

Soundscaping Your Fair

We live in a world of the senses. Each sense in its turn; sight, sound, touch, taste, smell (and some would say the sense of thought) is used by humans to create an impression of their world. One could argue that certain senses are more "vital" especially in terms of basic survival. Clearly, life is more severely challenged by defects in some senses as compared to others. For example, no one would claim that the lack of the sense of taste is as compromising as having no sense of sight, or a dull sense of smell is as debilitating as having a diminished sense of hearing. Though each of our senses uses varying amounts of our neural energy, it can be argued that no one sense is any more important than any other when it comes to the complete appreciation of the experience of life.

When basic survival is no longer the issue, why should any one sense be considered more important than another? There are several popular reasons, social situations for instance. Let's say we are talking to a friend about a potential blind date. Our first question is not usually, "well, what do they smell like?" (Though perhaps it should be.) More likely it is simply, "What do they look like?" It would be hard to argue that we do not live in a culture that emphasizes the appearance of things (sight) over all other attributes.

In terms of the body's physiology, the sense of sight utilizes more nerves than any other sense. Socially, physically and psychologically sight is the predominate sense of the modern age - is it any wonder then that it is the one that garners the majority of our attention when it comes to grooming our fairgrounds. Perhaps it is time for a change. With the advent of the age of electronics, and more recently computers, our ability to cater to our other senses has become not only more convenient, but also more necessary.

The other senses, though often thought of as subtle when compared to sight, are none the less powers to be reckoned with. The taste of a food ultimately determines its desirability regardless of how attractive the presentation. The fit and feel of an item of clothing is often the determining factor of whether we ever wear that garment that looked so great when we bought it at the mall. And no matter how pretty the lips, they will never get kissed if the smell of the mouth makes you keep your distance.

A case could be made that the visual centers on the brain are mere slaves to the other senses. A few examples:

You stick your hand into a box, the contents of which you cannot see, and using only your sense of touch you conjure up a horde of frightening images of what the prickly contents could be. Later you discover it is merely a hair brush.

The blood curdling scream and ghostly wail is discovered to be nothing more than a peacock showing off to its mate.

The smell of fresh baked cookies takes us back to a vivid image of Grandma's kitchen in our youth.

The feel of something lightly brushing across our face provokes a storm of slaps at a spider that is not really there.

In many ways the sense of sight provokes these cheap illusions. Our tendency to believe in false impressions forms the foundation of Hollywood movies and Las Vegas magic shows. The sense of sight is easily appeased. A fresh coat of paint on an old building does nothing to make it stronger, but it sure looks good, and every used car salesman knows that just polishing the windows on an old car will increase its sales price.

I am not saying that we should not be concerned with the look of a fair, of course we should, it is one of it's most important features, but there is no reason to sacrifice other elements within our control and just rest contented with the appearance of things.

In an attempt to overthrow the tyrannical power of the sense of sight I propose we explore the next most vital sense, the sense of hearing, through the use of this simple analogy. Landscaping is to the sense of sight as soundscaping is to the sense of hearing. As a renowned Madison Avenue advertising executive once observed, "You don't sell the steak, you sell the sizzle."

Soundscaping is a case where often times less is more, and dramatic improvements can be more easily obtained than you might think, especially when you stop thinking and start listening.

What does your fair sound like? Could you be blindfolded, guided around the grounds and know where you are? Probably to a much greater extent than you might think at first. Use the analogy of landscaping to guide you. Just as you have areas that are indoors and outdoors you need areas that are amplified and areas that are not. Just as you have areas of brightly colored flowers and shady trees, you need places for the screams of carnival riders and the conversation of families. Let people hear your fair, don't cover it up in a background wash of generalized noise. Is your idea of landscaping to paint every bush, building, walkway and food booth a dull gray. No! But many of you do just that when it comes to your soundscaping. Sound has a cumulative effect on the senses, more is not always better, increasing amplitude leads to the production of a bland sameness. What sound would you like to hear at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, rap music or the wind in the trees. Even a bad band turned up too loud commands our attention. Where are your quiet areas? Soundscaping is more within your control than you might at first think, but it is a decision that is too often left to the control of other people's judgment.

Each of the senses has a vital role to play in our appreciation of life. Each in its turn is precious and unique. We are an integrated whole, all of our senses knitting together the fabric of our lives. We need to execute judgments based on an increased awareness of the elements that make up the experience of the fair, and of life. I hope you will come and listen to my presentation. I'll be looking for you!