

Prolegomenon to a Geographic Study on the Subjective Quality of Inner-City Space

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I. Introduction

A visit to almost any boisterous Asian, African, South American and even European inner-city street market will reveal thousands of pedestrians funneling between narrow rows of anxious, vociferous vendors, hawkers and mongers, each one calling out his or her wares in characteristic harsh or melodic tones, depending on the idiosyncracies of their respective trades. These city-center street markets—the typical streets of trade in contemporary bazaar economies—can provide a pleasant, exciting sensory experience far outweighing their drawbacks and inconveniences. Indeed, American tourists invariably describe such markets among their unforgettable experiences abroad. It is unfortunate that Americans must travel abroad in order to experience the vitality of an urban street market. Yet, most of urban America has sacrificed the human quality of its inner cities for the convenience of motor transport.

Inner-city bazaars supporting high density human populations, for example those found throughout much of South Korea, are made livable, in part, by the sounds of human life itself. Also, these humane and exciting city bazaars are reminders to Americans of what their now-noisy, noxious inner cities once were like when they too were livable and supported a teeming humanity at their cores.

This research paper explores the subjective quality of inner-city space; first by introducing a particular geographical approach to landscape study developed by the Finnish geographer J.G. Granö: Briefly, Granö partitioned sense-bound space into discrete zones of sensation. His two major divisions were the "landscape"—at-a-distance, and the nearby zone of "the immediate surroundings." Secondly, I will discuss the importance of the sonic environment within the

zone of the "immediate surroundings." This paper does not dispute that sight is the dominant sense by which humans gain knowledge of their external environment, but questions that vision alone can provide complete and reliable access to environmental knowledge everywhere and at all times within sense-bound space. Finally, I will cite three implications for cultural geographic field study that come from an increased awareness of the subjective quality of inner-city space. The small city of Sögwip'o, Cheju Island, Republic of Korea, provides useful illustrations of a typical inner-city street market.

My major goal is to argue for an updating of traditional geographic field methodology in order to begin to offer "sound advice" to social scientists, and particularly to urban planners and architects, and thereby to help improve the quality of life in many unlivable inner-city streets of America that are now abandoned to the automobile.

II. 1. J.G. Granö's Geographic Approach to the Partitioning of Sense-Bound Space into "Landscape" and "The Immediate Surroundings."

Important information about the city, or about any place of sense, comes from experiencing the sense-bound space that is the human environment surrounding us, wherever we may be. Cultural geographers "make sense of the city" by getting out into the field and by using the five senses efficiently. By systematically seeing, hearing, smelling, touching and tasting we begin to apprehend the personality of a place, to diagnose problems in the living environment, and to suggest remedies for improving the local quality of life.

Logic teaches that all of our environmentally atuned sense organs should be utilized during fieldwork, and each sense applied to its best advantage. Yet, intellectual tradition in cultural geography teaches researchers to favor a visual-morphological method during their field studies of the cultural landscape.

Cultural geographers have long begun their studies by concentrating on visible material features at the earth surface. In practice, they apply the visual-morphological method wherever they detect a cultural landscape, and under the existing multiple definitions given for "landscape," this might be anywhere, including the inner city. Cultural geographers have never expressed much concern over the fact that built into this morphological method is a virtual tyranny of the eye. Granted, any preoccupation with the visual sense during fieldwork might present no problem to cultural geographers' meeting their objectives *if* visual sensation could provide a uniformly efficient information-gathering tool everywhere within sense-bound space.

But this is not the case. Sense-bound space is not everywhere equally accessible to the eye. In 1929 the Finnish geographer J.G. Granö (b. 1882 d. 1956) introduced into the geographical literature a rigorous methodology for studying rural landscape that maps out qualitative differences in sense-bound space. Granö partitioned the receding expanse between the mind's eye and the horizon into two distinct zones. Beginning approximately 20 meters from the observer, and ranging outward, was the zone he called "landscape," where vision provided a reliable indicator of objective reality.¹⁾

1) J.G. Granö, "Reine Geographie," *Acta Geographica*, vol. 2, no. 2(1929), p. 117. See also,

There is a passage in Annie Dillard's book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* that exemplifies the kind of qualitative terms in which the landscape beyond 20 meters is usually chronicled by its observers:

On my right a woods thickly overgrown with creeper descended the hills' slope to Tinker Creek. On my left was a planting of large shade trees on the ridge of the hill. Before me the grassy hill pitched abruptly and gave way to a large, level field fringed in trees where it bordered the creek. Beyond the creek I could see with effort the vertical sliced rock where men had long ago quarried the mountain under the forest. Beyond that I saw Hollins Pond and all its woods and pastures; then I saw in a blue haze all the world poured flat and pale between the mountains.²⁾

This exciting, informative imagery notwithstanding, most literary descriptions of landscape, like this one, are highly if not exclusively visual.

II. 2. The Importance of the Sonic Environment in the Zone of "The Immediate Surroundings."

Now to return to Granö's method for partitioning space. Within 20 meters was a zone Granö called — not "landscape" — but "the immediate surroundings," where the eye served as a less reliable tool to the observer unless aided by the other senses, principally the sense of sound, and to a lesser extent, the sense of smell.

Granö's detailed methodology was published in 1929 as *Reine Geographie* in German, and also appeared in 1930 in Finnish as *Puhdas maantiede*. However, his innovative ideas about the methodological implications of qualitative differences in sense-bound space have never been adequately introduced to American geographers. One reason that American cultural geographers lack detailed knowledge about Granö's field methodology is that in the 1930's his ideas were unique and unorthodox in the establishment of geography as a chorological science.

In 1939 the publication of Richard Hartshorne's influential *Nature of Geography* helped squelch the introduction of Granö's method into American geography. Hartshorne wrote that

Since Granö appears to be the only geographer who has ever actually used his ears and nose in the field, we may assume... [that the normal technique of field observation] is restricted to visible observation.³⁾

Eugene Van Cleef, "Book Review: 'Reine Geographie'," *Geographical Review*, vol. 20, no. 1 (1930), pp. 171-172; Jacob H.P. van der Vaart, "Granö's Pure Geography," *The Monadnock* (Clark University Geographical Society), vol. 49 (June 1975), pp. 91-95; Birger Ohlson, "Sound Fields and Sonic Landscapes in Rural Environments," *Fennia*, vol. 148 (1976), pp. 33-43; Anssi Paasi, "Connections Between J.G. Granö's Geographical Thinking and Behavioural and Humanistic Geography," *Fennia*, vol. 162, no. 1 (1984), pp. 21-31.

2) Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974, p. 39.

3) Richard Hartshorne, *The Nature of Geography*. Lancaster, Pennsylvania: The Association of American Geographers, 1939, p. 197.

It seems that Granö's ideas about geographical field techniques were so original that the maxim "geographers are what geographers (normally) do" was invoked by Hartshorne in 1939 to condemn them. However, since Granö used his ears and nose in the field to refine and improve geographical landscape methodology, his innovative techniques deserve a more careful examination in view of their constructive implications. In 1939 few American geographers had read Granö in the German, and given Hartshorne's negative review of Granö's ideas, many geographers were no doubt discouraged from making the effort to learn more about them. In fact, Granö's *Reine Geographie* has yet to be translated into English, although a geographer at Clark University has begun a translation, as have a team of geographers in Finland.⁴⁾

We can also note here that Hartshorne's 1939 "assumption" about field observation being normally restricted to "visible observation" helped to reinforce the tyranny of the eye in cultural geographic field work until the 1980's. Among well-known human geographers, Yi-Fu Tuan has only recently written of qualitative differences in sense-bound space, but makes no reference in this regard to Granö's pioneer work in this area.⁵⁾ And, in a recent article in the major American journal of professional geography entitled "On the Subjective Partitioning of Space," Granö's seminal ideas were also overlooked.⁶⁾

Many cultural geographers now conducting empirical field work in the inner cities can benefit from an awareness of Granö's pioneer work on environmental partitioning based on qualitative differences in sense-bound space. These qualitative differences have important implications for the conduct of fieldwork in the inner cities. I intend now to address three of these implications.

II. 3. Three Implications for Cultural Geographic Field Studies in the Subjective Quality of Inner-City Space.

The First Implication: First, there is the implication that an uncritical overreliance on the sense of sight may actually do a disservice to cultural geographic fieldwork in the inner-city streets, for example when confined, crowded urban space is visually ambiguous to the extent that the field worker becomes unnecessarily distracted, disoriented, fearful and exhausted by the detail and movement of objects.

Regarding this implication, it is necessary to point out that visual ambiguity in urban space is regarded as a problem worth overcoming only by some geographers, while others regard this ambiguity as something of an experiential end-in-itself. Consider, for example, the new experiential approach to interpreting cities offered by "humanistic geographers," including

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- 4) Jacob H.P. van der Vaart, "Granö's Pure Geography," p. 91. News of the translation project being undertaken in Finland comes in a personal correspondence to Dr. John Stevens from Professor Pentti Yli-Jokipii at the University of Turku, dated May 14, 1982.
 - 5) Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective," in *Philosophy in Geography*, eds. Stephen Gale and Gunnar Olsson, pp. 387-427. Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979.
 - 6) Stephen Gale and Reginald Gollege, "On the Subjective Partitioning of Space," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 1982), pp. 60-67.

Anne Buttner, David Seamon, Yi-Fu Tuan, and endorsed by many cultural geographers, for example Pierce Lewis, J.B. Jackson, and others.

According to Kobayashi this new "humanistic geography" seeks to explore human subjectivity.⁷ Also, it is presumed to be useful in training more sensitive urban planners.⁸ Jackson, for example, has said "It strikes me that some of our planners need to acquire a more robust idea of city life."⁹

However, the new "humanistic geography" has been severely criticized for not yet having offered any plan of action towards improving the quality of life in the inner city.¹⁰ Certainly a useful plan of action begins in an aggressive attempt to overcome the problem of ambiguity, and not from overly-dwelling on ambiguity itself. This danger is exemplified in the recent statement by Lewis, who remarks "We have always known that human landscape is complicated, and we glory in that complexity."¹¹ An important question to ask here is "When does aggrandizement of the ambiguous turn to problem-solving?" If never, then why should social scientists indulge themselves in this way?

Many geographers are, however, very interested in treating visual ambiguity as a problem statement, and anxious to overcome the problem in order to help improve the quality of life in troubled inner cities. For them, the implication of the particular subjective quality of inner-city space suggested by Granö's methodology is this: That the traditional morphological method they are accustomed to using is inappropriate to inner-city street studies, since it was designed to study landscape-at-a-distance. If within 20 meters, in the zone of "the immediate surroundings," the use of the visual-morphological method is inappropriate, how are cultural geographers to proceed in their fieldwork?

The Second Implication: The answer is found in a second implication of qualitative differences in sense-bound space: That geographers can learn to use their visual sense more effectively as an information-gathering tool in their studies of the inner city by first learning how elements in the sonic environment, for example street vendors' cries, are useful in helping the eye function more efficiently in ambiguous inner-city space.

There is a great lesson to be learned by social scientists in the experiencing of third world inner-city street life. The mercantile streets of the third world's (and even in some of the developed world's) bazaar economies consist of confined space and a dense population of merchants, their customers, and passersby. In such inner-city streets the 20-meter boundary

7) Audrey Kobayashi, "Landscape Aesthetics in Geography: An Existential Perspective." Unpublished paper delivered during the Special Session on Landscape Aesthetics, Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers, Louisville, Kentucky, April 16, 1980, p. 6.

8) Deryck Holdsworth, "Book Review: The Human Experience of Space and Place," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 72, no. 1 (March 1982), p. 152.

9) J.B. Jackson, "The Stranger's Path," in *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J.B. Jackson*, ed. Ervin H. Zube. Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1970, p. 105.

10) Deryck Holdsworth, "Book Review: *The Human Experience of Space and Place*," p. 151.

11) Pierce Lewis, "Facing Up To Ambiguity," *Landscape*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1982), p. 22.

suggested by Granō as a threshold to the visual zone of sensation is totally inappropriate, because during peak business hours the surging tides of humanity can block all vision mere inches beyond the nose. In these circumstances the human sense of place and efficient human activity must be guided and served principally by auditory, olfactory and tactile impressions, which, when combined, permit the observer to more confidently extend perception beyond many of the physical and visual barriers of confined inner-city space.

The third world inner-city streets of exchange are primarily a strong sonic environment. It is sounds, and principally sounds, that direct attention to related visual elements. Sounds, and not vision, are a ubiquitous link to reality within the inner-city street markets. Sound here "has a protective and enriching function. Without sound, visual perception is different: less contrastful, less attention-demanding, and less informative."¹²⁾

It is impossible to argue the importance of the inner-city sonic environment without specifying those elements within the sonic environment which enhance or detract from quality of life. There are a multitude of sounds that can make the inner-city streets livable or unlivable. Street vendors cries are one example of positive elements in an inner-city sonic element, since they are useful in helping the human eye function better. It is the role of street vendors' cries in city bazaars to direct vision effectively and harmoniously toward affordable buying opportunities within a crowded market environment.¹³⁾ For example, one observer has noted:

The street vendor's cry is not a cry in the narrow sense of the word but a musical phrase repeated ad infinitum, melodically precise and unequivocal as to its meaning. The melody announces the exact nature of his merchandise long before he can be spied in the crowd.¹⁴⁾

Street vendors perform an essential aesthetic function in the mercantile streets of a bazaar economy, by mitigating with the human voice some of the harsh economic realities of survival in the inner-city habitat. Among those who have written on oriental bazaars are observers who recommend them as "exciting" and even as "comfortable." Rudofsky, for example, contrasts the comfort of so-called primitive streets of exchange with the discomfort of our modern streets of transport.¹⁵⁾

There will always be cynics ready to condemn the inner-city streets of exchange as part of "the tragedy of millions of immigrants."¹⁶⁾ However, most chroniclers of these streets have reacted more positively, finding amidst their dense human drama an unassailable aesthetic. Consider, for example, the conclusion reached by the historian Gregorovius,

standing one day high above Naples on the terrace of the Carthusian convent of San Martino and listening with growing wonder to the ocean of voices that surged against the hill. [He] thought that the townsfolk had risen in white-hot fury against the new government. He was

12) Michael Southworth, "The Sonic Environment of Cities," *Environment and Behavior*, vol. 1, no. 1 (June 1969), p. 52.

13) Richardson Wright, *Hawkers and Walkers in Early America*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1927, p. 233.

14) Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969, p. 137.

15) Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People*, p. 205.

16) Michael Gold, "A Gang of Little Yids," in *A Gathering of Ghetto Writers*, ed. Wayne Miller. New York: New York University Press, 1972, p. 215.

wrong: the uproar, a daily occurrence, was produced by the exultant cries of the vendors in the morning markets. What, he asked himself, makes people kick up such a riot, and he answered: Pleasure — nothing but pleasure.¹⁷⁾

Bypassing the vendors to examine the mercantile streets themselves, we find it is significant that these streets of exchange have flourished wherever the public has had the right “to buy in the cheapest market.”¹⁸⁾ In addition, we observe that the function of the streets of exchange — as opposed to the streets of motor transport that tend to replace them in the normal evolution of inner cities — has been to provision high-density medium and low-income urban pedestrian populations. Economic exchange in the healthy bazaar economy of the inner cities is of necessity inefficient; being a tremendous overcrowding of the market network by marginal operators.¹⁹⁾ Yet, these streets of exchange are a “thriving, bustling world of intense human interaction.”²⁰⁾ More than anything else, they are “echo chambers of human passion.”²¹⁾

We can examine the layout of the small coastal city of Sögwipo, located on Cheju Island in the Republic of Korea, for its example of a vital inner-city bazaar (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). The Sögwip’o street market is located at the city center, and is preserved by the exclusion of all but essential motor traffic from entering the lanes. This, despite the market’s central location in the city’s traffic network. Pedestrian traffic is usually heavy in the bazaar, and both street-center and curbside vendors, stationary and mobile, choke the lanes. It is interesting to note that Sögwip’o City also has a periodic market to which the center of shopping activities shifts dramatically every fifth day (i.e. on those calendar days ending in the numerals “4” and “9”). The periodic market grounds are located approximately one kilometer from the city center and the fixed bazaar.

To argue that inner-city bazaars such as the one found in Sögwip’o are strong sonic environments is not to say that they are noisy and undesirable places. “Noise” is any annoying or unwanted sound. But these streets of exchange are the poor people’s market, and viable places unless legislated away. Vendors’ cries are an integral, idiosyncratic part of these streets, and they help them to fulfil important economic, social and aesthetic functions.

The Third Implication: This brings us to the third and final implication, which is: That in those inner cities of the world where such informative and harmonious sounds such as vendors’ cries have been supplanted by noise — by useless sound — both the sonic environment and the quality of life have simultaneously deteriorated. Recognizing that sensual variety and harmonies accompany stages in the growth and decline of cities may produce some innovative urban planning strategies. For example, enhancing the sonic environment of now-noisy, dreary inner cities by recreating robust harmonies out of the past.

17) Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People*, p. 136.

18) Charles Hindley, *A History of the Cries of London, Ancient and Modern*. London: Reeves and Turner, 1881, p. 255.

19) Clifford Geertz, *Peddlers and Princes*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, pp. 28-29.

20) Donald Appleyard, “Livable Streets: Protected Neighborhoods,” *Ekistics*, vol. 45, no. 273 (November-December 1978), p. 412.

21) Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People*, p. 137.

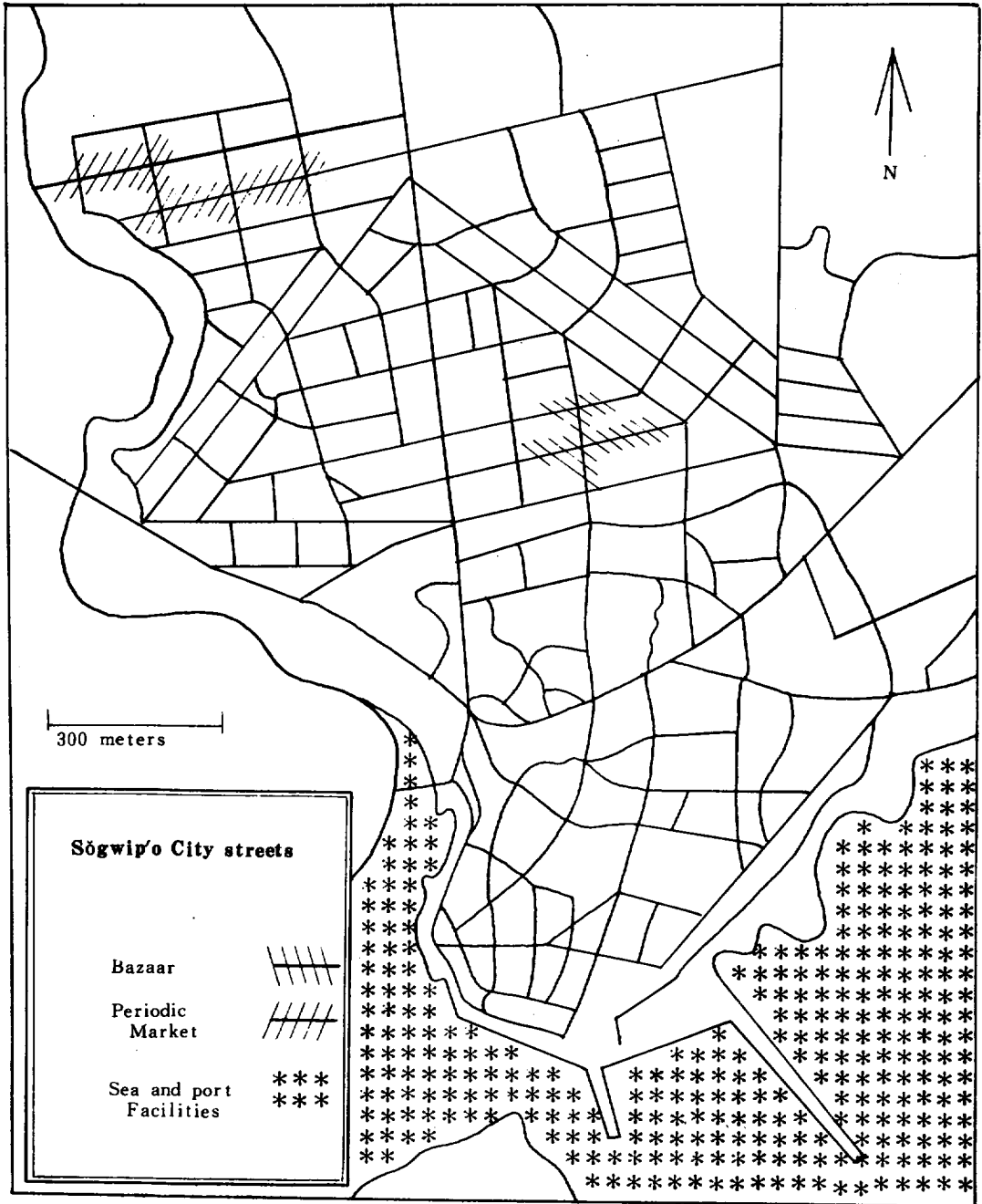


Figure 1: sogwip'o City, Korea, locating bazaar and periodic market.



Figure 2 : Street scene within Sögwip'ö City bazaar.
Between the mind's eye and the horizon is a crowded sensuous environment with a variety of goods and services at rock-bottom prices.



Figure 3 : Sögwip'ö bazaar; another view. Pushcarts, bicycles, backpacks and tubs are the major means of conveyance in this crowded inner-city space. Photos by author, 1984.

We can observe in many third world cities that their narrow inner-city streets do not serve motor vehicles, but a mass of humanity, mostly pedestrian, involved in exchange of goods and services. These inner-city streets are places where "one sits down, rests, watches, feels sad, rejoices, talks, reflects, trades, gains and loses," and is entertained.²²⁾

These third world cities are reminders that our own American inner-city streets were once the essence of urban life, and lively places. But came the automobile, and streets were widened; this being the beginning of the decline of population in the inner cities of America, which J.B. Jackson and others have chronicled: First pedestrians were restricted to sidewalks. And year by year the sidewalks grew narrower. Pedestrians were quite literally pushed to the walls.²³⁾ There was no more room for street vendors, or shoeshine boys, musicians and beggars; no room for pushcarts. All commercial displays were moved inside, behind glass. And the merchants in these fixed establishments adapted their advertising to cater to passing motorists, rather than to attract pedestrians.²⁴⁾ All this came about when the inner-city streets of America were abandoned to the automobile.

Now it is time to inject more sense into the inner-city places. Cultural geographers and urban planners eager to revitalize underpopulated and dreary inner-city streets can now begin to sort out the "continuous stream of invisible but highly attention-demanding sounds, smells, and micro-climates" of the inner-city streets.²⁵⁾ They can begin to discover which sound settings are more pleasing than others, the objective being to improve overall the quality of life in a confined place of sense like the inner-city streets. If the sound setting of viable inner-city streets of exchange located in many parts of the world are to provide any kind of useful model, the street vendors calling out their wares must certainly be investigated as an important part of this sound setting.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, J.B. Jackson is certainly correct in his observation that planners need to acquire a more robust idea of city life. Cultural geographers can help provide planners with important detail about what a viable inner-city place of sense might consist of. Certainly the familiar platitude "Not every prospect pleases" can be applied as well to the sonic environment as, for example, Gold has done with his condemnation "the shouting of peddlers like an idiot asylum."²⁶⁾ But Gold's is apparently a minority opinion, and is perhaps dismissable as a very personal invective against what he experienced of urban slum life in general.

Assessing the re-establishment of inner-city bazaars is only one part of a necessary study on revitalizing and humanizing America's noisy, dirty and dangerous urban cores. For example,

22) Milos R. Perovic, "The 'Streets of Encounters'," *Ekistics*, vol. 45, no. 273 (November-December 1978), p. 407.

23) Panayis Psomopoulos, "Editor's Comments," *Ekistics*, vol. 45, no. 273 (November-December 1978), p. 407.

24) J.B. Jackson, "The Stranger's Path," pp. 110-111.

25) Michael Southworth, "The Sonic Environment of Cities," p. 48.

26) Michael Gold, "A Gang of Little Yids," p. 218.

Noble and Harnapp have identified a necessary first step in attacking the problem of general urban noise, which is "the gathering of noise data and its mapping to gain an insight into the spatial characteristics of the phenomena," adding that "for this, the geographer is eminently qualified."²⁷ It is therefore proposed that the sensory environment of the Sögwip'o street market be mapped out in detail, including a complete inventory of its vendors' cries. Analyses of this data can eventually be compared to similar studies conducted elsewhere throughout the world. In this way the quality of various inner city sonic environments can be systematically evaluated for urban planning purposes. Such a research program may ultimately provide a rationale for recommending the re-establishment of the street vendors' traditional niche at the civic cores from where they have more recently been displaced.

Adverse noise levels in the industrial inner city seem related to the concentration of motor traffic there. For planners not to act to remove the dangerous impact of the automobile from the inner-city living environment would be, in view of present knowledge, unconscionable. Planners should not ignore the irony that prohibitions against street peddling have to be strictly enforced — usually in the name of traffic safety — or else street vending would reestablish itself at the urban core spontaneously.

Inner-city street life, including vendors and their sonic environment, can be studied both as a contemporary phenomenon worldwide, or studied in a historical context. Whichever, the inner-city place of sense is a study that seems overdue for a thorough geographic investigation.

27) Allen G. Noble and Vern R. Harnapp, "Towards a Model For Monitoring Community Noise," in *The Environment: Chinese and American Views*, eds., Laurence J.C. Ma and Allen G. Noble. New York: Methuen, p. 278.

도심내 공간의 감각적 특질에 관한 지리적 예비고찰

David Nemeth

본고는 도심내 공간의 감각적 특질 (Subjective quality)에 대한 체계적 연구의 필요성을 논의하였다.

도심 한가운데에 있는 노점들은 세계 어느 곳에서나 찾아볼 수 있으며, 인간적인 측면을 담고 있다는 점에서 지금 미국내 여러 도심의 중심을 차지하고 있는 무감각한 자동차 거리들과는 좋은 대조를 보인다.

핀란드의 지리학자 J. G. Granö는 50여년전에 우리들의 감각기관을 사용하여 시골의 공간을 서로 다른 여러 감각구역으로 분할한 바 있다. 본고에서는 그의 방법론이 소개되었다.

혼잡한 도심의 노점속에서도 청각적 환경요소의 중요함이 예증되었다. 시장가에서 상인들이 외쳐대는 소리는 긍정적인 감각환경의 중요인자로 판단된다.

한국의 작은 도시 서귀포는 도심내 노점의 전형적 위치와 노점들에서 찾을 수 있는 몇 가지 조건들을 잘 드러내고 있었다.