以多种不同的方式表现出来。它正在深刻地重塑城市生活的具体体验，产生了特定的权力关系。本文就是对此进行重点研究。本文借鉴列菲弗尔（Lefebvre）和詹森（Jansson）的研究成果，发展了“纹理”空间的概念，以便提供分析词汇，可以用其来描述特定城市环境、身体感觉和数字设备交汇处的城市体验的独特配置。分析具身感官政治很重要，因为身体感知的各个方面对于人类自我与他人的体验以及彼此之间的关系至关重要。因此，身体以不同的方式融入这些新城市美学的不同表达中：有些人被吸引，有些人则被隐形或排斥，还有些人矛盾地纠缠在以数字为中介的审美氛围中。本文提供了一些例子，说明当代数字化城市变革的三个最重要且相互关联的进程的纹理美学中固有的权力关系：努力被视为“世界级城市”、促进绅士化以及促进旅游业。

## 关键词

审美、数字、具身、感官、社会差异

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## Introduction

Aesthetics, generally understood as an intensified emphasis on the sensorial look and feel of urban environments, has become an important perspective through which to examine economic, social and cultural processes of urban regeneration projects across the globe (see e.g. Degen, 2008; Fiore and Plate, 2021; Ghertner, 2015; Lindner and Sandoval, 2021; Pow, 2009; Summers, 2019; Walks, 2006). Urban research has identified a range of different aesthetic strategies that play a crucial role in the branding, planning and experiencing of new urban redevelopment projects (Colomb, 2013; Degen and García, 2012; Leszczynski and Kong, 2022; Lindner and Sandoval, 2021; Sacco et al., 2019). For example, city branding campaigns put explicit emphasis on sensory experiences as unique selling points to attract visitors or investment (Degen, 2010; Medway, 2015; Rius Uldemolins, 2014), and computer-generated images by architects evoke future embodied sensations to

sell urban developments (Degen et al., 2017; Melhuish et al., 2016; Rose et al., 2015). These sensations can be visual (Ebbensgaard and Edensor, 2021; Summers, 2019), olfactory (Pinkster and Boterman, 2017), tactile (Degen, 2003, 2008; Edensor, 2022), gustatory (Clot-Garrell et al., 2022), auditory (Järviluoma and Murray, 2023; Paiva and Sánchez-Fuarros, 2021; Summers, 2021) or kinetic (Rose et al., 2021), and are assembled into a particular stylised neoliberal urban landscape by planners and developers alike to create what has been described as a ‘designer heritage aesthetic’ (Degen, 2008) or a ‘world-class aesthetic’ (Ghertner, 2015) which has become an ‘aesthetic common-sense’ (Speake and Kennedy, 2022). Many studies, often summarised under the heading of sensory urbanism (Jaffe et al., 2020), have demonstrated how such efforts replicate dominant trends in architecture and design emanating from the Global North (Heyward-Rotimi, 2023; McNeill, 2008;

Ren, 2011), and, at a more local scale, have revealed the deliberate management and organisation of place-experiences to appeal to dominant white middle-class aesthetic sensibilities (Degen and Ward, 2022; Pow, 2009, 2018). Indeed, much scholarship, including a recent special issue in this journal on transnational gentrification (Hayes and Zaban, 2020), has established the close relationship between many of these aesthetic strategies to create a world class city imaginary and processes of gentrification and tourism, highlighting their imbrication in socio-spatial exclusionary politics within cities (Cocola-Gant and Lopez-Gay, 2020; Davidson and Lees, 2005; Degen, 2008; Jaffe et al., 2020; Lees et al., 2013; Lindner and Sandoval, 2021; Pow, 2009; Sigler and Wachsmuth, 2020; Summers, 2021).

Much of this aestheticising work now occurs through digital technologies. The computer-generated images (CGIs) used by architects, planners and developers to design and evaluate new urban development projects are an obvious example. These CGIs can be highly elaborate and expensive (Rose et al., 2014), or they can be much simpler: either way, it seems they are now an obligatory part of every redevelopment project. However, the mediation of urban aesthetics by digital technologies is much more extensive than just marketing images. Elsewhere, we have argued that in the context of contemporary urban change, the digital mediation of urban aesthetics must be understood more broadly. It involves many different digital hardwares and softwares, shaping many aspects of the sensorial everyday experiencing of urban space (Degen and Rose, 2022). Digital technologies, and particularly smartphone applications and cameras, are now central not only to the representation of city life, but to much of its embodied everyday experiencing. These digital mediations, both professional and ordinary, are often present in particularly

intense forms as cities and neighbourhoods are regenerated, branded and marketed. They are the focus of this paper.

The notion of an urban aesthetics – and its close cousins the urban brandscape (Klingmann, 2007), the experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and the urban atmosphere (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019) – have been examined extensively. This article focuses on the *differentiated* ways in which urban aesthetics are mediated digitally. It assumes not only that this digitally mediated urban aesthetic manifests multisensorily in different ways in different urban locations, but also that the sensations of a particular aesthetic engages different bodies differently. Various aspects of bodily sensoria are central to human experiences of, and relations between, both self and other; for example, skin colour is bound into ‘the political, economic, cultural, and social exploitation of visible human difference’ (Weheliye, 2014: 4). Yet as Gandy (2017) points out, little attention has been paid in the literature on urban atmospheres to questions of bodily difference in relation to variations of sensory intensities and distributions. An exception is the recent discussion by Jaffe et al. (2020) in this journal, which analyses how different tourists experience tours in low income areas through different bodily registers and in different intensities depending on their own subject positions and particular tour guide. However, embodied experience as evoked in most discussions on contemporary urban sensations tends to assume a universal body ‘seemingly devoid of gender or any other kind of social difference, or indeed any clear sense of historical or geographical context beyond the confines of the (late) modern European city’ (Gandy, 2017: 369). There is therefore a need for a more nuanced analytical vocabulary which can address this absence. Drawing loosely on the work of Lefebvre (1991) to develop the concept of ‘texture’ (Jansson, 2013), we offer just such a vocabulary to address distinctive

configurations of the new urban aesthetic at the intersection of specific urban environments, bodily sensations, and digital devices.

Elsewhere, we have conceptualised the intimate entanglement of digital technologies and the sensorial feel of urban redevelopment as the ‘new urban aesthetic’, building on a series of case studies of the production and use of computer-generated images, social media and navigation apps in three cities (Degen and Rose, 2022). In this article we push our argument further by drawing on a broad range of scholarship to think explicitly about the power relations that are enacted in different configurations of the new urban aesthetic. Our extensive review of the intersection of the literatures in urban studies and digital media studies suggests that there are three urban processes in which the digital mediation of aestheticised urban experience is especially intense: gentrification, tourism, and world-class city-making. These three processes are of course interconnected. Many cities globally are investing in their ‘brand’, aiming to present themselves as attractive destinations. Investments in cultural institutions and events are also often made part of a city’s brand and also of its efforts to attract tourists. And while such institutions and events can be large scale, smaller scale creative activities attract tourists too while simultaneously also often being part of the gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods.

None of these three processes are new. Their digital mediation has three specific consequences however. The first is an intense focus on visual images and the visual appearance of cities and the bodies that inhabit them (though, as we will argue, other sensoria are also implicated in urban aesthetics). City marketing materials are primarily visual, and they circulate through a digital media ecosystem which is also saturated by images. Secondly, that imagery is multiple and complex, not least because social media

has transformed the imaging of cities, allowing anyone with a smartphone to picture a site and share it online (Törnberg and Uitermark, 2022). And finally, urban environments now are full of the screens on which digital media are displayed, including large public screens and smartphone screens. They are very often in sight and to hand, inflecting bodily experiences of urban space and time (Rose, 2022; Rose et al., 2021). These effects are why we have described these processes as a *new* urban aesthetic: the way cities are experienced is increasingly mediated digitally. In this paper, we ask what bodies and sensations are engaged or excluded in the digital mediation of urban aesthetics. This aesthetic power is one critical element of the many power relations which are shaping contemporary cities.

The next section of this article offers a conceptual framework for approaching the sensory power relations inherent in the new urban aesthetic. The paper then draws on the work of a range of scholars exploring different kinds of digital technologies and their uses in different kind of urban redevelopment, to explore how digitally mediated, sensory urban life is ridden with distinct and complex embodied power relations.

## **Aesthetic power in the digitally mediated city**

How can we conceptualise the sensory power relations embedded within digital mediations of the urban in contemporary branding and redevelopment processes? By focussing on processes of digital mediation, this article elaborates how ‘the process of mediation is a process of *differentiation*; it is a historically and cultural significant process of the temporal stabilisation of mediation into discrete objects and formations’ (Kember and Zylinska, 2012: xvi, emphasis in original). Our understanding of the power relations inherent in the new urban aesthetic therefore

refers to both what is stabilised in specific versions of the aesthetic and also what an aesthetic does not allow to become actual and experienced. We develop our understanding of this aesthetic power by drawing on Jansson's (2013) discussion of Lefebvre's (1991) well-known triadic notion of space.

Jansson (2013) describes mediatised spaces as 'textured', which 'refers to the communicative weave, or fabric, that is created through human activities in space', which can involve representations such as the images posted on social media but which is also 'a deeply embodied sense as we learn how to move and act in various settings' (p. 286). Jansson's discussion of textured spaces draws specifically on Lefebvre's triad of space as conceived, perceived and lived, though it takes a more phenomenological approach to Lefebvre's account of space as an ongoing practice constructed through bodies engaged in the building, representing, framing and experiencing of space (see also Kinkaid, 2020; Simonsen, 2005; Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020). A texture thus refers to a specific combination of perceived, conceived and lived urban experiences and the embodiments that they assume. In the context of the urban processes discussed above, this focus on and specification of experience is important because, while the original participatory promise of the internet has certainly soured, it remains the case that social media platforms are deeply embedded in much of everyday urban life and have significant potential for producing, sharing and consuming a very wide range of materials with lived effects. The use of social media such as Facebook (Rodgers, 2022), Twitter/X (Bosch, 2017) and TikTok (Kaye et al., 2022; Zhang, 2021) as a tool in many contemporary urban struggles is notable, for example, as well as its more ordinary use in recording everyday experiences (Serafinelli, 2018) and maintaining social networks (see e.g. Cowen et al., 2020), status (Boy and Uitermark, 2024) and identity (see e.g. Brock, 2020).

It is also the case that the same social media platforms have been adopted as a further tool for urban branding by city authorities, tourism boards and others. Social media provide architects, developers and place-making agencies with a platform to present their future designs and plans as well as post promotional materials about events and activities in neighbourhoods. However, social media's platform format allows everyone to post about their urban experiences, so that 'it is no longer possible to separate place managers and public authorities as the sole producers of brand images and the public as the consumer' (Sevin, 2013: 229). Indeed, user-generated content has become the most trusted and diverse source of online information for urban visitors and tourists, and platforms such as Instagram have become the main way of identifying the latest hip neighbourhood or new restaurant (Acuti et al., 2018; Boy and Uitermark, 2017). The (re)circulation of many kinds of images by many urban dwellers for many purposes thus also requires a nuanced analytical vocabulary to understand the multiple urban sensibilities generated. The question of who becomes visible and where remains important (Aiello, 2021) but is no longer sufficient: the question is also how are things made visible and with what embodied consequences? As the article will demonstrate in the following sections, such online content prioritises specific ways of feeling and doing in particular places, and hence distributes particular forms of sensibility in and across different urban locations.

So let us elaborate on Jansson's (2013) notion of texture which aims to capture the communicative density of the space that is created by the interaction between images and embodied social practices. Jansson develops Lefebvre's spatial trialectic to conceptualise a spatiality of mediation. The first element of Lefebvre's (1991) account is *conceived* urban space, which refers to abstract, representational spaces, constituted when

'knowledge of [urban] material reality is comprehended essentially through thought, as *res cogito*, literally "thought things" ' (Soja, 1996: 79); this can be in the form of verbal, visual or written representations. Jansson suggests this aspect of urban space takes the form of the circulation of representations of spaces and places (Jansson, 2013: 283) which, as Lefebvre highlights, is supported by their visual character: 'they are made with the visible in mind: the visibility of people and things, of spaces and whatever is contained in them' (Lefebvre, 1991: 75). The importance of CGIs to urban redevelopment projects highlights the importance of conceived urban space. These images are carefully designed to convey a particular version of the inhabitation of urban space. Using the affordances of digital software, buildings are rendered immaculate, the lighting gorgeous, the people occupying this space at leisure. Many attempt the kind of photo-realism available in softwares' cut-and-paste functionalities to persuade viewers of the accuracy of their version of these redevelopments. In many accounts, including Lefebvre's, conceived urban space is created by the 'dominant discourses' produced by city planners, developers and governments (Simonsen, 2005). As already noted, however, a key aspect of the shift wrought by the pervasiveness of digital technologies in many cities now is that the distinction between dominant and other visions of urban life is much less clear. Social media platforms can host vigorous debate about development proposals (for one example, see Rodgers, 2022), for example. There are tweets and blog posts that critique or parody glamorous CGIs, and indeed sidestep them entirely to produce quite different representations of space (Rose et al., 2015).

The second element of the textured spatiality of digital mediation is *perceived* space. Perceived urban space refers to the immediately observable materiality and traceable uses and practices and patterns in everyday

life. *Perceived urban aesthetics* thus refers to the everyday relations between bodies, urban built environments and 'the more material, sensuous dimensions of the media; the very stuff in terms of tools and infrastructures for mediation that make up our everyday environments' (Jansson, 2013: 282). Under the condition of the new urban aesthetic, the perceived materialities of a street and a body must include digital technological devices such as smartphones but also many other kinds of digital infrastructure devices, from environmental sensors to phone signal and Wi-Fi transmitters, to digital billboards and server exchanges. Immediately related to the aesthetics of digitally mediated perceived space, however, is recent work on the visual appearance of platforms in urban neighbourhoods. Leszczynski and Kong (2022), for example, offer a typology of the visible, material signs of urban platforms in gentrifying neighbourhoods of three Canadian cities, including 'shared bicycles or e-scooters that may be located and rented via a mobile device; coinless parking metres that indicate the necessity of payment for street parking via an app; and stickers on the storefronts of restaurants and eateries advertising on-demand delivery by any number of meal courier platforms' (Leszczynski and Kong, 2022: 9; see also Leszczynski and Kong, 2023), and suggest that such objects have an aesthetic of 'cool' online digitality which imbues everyday life in the neighbourhoods that host them.

The final spatial element of urban aesthetics is *lived* urban space, the space of users and inhabitants. In Lefebvre's words, it is 'space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols ... It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects' (Lefebvre, 1991: 39). Jansson (2013) describes the lived aspect of mediation as what saturates everyday life and holds it together as a normal way of doing things. Lived space is produced by social practices, which bring together representational meanings with bodily experience. This is

a critical aspect of the experiencing of various versions of new urban aesthetics: the saturation of everyday lived space in cities by digital technologies of many kinds and their specific mediations of 'the warp and weft' of urban life (McQuire, 2016: 20). Lived space is thus the space of the imagination and personal experiences where the situated body interprets, feels and engages subjectively with the mediated images, meanings or narratives and where the normalisation of social practices happens.

A recent essay by Wall (2023), drawing on US Black theorisations of the 'internal colony', is an exemplary account of how a perceived and lived urban aesthetic can include some bodies while excluding others. Wall's focus is the urban policing of 'public order'. Wall argues that one of the modalities of urban policing is 'atmospheric': the police as an institution and through affect-saturated encounters produce a series of 'background effects', which might be understood as a particular kind of *lived* space. In that space, those constituted by the police as 'suspect populations' must remain 'vigilant to the everyday ordering around them' (Wall, 2023: 113): thus black bodies enter those lived urban spaces through a constant 'haze of suspicion' which is 'a sort of background hum' intensified by sight of particular objects – a police car or a truncheon – and those objects' capacities for violence (Wall, 2023: 115). This account can be glossed in the spatial vocabulary we develop here in terms of the material objects of perceived space intervening and reconfiguring a lived space which is itself conceived through racist representations of different bodies. In contrast, bodies seen by the police as less threatening – that is, white bodies – are differently located, and insensitive to those perceived and lived spaces. Wall (2023) describes them as anaesthetised to that space. An anaesthetic is precisely a substance that produces a loss of sensation. However, Wall also points to yet further spaces that

might be layered onto such an urban scene. Their example is Gilmore Wilson's sketch of a Venice Beach boardwalk, where young, excited, boisterous multiracial crowds can 'crack open the atmosphere of suspicion, and their joyful affects seep through', disrupting one lived space with another (Wall, 2023: 115).

The production of an urban, digitally mediated aesthetic can entail very different combinations and forms of perceived, conceived and lived space. However, while we propose that the concept of 'texture' as we have elaborated it here offers a useful analytic vocabulary, it does not align specific embodiments with each of the three components of urban aesthetic texture. Social power relations are scripted on and through specific forms of embodiment in extraordinarily complex, intersectional ways in different places, as countless feminist, Black, queer and crip scholars have demonstrated, and these are entangled with conceived, perceived and lived spaces in multiple ways. That complexity speaks to the critical purpose of this article's reworking of Lefebvre's spatial trialectic as texture: it allows the unpacking of such complex, digitally mediated spatialities in order to specify the diversely embodied power relations of specific productions of space in particular places. The perceived aspect of the new urban aesthetic pays attention to the particular shaping of the urban materiality by ubiquitous digital devices and software; the conceived aspect focusses attention on the representations created and shared by many different users of digital technologies; and the lived aspect pays attention to how sensory power relations are negotiated in everyday life, experiences and practices. Moreover, since these three aspects do not always align, this Lefebvrian conceptualisation of urban space also 'operates as a challenge to the homogenising spatial logic of capital and bourgeois culture, threatening to unravel its ideology and produce space *otherwise*'

(Kinkaid, 2020: 168, emphasis in original). The notion of textured space thus allows for a more critical vocabulary that can describe the characteristics of different versions of the new urban aesthetic. The next section deploys this vocabulary to analyse various textures in relation to the three dominant processes of contemporary urban place-making.

### **The texturing of aesthetic power**

This section focuses on three of the most important forms of contemporary urban redevelopment: those which gentrify neighbourhoods; those which aim to attract tourists; and those which aim to assert the status of ‘world-class city’. Versions of these are found in many different cities, and the digital mediation of their sensorial aesthetics enacts particular forms of embodiment. Analysing their textures allows a more explicit account of their inherent aesthetic power relations.

#### *Aesthetic power in the ‘world-class city’*

Place-marketing techniques have long been central to efforts to gain or maintain ‘world-class city’ status to attract international investment, host expos and attract global consumers. Many cities strive for that status in part by branding themselves through various kinds of visualisations digitally created since ‘the digital medium allows (though never guarantees) the production of powerful visceral place atmospheres, constructed by following a specific scripted “formula”’ (Degen et al., 2017: 21; see also Aiello, 2021; Colomb, 2013; Greenberg, 2009). Conceived images of the world-class city are created by the policy makers and politicians who manage a city, and the agencies and studios they hire to design their marketing strategies and their spectacular architectural projects (Arantes, 2019; Ghertner, 2015). The aim is to display the city on the global catwalk to investors and visitors in a never-ending cycle

of seductive images of future buildings which circulate through cities and across the globe in magazines, websites, expos, billboards, policy documents, architectural competition briefs, social media streams and award ceremonies. Such imagery generally treads a fine line between asserting the distinctiveness of the city being pictured while also rendering it familiar to its assumed audiences (Aiello, 2021; Speake and Kennedy, 2022). This often results in a celebration of ‘local’ heritage, arts and culture situated alongside a Western aesthetic of broadly modernist architecture, though it may also feature spectacular architectural projects which are ‘now assessed according to their visual impact which reinforces the importance of the appearance of skins and surfaces ... in a new photogenic superficiality’ (Arantes, 2019: 7).

As Soja (1996) highlights, this conceived ‘imagined geography tends to become the “real” geography, with the image or representation coming to define and order the reality’ (p. 79). Studies of Delhi (Ghertner, 2015), Ouagadougou (Tinguiri, 2023) and Edinburgh (Tooley, 2020) demonstrate the embodied specificity of those visions. Aesthetic judgements about what looks attractive and glamorous according to world-city conventions condemn certain neighbourhoods and their inhabitants as too visually unattractive to survive in a world-city. Ghertner (2015) suggests that this is a common trend across cities worldwide. Governance decisions are made on the basis of quite specific aesthetics: world-class cities are increasingly governed by ‘codes of appearance, not documents or records’ (Ghertner, 2015: 6). This has direct consequences for the bodies that can be made visible in such cities. Conceived spaces of world-class urban glamour constitute poor, displaced and marginalised populations as well as neighbourhoods as noxious nuisances and exclude them from their digitally produced visions of future urbanity. CGIs



of large redevelopment projects thus produce images of conceived spaces in which the original inhabitants of the site, as well as the labourers who built it, are rendered invisible. While some projects may take considerable care to populate their CGIs with figures that indicate local people as well as global consumers (Melhuish et al., 2016), these figures never ‘look as if’ they live anywhere other than in a middle-class enclave.

Social media platforms allow for various engagements with such imaging and its consequences. In particular, the literature suggests that digital media are deployed less to create alternative conceived images of cities and more to generate many forms of inventive lived space which reassert the embodied presence of those excluded from the images of world-class cityness (Rose, 2017). Individuals, neighbourhood-based collectives and friendship groups use whatever digital tools are to hand to enact different kinds of lived spaces: ‘smart’ citizens are reconfigured by canny performances of *chatur* citizenship (Datta, 2018); Whatsapp messaging enables women to travel through streets and on public transport feeling safe (Datta and Thomas, 2022); collectives are galvanised to organise and campaign against the demolition of their homes (Cowen et al., 2020) and to protest proposed redevelopment projects (Walters and Smith, 2024) or state-sponsored challenges to their own aesthetic practices of cleanliness (Poleykett, 2022). Each of these examples point to the specific texturing of world-class city-making, which is both conceived in highly restrictive ways but never truly monopolises lived experiences of urban life.

### *Aesthetic power in gentrifying neighbourhoods*

The second texture this article explores is that of the gentrifying neighbourhood. Gentrification is a complex phenomenon,

and has been the subject of a great deal of research of course. Much of that work has emphasised the significance of aesthetics to gentrification, in terms both of the relation of gentrification to the creative industries and of the centrality of cultural capital to gentrifier identities. The discussion here explores some of the specifically digital dynamics of such aestheticisation in cities.

A range of studies have started to explore the imbrication of social media and urban change, including gentrification processes. It is clear that social media, in particular Instagram, has intensified and accelerated processes of gentrification by sharing aestheticised images of places, which produce conceived representations of place that attract visitors. For example, Chang and Spierings (2023) have examined how the Instagrammable nature of speciality coffee bars is linked to the commercial gentrification processes in Seoul; Degen and Ward (2022) have analysed how a range of digital visualisations from CGIs to YouTube videos and Instagram posts are used to future-brand a neighbourhood in London; and Polson (2024) has examined how the transformation of Denver’s RiNo Art District from an industrial and warehouse district to one of USA’s most popular street art destinations went hand in hand with the incessant posting on Instagram of its street art. Polson’s work is particularly relevant to our argument of a textured aesthetic, because it demonstrates how such conceived spaces are related to shifts in experienced space in which bodies are imbricated differently. Not only did the social media posting of graffiti and mural art represent the area before its redevelopment, but the posting of graffiti led to officially sanctioned street art festivals in an attempt to further sell the area to investors, developers and the broader public. And as street murals and graffiti were posted online, people become familiar with places that some might have previously regarded as dangerous but were now conceived as ‘hip and hot’. Polson’s (2024)

analysis points to the exclusionary workings of this specific aesthetic: the highly selective representation of the RiNo Art District online does not portray any of the racial and gentrification conflicts in the area, nor the displacement of African American and Hispanic communities and the physical exclusion of their sensorial embodiments from the newly gentrified areas (see also Summers, 2019).

The popularity of the online street art posts has also reconfigured the perceived aesthetic on the ground as ‘alleys are cleaned up by removing informal dwellings and their inhabitants, but electrical wires, dumpsters, and weeds remain to give the walls [with graffiti murals] that run along them just the right gritty backdrop for good urban photoshoot’ (Polson, 2024: 89). This article has already noted another example of the perceptible aesthetic signs of urban cool: various objects associated with urban platforms (Leszczynski and Kong, 2022). A sustained analysis of the digitally mediated production of the coolness of gentrification in Amsterdam by Boy and Uitermark also emphasises its embedding in the everyday perceived spatialities of local gentrifiers and social media influencers (Boy and Uitermark, 2017, 2020, 2024; Bronsvooort and Uitermark, 2022). Working with a dataset of 34.4 million Instagram interactions that tag Amsterdam, as well as street observations and interviews, this work demonstrates how ‘Instagram users selectively and creatively reassemble the city as they mobilise specific places in the city as stages or props in their posts. Instagram images, in turn, become operative in changing the city’ (Boy and Uitermark, 2017: 613). Boy and Uitermark (2017) identify a number of partially distinct gentrifying groups, each of which carefully pictures certain objects as part of the sensory experiencing of its neighbourhood in its Instagram posts: its music in clubs, its drinks in bars and coffee shops, the architecture of its streets. Paralleling Polson’s (2024) discussion of the selective representation of the

RiNo art district, non-white, non-bourgeois and non-hip bodies and tastes rarely appear in these lived images. Bronsvooort and Uitermark (2022) argue that such online activity constitutes the performance of bourgeois whiteness (and in the case of many lifestyle influencers, white bourgeois femininity). These lived spaces are not the same as the lived diverse streets that currently retain many immigrant-run shops, but which do not appear online, leading one local business owner with a Moroccan background in Amsterdam to offer advice to other non-white entrepreneurs on how to ‘Insta-proof’ their business (Bronsvooort and Uitermark, 2022: 2871). In an echo of Ghertner’s argument about aesthetic control, however, both Polson’s work on Denver and Bronsvooort and Uitermark’s research in Amsterdam illustrate that urban planners are increasingly adopting the same Instagram-friendly representational style as part of their planning strategies.

Boy and Uitermark’s (2017) study emphasises that gentrifiers aestheticise their own neighbourhoods in somewhat different ways, often signalled by the objects in their Instagram posts. Their images of lived spatialities on social media platforms tend to emphasise the visual and everyday aspects of neighbourhood life, although only certain food, drink, architecture, objects and bodies become visual signs of ‘cool’. The lived experiences of these platforms’ app use – particularly sharing photographs and following influencers of various kinds – spreads this gentrified urban aesthetic very widely. However, other aesthetics remain possible. While the lived experiences of Black bodies and the history of Black resistance and politics in a gentrifying neighbourhood such as RiNo art district in Denver are not made visible, Summers (2021) points to other everyday practices that may challenge that distribution of the sensible, in particular the aural aesthetics produced by playing particular kinds of

music popular amongst Black and Latinx residents, which become a sensory battle-ground in intensely gentrifying neighbourhoods.

### *Aesthetic power in tourism destinations*

The third texture of the new urban aesthetic discussed here is its role in relation to tourism. Attracting tourists is one of the key means for many cities to attract income and revenue. Tourists are attracted not just by elaborately conceived branding campaigns in the mainstream media but also use their Instagram, Tik-Tok and Facebook apps, as well as a growing number of ‘alternative tourism’ apps (Jansson, 2019), to research destinations before they visit to find the best restaurant, coolest neighbourhood or latest graffiti, and this clearly intersects with both the social media practices that gentrify neighbourhoods as cool and the branding of cities as ‘world-class’. The circulation of images of urban locations, objects and events on social media platforms mean that the same images that serve world-class city marketing campaigns can also appear in posts by tourists to a city; and posts by neighbourhood gentrifiers can be picked up by tourists (Bronsvort and Uitermark, 2022; Zhou and Wang, 2014).

The previous two discussions of digital aesthetic textures focused on different kinds of conceived images and perceptible objects which mediate the production of world-class cities and gentrifying neighbourhoods respectively. The first were the polished CGIs used by city planning authorities; the second the influencer aesthetics mediating gentrification. Our focus in this shorter section demonstrates that aesthetic power is not only visual. It also demonstrates again how attending to its viscerality can show how an urban aesthetic differentiates embodied experience. Much has been written on how the digitally mediated promotion of places impacts their social practices (Boy and Uitermark, 2024; Bozzi, 2020;

Degen and Ward, 2022; Jansson, 2018, 2020). Jansson, for example, emphasises how alternative tourist apps enable tourists to gain paid access ‘to “no-tourist highlights” presented by “handpicked locals only”’ (Jansson, 2019: 170). As Jansson remarks, this starts changing the social interactions and aesthetic engagements in the lived space as ‘analysis suggests that alternative tourism apps contribute to the normalisation of middle class ways of appropriating and displaying middle class neighbourhoods’ (Jansson, 2019: 177). Research by Paiva and Sánchez-Fuarros (2021) on tourism in Lisbon also demonstrates how digitally curated sensorial touristic experiences are deliberately conceived and staged on particular tourist corridors by a diversity of stakeholders from hotels to stores to street performers:

they are generally guided by a recurring ensemble of certain atmospheric elements that compose what has been called the ‘Lisbon brand’, a city branding strategy focused on the remaking of local identity, history, traditions, nostalgia and memory, often exaggerating and amplifying (and exaggerating) the city’s cosmopolitan and culturally diverse character. (Paiva and Sánchez-Fuarros, 2021: 397)

Paiva and Sánchez-Fuarros demonstrate that these designed tourist sensations have produced what they term ‘collateral atmospheres’ for the residents of those tourist corridors, often expressed via neighbourhood-based Facebook groups, which include experiences such as feelings of distress and anxiety during night-time sonic entertainment events, the ‘morning after atmosphere’ created by perceiving the detritus left behind after such events, and a sense of ‘inauthentic atmospheres’ as tourist shops replace shops that cater for local residents. Paiva and Sánchez-Fuarros (2021) note the affective and embodied feelings of such collateral atmospheres as well as their material and social effects on families and communities.

The Lisbon brand in this instance has very different lived effects for tourists and for residents.

Our discussion of the textures of three different iterations of urban aesthetic power has explored efforts to brand a city as world-class and worth visiting, and as hip and 'cool'. We have emphasised several ways in which digital technologies are mediating these different kinds of place-making. Digital technologies are enrolled in the creation and circulation of images which show these qualities visually, very often, whether through the use of sophisticated architectural rendering software, or smartphone cameras and social media campaigns. The article has emphasised how these conceived and lived mediations of places circulate widely once they are online, and are joined by a multiplicity of other place images, some of which enact their own particular aesthetic as they become conventionalised by, say, Instagram influencers or protest organisations. These various processes become embedded in urban materiality and practice through their strongly sensorial qualities. Planners make decisions through the filter of the 'gram' or of what looks 'world-class', tourists visit places they have found on an app that points to more 'authentic' experiences of a place, gentrifiers celebrate particular tastes and sights. These aesthetics are textured: their spatial organisations invite specific embodied sensations of identification and resistance. The sensoriality of the digital mediation of places is thus shifting the production of urban space in contemporary cities.

## Conclusion

Neoliberal capitalism's constant need for reinvention is increasingly reliant on the continual expansion of technologies and practices of an 'expressive infrastructure' that will act as 'a pipeline for affect and imagination',

particularly between consumers and products and between inhabitants and the city (Thrift, 2012: 144). While several authors emphasise that an urban aesthetic can be designed but not necessarily imposed (Degen, 2008; Paiva and Sánchez-Fuarros, 2021; Sumartojo and Pink, 2019), we suggest that the ubiquity of digital devices and the sensoriality of the aesthetics that emerge in lived space can, and do, facilitate the embedding of particular distributions of sensed experiences into urban life.

By exploring various aspects of the digital mediation of urban space, this article is attentive to the contradictions within and between different versions of the new urban aesthetic, noting how 'how visualisations of urban redevelopment oscillate between smoothness and friction in their surface engagements with the city' (Lindner and Sandoval, 2021: 4). However, it focusses more directly on the question of which bodies are enrolled in particular versions of the new urban aesthetic. While some bodies may find certain forms of urban aesthetics seductive because they identify with the places and practices and people represented, others may feel alienated, distressed, ignored or simply bored. The triadic Lefebvrian analytical vocabulary of textured aesthetic power developed here can describe these multiple experiences, as well as ambiguous experiences of urban change like Fraser and Wilmott's (2020) playful entanglement of the aesthetics of ruin and progress in Salford and Manchester, or Aiello's (2021) ambivalence towards a regenerated zone in Bologna. Other urban aesthetics may produce sensibilities that take a very different sensory form. Some aesthetics are simply not felt at all by some populations: some aesthetics produce forms of anaesthetics (Wall, 2023). Embodied articulations of class, race and gender are reproduced in all of the examples discussed in this paper, and as the digital mediation of cities intensifies,

it is more than likely that more and new forms of embodied differentiation will emerge too.

Hence the ongoing need to analyse sensory power in the city in its digitally mediated forms. It also suggests at least two different lines of enquiry to further elaborate the aesthetic power dynamics of contemporary urban redevelopment. One is to investigate a wider range of professional digital image-making practices, whether for tourist boards, planners or developers. Digital images and technologies are shaping their design practice in a range of ways. CGIs continue to visualise future developments or attract visitors to new or lesser known locations. However, digital visualisations are extending their form and reach and thus mediating urban space in new ways. Few studies have explored how urban spaces are currently being restructured and planned with their social media presence in mind, for example (but see Banks, 2022; Degen and Ward, 2022). And then there is the use of digital screens that offer more immersive, interactive embodied engagement in cities, from three-dimensional digital billboards, to virtual and augmented reality ‘experiences’, to the construction of new immersive digital entertainment districts like London’s Outernet, which opened in 2022. Described as ‘a gigantic walk-in billboard’ and as ‘one of the strangest structures in London’, it hosts three times as many screens as Piccadilly Circus, ‘forming a 360-degree brandscape designed to bombard you with messaging from all directions’ (Wainwright, 2022). What is striking when visiting Outernet is the complexity of this space, where individuals capture and post the spectacular digital visuals on their phone alongside the smells of overflowing rubbish while security guards hover. With more and more urban locations and events being branded as ‘immersive’, the texturing of embodied experience promises to be a fruitful critical lens

through which to examine the ongoing digital mediation of urban life.

The second and related direction for future research suggested by our analysis focuses on the embodied practices of everyday encounters with different forms of digital urban imagery in order to better understand the more ordinary, less spectacular digital mediations of urban lived spatial textures. There are very few studies that explore how many kinds of digital media are embedded in everyday urban life (but see Törnberg and Uitermark, 2022). Difficult as it would be to conduct (but see Järviluoma and Murray, 2023; Krajina, 2014), an investigation into the everyday experiencing of multiple online urban aesthetics would generate a better understanding of the power dynamics of such textured aesthetic experiences (and build on the work of, e.g. Guano, 2022 and Tooley, 2020).

We have argued that thinking through the digital mediation and experience of urban space as a form of spatiality textured by conceived, perceived and lived city spaces can generate a more capacious vocabulary for interrogating embodied sensory politics because it draws attention to the presence of digital media in cities; to their widespread use to represent cities; to the multiplicity of ways this might happen. Ultimately, we argue that analysing embodied sensory politics is key to understanding cities, as bodily sensoria are central to human experiences of self and relations between self and other.

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