

## Embodied spaces in the making: visually impaired people, bodies and surroundings

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This article looks closer into the various ways visually impaired people make their own space through practice. Space-making is not necessarily dependent on sight. Use of other senses, such as hearing, smell or touch, is equally important, but these senses are often missed when the point of departure is to view our surroundings as something we see, not something we construct and live in, or, embody. The focus of this article will be on people with visual impairment and the complex and diverse ways in which they relate to and experience the spatial world. The article is based on my PhD project, entitled 'Living with visual impairments – visual impairment as experience'. The project seeks to gain insight into how living with visual impairment is experienced. Such knowledge has been attained through a study involving fieldwork in everyday life situations with people with visual impairments.

**Keywords:** visual impairment; embodiment; experiencing bodies; spaces

### Introduction

The summer holiday was just fantastic! When we had nice weather we went on lots of boat trips. I prefer to sit on deck because from there I hear the roar of the engine least, and I am able to really feel the sun and the wind. I absorb the sounds and smells. To be out there, anchored in the open sea . . . It is so good to have the opportunity to be on my own, to feel the freedom and independence; no overcrowded beaches, and when going for a swim from the back of the boat . . . diving out in deep, open water without the fear of hitting the bottom.

These are the words of a blind woman in her thirties, describing her favourite summer activity. She and her family own a leisure boat which they use a lot in the summertime. She passionately describes the feeling of being alone on their cabin cruiser, anchored in the open sea while the rest of the family members are away on excursions by use of the dinghy. All by herself on the boat Stine switches on the radio and dives into the open sea. She loves the feeling while immersing her body in the refreshing seawater without the fear of hitting the bottom. Then, the freedom felt when she is swimming away from the boat as far as she can, still within the range of the buzz of the radio. For Stine, being alone, diving into the open sea and knowing that there are no obstacles put her in a state of satisfaction through the experience of

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nature and the environment. The way she makes use of space, through the movement of her body, gives her simultaneously the feeling of freedom and control.

Such issues are to be seen as central in the present article; looking closer into the various ways visually impaired people make their own space through bodily practice. By describing the case of Stine more closely, the central issue of this article is to expand our ways of perceiving and analysing how visually impaired people are connected to and construe their surroundings by and through an experiencing body. Space-making is not necessarily dependent on sight. Use of other senses, such as hearing, smell or touch, are equally important, but these senses are often missed when the point of departure is to view place as something we see, not something we construct and live in, or, embody. I want to show that not only sight, but the body with all its senses, is important in understanding interaction with and in construction of meaningful spaces. The relationship between people with disabilities and their surroundings is often described with reference to physical obstacles and barriers, and visually impaired people are sometimes described as lacking, or having distorted and incomplete knowledge of space (Golledge 1993). Descriptions of the visually impaired and their mobility and accessibility have traditionally focused on the lack of possibilities and abilities of orientation and motion.

However, the focus here will not be on lack or compensatory strategies, rather the text will describe a case which in different theories underline the various ways blind people construct and experience meaningful relationships with the spatial world. To view physical surroundings as barriers which block or hinder visually impaired people from being active and in motion is seen as an inadequate perspective to use here. The aim of the article is rather to challenge traditional perspectives and to view surroundings as markers and guidelines to use and interact with in experiencing and creating space. The discussions will aim to present an alternative theoretical and analytical framework for understanding phenomena and concepts of visual impairment, body and space. Within social science, both the concepts of space and body traditionally seem to have been treated as mere passive backgrounds or containers, through which action is canalized (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003; Jackson 1996). By focusing on the concept of embodied space, the article investigates the dynamics and interactions that take place between human bodies and their surroundings in various and active ways. From the empirical findings, various ways in which bodies move and orient spatially will be elaborated, and there will be an outline of how spatial movements are filled with meaning. Spaces and places are not only out there, in the landscape; rather they are: ‘... simultaneously in the land, people’s minds, customs, and bodily practices’ (Rockefeller 2002; cited in Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 6).

One important reason for focusing on space is that it contributes to an important analytical frame of understanding. It is fruitful in all kinds of studies that imply physical, natural, and material conditions of social and cultural life. Based on empirical findings it will be argued for seeing construction of space as useful for understanding in what distinct manners visually impaired people make use of and experience in these conditions. People do not only structure place and space in different ways, they also experience them differently. Hopefully, this article will show how the making of blind embodied spaces both underlines the activities and bodily experiences we all share, and elucidates the other bodily senses we use when interacting with our environment in constructing our bodily spaces. A central issue to be discussed is how blind people use other devices in this construction or rely on

other senses than the sight. Those of us who are not blind base our interaction with our surroundings on sight, or more precisely, we give prominence to the sight as the only or most important sense in constructing relationships to the material world.

Through comprehensive fieldwork, participant observation, and conversations, I have acquired knowledge concerning blind peoples' experiences and making of space, by being together with different people in their everyday lives and thereby sharing experiences with them. In the specific case of Stine presented in this article I have spent some time together with her, having had long conversations and taking part in her daily life and tasks. We went to the city centre together, did the shopping for the household, went to the fitness centre together, prepared dinner for her family, went for walks in the neighbourhood, in addition to staying at home, in her house, with the rest of her family in their ordinary daily life.

Here my emphasis is not only on the importance of doing fieldwork, but also to argue further that the analysis will be much richer by implying the full body of phenomena in the analyses; '... we need to transform ourselves from ethnographic "spectators into seers"' (Stoller 1989, 40). Much of what we see is shaped by our experiences and our gaze, and has direct influence on what we think; 'And what we see and think, to take the process one step further, has a bearing upon what we say and what and how we write' (Stoller 1989, 39). The fieldwork experience made me aware of the fact that there's more to ethnography and anthropology than one first gets to know by just looking. Through this experience I gained access to knowledge which I would not otherwise have had. I discovered how important it is to bring the body, with all its emotions, cognition, knowledge and experiences into both the methodological and analytical field.

The article is structured as follows; firstly, I will make a sketch of the theoretical and analytical framework of the body and embodied spaces. The methodological implications of the kind of ethnographic study implied will be described as well. Secondly, the case of Stine will be described. After the case description, the analysis will follow, which through use of Stine's experiences, both aims to focus on specific ways of constructing, experiencing and moving around in space, and in addition to draw some general discussions out of the specific case.

### **Body and embodied space in theories and analysis of social relations and cultural conditions**

As mentioned previously, spatiality is often reduced or marginalized into: '... the background as reflection, container, stage, environment, or external constraint upon human behaviour and social action' (Soja 1996, 71). In this view, space is seen as a frame of action or meaning. Thus, as in anthropology, the interest in the spatial dimension of culture has traditionally always been there, but these perspectives tend to treat landscapes and material conditions as mere backgrounds. Studies of tribes and villages have traditionally contained descriptions of the natural landscape and material conditions as backgrounds or scenes where everyday life activities are taking place. However, there has been a shift of focus, from looking at spatial dimensions as backgrounds toward seeing them as central cultural dimensions; '... so that the notion that all behaviour is located in and constructed of space has taken on new meaning' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 1).

As space can be seen as an important dimension of analysis, so too can things and physical surroundings. Latour (2001) argues that humans are to be seen as part of,

and in relation to, artefacts and the environment. This is a perspective seen as central within actor-network theory (ANT) (Latour 2001). Focus is on things and materiality and the meaning they have for relations between humans and surroundings. Latour uses the term ‘actant’ to describe things which *do* something, and can be associated with objects, events, and humans (Latour 1987). From this perspective objects are seen as contributors to the establishment of certain kinds of relations between humans and surroundings. The artefacts are in these ways important parts of the connection of humans and surroundings, in the same manner as white canes and assistances. Through this connection, humans and non-humans, nature and culture can be seen as tangled (Asdal 2004, 35). For visually impaired people things and material surroundings are important reference spots, physical and natural objects containing information which makes movement and orientation possible.

In several anthropological studies the body is seen as inactive, passive and static (Jackson 1996). This is a familiar notion in studies of people with impairment, namely to see the body; ‘as a passive recipient of social forces’ (Paterson and Hughes 1999, 601), and as lacking both intentionality and intersubjectivity (Csordas 1994). Such notions describe ideas of passive bodies, and of bodies in lack of control. ‘The body is often held to be one such container, with the skin serving as an “envelope” within which . . . “the sum of experience” resides’ (Desjarlais 1996, 74).

On the other hand, the concept of embodied spaces can be seen as a contribution to connecting the active body and its surroundings. In addition, lived experience can be grasped as: ‘. . . a center of agency, a location for speaking and acting on the world’. (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 2). Haraway’s (1991) use of the term *location* emphasizes that the body must be placed within the location of action and agency. The term embodiment emphasises the importance of seeing the body as both a physical and a biological unit, and refers to both biological and social aspects of the body. Embodiment can be seen as: ‘. . . an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world’ (Csordas 1994, 12). Used in this manner embodied space is a kind of location, a location within which: ‘. . . human experiences and consciousness take on material and spatial form’ (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 2).

To view embodiment as a way of perceiving and engaging in the world also requires us to bring emotions into the analysis, as well as cognitive and so-called rational, spoken descriptions or happenings. Emphasis ought, therefore, to be put on: ‘. . . the public, social and cognitive dimensions of emotional experience’ (Lutz and White 1986, 429). Speaking from a rationalist point of view, emotions are seen as irrational, and as disordering and problematic (Lutz and White 1986). Throughout the fieldwork and the conversations with visually impaired people it became obvious that emotions must be taken seriously, both as an everyday object and as a scientific concept. As Stine describes being alone on the boat, the sounds and smells, one gets closer to her experiences of the feeling. In addition to listening to the words and meanings in what she says, one can close ones eyes and feel the situation within one’s own body. Emotions must be seen as phenomenon to be found in social interaction (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, 11). We must therefore look for ‘. . . emotion’s social relational, communicative, and cultural aspects’ (Lutz and White 1986, 405).

The following paragraphs contain descriptions of a blind woman, Stine, and some of her various experiences of her social and material surroundings. The descriptions are based on several fieldwork experiences shared with Stine. This study is part of a PhD thesis, entitled ‘Living with visual impairments – visual impairment

as experience'. The aim of the project is to gain insight into how living with visual impairment is experienced. Such knowledge is sought by an ethnographic study involving fieldwork in everyday life situations with people with visual impairments. Through these fieldwork periods I not only obtained access to a blind woman's orientation, sensing and embodying ways of relating to the surroundings; these experiences also made me discover how my own bodily experiences played a crucial part, not only as empirical objects, but as analytical objects as well. From this experience I gained access to knowledge that I would otherwise not have had. Through sharing various experiences with Stine – by assisting her and spending daily life situations with her – I discovered how important it is to bring the body with all its emotions, cognition, knowledge and experiences into both the methodological and analytical field.

### **Stine**

Stine is a woman in her thirties. She is married and has two children. Stine was born visually impaired but became blind in her late teens, just after her oldest child was born. Stine grew up in a sighted environment. Until she reached the age of 15–16 she had some vision left which made it possible for her to be part of the ordinary school system, by help and use of optical facilities. While moving around and orienting in the surroundings she managed without a white cane and was sticking with her friends. Stine felt she was functioning quite well growing up in a sighted environment. When looking back she is grateful for having experienced the same childhood environment as other, sighted children, being able to have the same friends and live in the same residential area through her entire childhood.

Both of her children, two teenage boys, are visually impaired like her. Stine's husband has normal sight. Stine has not had income-producing work, with the exception of a year or so as an assistant in a kindergarten after finishing secondary school and before she got married. However, over the years she has spent lots of time and effort looking after her family, and she is in charge of running the household and the daily life of her immediate family. Stine also describes the cabin of their leisure boat as her domain and responsibility. She is the one in charge of the food supply, cooking, cleaning and tidying the cabin of the boat as well as in the house.

Stine is experienced as an active and vital person, both in the way she describes her relationship to and participation in everyday life within different arenas, and in addition, in her way of making use of her surroundings through her bodily motions. She is a fast and confident walker. The upright, and simultaneous relaxed position of her body, and the quick and persistent way she uses her body to orient herself in her surroundings, gives the impression of a woman with lots of guts and toughness. Stine shows no fear of hitting herself or knocking against the surroundings. When stumbling into something she immediately stops, reorients, and then changes direction. She seldom fumbles, and rarely uses her hands to orient and to feel the surroundings around her to avoid bumping into something.

Stine once asked me to go for a walk with her in their neighbourhood. She wanted us to walk the same route as she usually walks together with either her husband or friends. Usually, while we were walking and heading somewhere, Stine would hold her hand around my elbow, but this time she had an elastic band which she asked me to hold in my left hand. She then took hold with her right hand and we were connected by a band of about 20 cm of elastic which gave our bodies some space

around us and made both of us able to move more freely and independently. The route took us about an hour to cover, and all the way I got the feeling that Stine was in control of the direction, the speed, and the location of the surroundings. I had a hard time keeping up with her fast walking pace. As we walked, Stine described the surroundings and the direction we were heading in, and my only task, apart from being a companion, was to confirm her description of the surroundings.

One morning when I came to visit Stine, I discovered footsteps in the newly fallen snow outside her house and in the entrance area. The footsteps went in a direct line parallel to the outer wall of the house from the front door straight to the door of the woodshed. After Stine let me in, she told me her husband was sick and had stayed home from work that day. She therefore wanted to care specially for him by lighting a fire in the fireplace. She was the one who had fetched firewood from the woodshed. She described how, while carrying the can filled with firewood sticks into the house, both her hands are occupied with carrying the can. She therefore had to make use of other body parts to manoeuvre and orient, and used her tights by barely touching the outside wall with one of her thighs on her way between the woodshed and the entrance of her house.

To keep her body in shape Stine exercises several times a week in a fitness centre in the local town centre. Her husband and sons all love sports, and the whole family life is characterized by activity and sports. During one of my stays with Stine, we went to the fitness centre. Stine guided me round the centre's localities and showed me the changing bench and wardrobe she uses in the locker room. The site she has chosen to change her clothes is near the showers, and she always makes sure the end shower is free for her to use. This she does by putting her shampoo and shower gel on to the shelf by the end shower. This is quite important to Stine because she is determined not to bump into other users of the fitness centre, naked, on their way in to or out of the showers. Elsewhere, she often bumps into people without being worried about it. But, inside the locker room and naked, she finds it important to avoid the embarrassment of bumping into other naked female users.

In order to give me some impressions of her daily life tasks, Stine one day invited me to join her for a trip to the city centre to do some shopping. We went by bus, and when the bus stopped at the bus station Stine helped me finding the direction to the pedestrian area of the city centre where the shops were. While we were walking down the street Stine described for me all the obstacles she tries to avoid in the pedestrian area. There were lots of signs, flower boxes, dustbins and lamp posts occupying most of the area where we were walking. Stine showed me how she had devised her own route to avoid these objects. She had worked out that near the middle section of the street there were some structures in the paving stones which made up lines for her to follow. We went into the food store where she buys the goods for the household to buy the ingredients for today's dinner. Stine told me the different goods we needed, and knew exactly in which sections and shelf units we would find them. Afterwards Stine wanted to drop into a shop where they sell wool. She had a jumper-knitting project going on, but she had given up knitting this particular jumper because the type of wool made it difficult for her to count the stitches and to follow the pattern. The yarn was composed of two different threads that were too knotty. Stine has a specific opinion of what colours she feels are suitable for her, and this opinion she has built up by listening to the comments and compliments that other people have given on the way she dresses and various colours she wears. One of her closest friends works in the wool shop, and Stine introduced us when we arrived. Stine and her

friend discussed Stine's request and together they found better wool for her to use. Stine wanted to find new wool in a different shade of red to the old one. She felt the red colour was too intense, and was looking for a red which had a tone of brown in it. Her friend agreed, and said that the first red colour wasn't Stine's colour, and that the red brown was more suitable for Stine's skin and hair colour. Stine told me this friend was one of a couple of friends she has kept in touch with since early childhood and with whom she has a meeting one evening a month. They come together to eat and chat and they bring their knitting work with them.

Stine describes herself as a socially oriented woman who refuses to isolate herself within the domestic and family sphere. She sees the relationship with her friends as important to her. She goes on different trips several times during the year with the friends with whom she regularly meets every month. Stine loves to be in motion, to travel, to visit new places, towns and countries, to walk in the mountains, go for skiing trips, and as already described, to swim in the open sea. As well as taking care of her relationships with her friends, Stine also engages and participates in voluntary work with the purpose of helping vulnerable groups and individuals in society.

These descriptions of Stine's life illustrate specific ways of constructing, experiencing and moving around in space. In addition, it shows how space does something to the way people relate to and act within distinct surroundings. Embodied space is being made and experienced through the way the body relates to and engages in its surroundings. In the following analysis Stine's ways of acting towards and experiencing boundlessness and borders, of bumping into objects and physical surroundings and in addition being socially oriented and engaged will be elaborated more closely.

### **Discussions – connecting bodies and surroundings**

A so-called disabled body contains competence which can be seen as challenging the traditional understanding of it. The experiences of Stine underline that despite the lack of vision and being in need of situational assistance to orient, she appears as an active agent. Her attention to the environment, her alternative way of orienting, localizing, and moving, underline the fact that her body represents bodily agency, action, non-visual ability and capacity. It is through interaction with the surroundings that people orient and experience the world. People not only structure spaces in distinct ways; they '...experience them differently and inhabit distinct sensorial worlds' (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 4). Pandya (1990) is interested in body movement in the construction of place and space, and her way of conceptualizing space is to see it as motion rather than a container. Speaking of actors' 'mobile spatial field' means to focus on the way people create space and places by moving through them.

### ***Groundbreaking***

Through Stine's descriptions of her life, often while we were walking and talking, I gained insight into the way she uses and relates to her physical and social surroundings. The story of being alone on the boat, diving into the deep and open water, contains a description of the thrill of swimming away from the boat. I became anxious just by imagining being alone on a boat, surrounded by an endless horizon and the deep sea, without vision. But listening to Stine's passionate descriptions of

diving out into something representing boundlessness and endlessness almost took my breath away. However, almost immediately I understood Stine's fascination: for her, being in and part of such surroundings without borders, ends, or other obstacles, gave her a feeling of freedom and independence. Stine, who must experience difficulties with open spaces while having ground under her feet, experiences the sea as an open surface of a different type. The dive includes a jump, in other words, actively letting her body in a way lose control while falling off the deck and down into the sea; then breaking the surface of the water and swimming down in the direction of the bottomless sea, can be said to set Stine free. For a woman like Stine, who takes considerable responsibility for her environment, the dive into the sea from an empty boat also gives her time off. It frees her from the responsibility and control she is usually in charge of.

Stine is a woman described as engaged in her surroundings. This engagement is displayed both in her way of orienting in and comprehending her natural and material surroundings, and also in her relational engagement in and preoccupation with family and friends. When I asked Stine about her fearless and confidential way of walking and orienting, she replied by describing her activeness and engagement as an important means for her to be able to live the kind of life she does. For Stine, to manage to follow her family and friends and to keep up the high level of activity this implies, her body must be active and fit. One way of interpreting this is to view her effort to keep her body fit as a way of attending to and caring for her social relations. From the description of her knitting project, her engagement in materiality is given spatial relevance. The knitting is a way of relating herself to the material and social context. All these kinds of activities can be seen as ways of creating meaningfulness and being engaged in the world through the construction and use of space.

Through her distinct ways of making use of space Stine indicates to those around her who she is and what kind of person she wants to be perceived as being. By running the family, keeping her body in shape, engaging in voluntary work, participating in social networks – such as doing her knitting work together with her female friends – taking control over the walk with me in the natural environment of their neighbourhood, Stine gives the impression of a woman who should be considered as independent and active. Despite her blindness she can both prove to herself and to her surroundings that she can manage life as well as sighted people, albeit by other means. To be independent and active are seen as important values and means of being able to live one's life in accordance with the wider society. For Stine this is as central as for the rest of us as members of a specific culture and society. But, for Stine the independence and activeness is of another kind. I will elaborate this further by referring to a documentary sent on Norwegian television a few years ago.

Two years ago the Norwegian Broadcasting system (NRK) broadcast a television documentary about a young woman, Katrine Bråtane, paralysed from the neck down. The documentary gave insight into Katrine's fight to live an independent life. Despite not being able to move any other part of her body apart from her head, and being dependent on other people's help for every kind of daily life tasks 24 hours a day, Katrine described independence as the most important and meaningful aspect of her life. For me, as viewer, I realized I automatically had been thinking of people with paralysis as to an extensive degree being dependent and passive. For Katrine, the independency was not about being able to dress or undress herself or to brush her teeth on her own, tasks she knows she never will be able to do. To be independent as

Katrine described means to be able to make her own decisions and make things work in a way that satisfies her needs and wishes for being able to live a good life.

Stine once described for me how she acts in social gatherings, for example, going out for dinner parties. To avoid all the messing around in search for the food in the buffet, her husband is there to help her and to go and get something to eat for her. She says: 'Lots of people believe he also does this at home, because he helps me with fetching food. They think I'm not capable to manage it by myself. When they visit me at my own house, they will see I'm the one arranging and my husband is the one sitting in the chair meanwhile'. She told me these kinds of activities are not the most significant ways for her to show her independence in public spheres. When she is in company with others outside her home, her ways of showing her independency are, among other activities, by participating on mountain trips, skiing tours, travelling to and experiencing other places, engaging in and participating in different kinds of social happenings and relations (as in voluntary work). But, in her private sphere, to have a clean and nice looking home and to be able to serve the guests in her own house are also important ways for her to show her independency.

As sighted, we may think that the less blind people move, the less are the chances of bumping into something; that any movement, every step a blind person takes, the environment must represent danger and barriers. Through her bodily ability, by the active way of using her body and engaging in the environment, Stine's way of relating to the world gives a new meaning to concepts like independency, freedom, action and agency. For Stine, to bump into something can be viewed as an action of intentionality. The first time I visited Stine, my first impression of the way she constantly was bumping into furniture, walls and door frames inside her house, was that it was an expression of lack of control and not knowing the direction. To me it was an expression of not knowing how to deal with the sightlessness. Each time she bumped into a chair or the edge of the table I interpreted the collision as a sign of loss of direction and as clumsiness. After a while I realized that this bumping was intended. It was her way of navigating through space.

Stine, despite not having the vision to guide her in her orientation and perception of the world, appears as an active and independent agent. Through her way of orientating, localizing, moving, her sensing attention to the environment, her body, represents bodily agency, non-vision ability and capacity.

### ***Constructing space and meaningful relations between humans and surroundings***

The space we move within we ascribe as meaningful through bodily activity and both the kind and meaning of activities are ascribed in different ways. The material and natural structures that surround us are of specific significance for visually impaired people. Sighted people use sight as their main orienting device, and as a device for constructing meaningful surroundings. Stine cannot visually see her surroundings, but through her way of moving and orienting she incorporates physical objects as points of reference. Inside buildings and at home she localizes where she is by bumping into objects. Such objects are furniture, door frames, tables, chairs, railings, walls, flowerpots, dustbins, traffic signs, pedestrian kerbs, cars, trees, bushes, people and buildings. Stine is not able to see these objects, but immediately after she bumps into them she perceives and localizes, through her body, what the object is and so where in the landscape she is and where to head for next. Surroundings can be viewed as landmarks, as points of reference to navigate by (Hutchins 1995). The touch and

contact established between her body and the surroundings, through the bumping and touching, is Stine's way of navigating by use of landmarks and points of reference.

Often, open spaces are described as difficult for blind people, in contrast to what sighted people often assume. For sighted people, open areas are seen as the best ones for the blind because they do not present any danger of tripping or bumping into something:

For the blind point of view, however, a flat, open surface is not negotiable because there are no orientating signals. There is no structure. It is not predictable, because it may end at any moment, and there is no way of telling where you are, once you are on it. The problem for the blind person is not falling over, but knowing where he is. (Hull 1990, 103)

For Stine, being in the open sea, without any structure is not described as a problem. Rather the lack of fear of obstacles gives her the opportunity to move around and use her body freely. In most other situations in her daily life, she has to be aware of the physical structures both constraining and guiding her movements.

John Hull, who is an Australian professor of religious studies who became blind at a mature age, gives rich descriptions of central experiences of blindness in his book *Touching the rock* (Hull 1990). He describes surroundings as predictable structures, through which the blind person is able to orient. As he sees it, space does not present external structures. In contrast, he argues that space in a sense needs to be seen as localized in one's own body. Space is created though the way the body experiences it. A house cannot be visually observed as a physical object by blind people: 'For the blind person, the house is only there because of past experiences' (Hull 1990, 94). These experiences are embodied. The knowledge of the location of the house, as of Stine's ways of orienting inside her home, is embodied. With reference back to Desjarlais (1996), the skin is not an envelope within which the experiences reside. Rather these kinds of engagements in the world are expressed and experienced and therefore in a way material and spatial. Embodied space is the location where both experiences and consciousness are possible to grasp (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003).

Hull (1990) speaks of surroundings as predictable structures. For Stine, to be able to orient and find her way in the pedestrian area of the city centre, in the natural surroundings of her neighbourhood, in the food store and in her house, she has embodied a certain rhythm which guides her and tells her where she is and where to head for. Through being in motion, walking, perhaps unconsciously counting her steps while she is putting one foot after the other, from one point to the next – not too slow not too fast – this embodied rhythm enables Stine to orient and to make sure she is heading for the right position. Lefebvre (2004) suggests the importance of investigating the relationship between the social and biological rhythm: 'Everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm' (Lefebvre 2004, xv). We train ourselves, and are trained, to behave in a number of ways. In addition, he argues that humans think *with* their body, not through it. The body is therefore to be seen not as a medium or a container, but rather as a lived-in temporality. It helps us to make sense of the world, telling us where we are and where to head for next. The act of rhythm '... integrates these things – this wall, this table, these trees – in a dramatic becoming, in an ensemble full of meaning, transforming them no longer into diverse things, but into presences'

(Lefebvre 2004, 23). One has to train oneself to work hard to modify one's perception and conception of the world, of time and of the environment. (Lefebvre 2004, 22). By paying attention to our whole body and all our senses, so we receive data. We will '... come to listen to a house, a street, a town, as an audience listens to a symphony' (Lefebvre 2004, 22).

### *Use of other senses in experiencing and embodying space*

It is not only physical surroundings that are seen as important objects to orient by. In addition, and as illustrated, central elements of motion, sensing and feelings need to be grasped as parts of this orientation in space, through smells, sounds, and contact with the ground. The weather and the seasons are also important conditions. For Stine, the experience of being out in the family boat is made up of the way she feels and senses the environment. Her attention is directed to the absorption of smells, sounds and wind. This gives her a unique feeling of absorbing the knowledge with her body; the attention to and acknowledgement of what is going on around her. Hull (1990) describes the feelings of the wind as invisible, and in that way sighted people gain nothing over the blind. The world is mainly visual for the sighted, and the wind, as an invisible phenomenon, is only observed incidentally: '... it is one of many things which one notices in passing' (Hull 1990, 107).

While discussing the subject of this article with one of the other participants in the PhD project, a congenital blind young woman, she commented on my focus on visually impaired people and their alternative ways of orienting in and relating to space in the following way:

I think sighted people underestimate the 'feeling' of space. As a blind person you are able, at least when on known ground, to feel that you are placed in the right position in relation to where you are heading. In the pedestrian area of my town centre for instance, I know and experience space through the way I feel the ground, how the sounds and the echoes in the street are, what kinds of smells there are and lots of other sensations. This makes windy days hard and dry, sunny days easier.

The wintertime can be hard to navigate in because the pavement and streets are all covered with snow and ice. This makes it more risky and difficult to walk, and also creates a cover which makes the contact with the ground more difficult. The edge line becomes blurred, and indication of where the pavement ends and the busy roadway starts is missing. The surroundings are changed and the space of movement is reduced.

As Lefebvre (2004) considers, experiences of smells and feelings are to be seen as parts of the embodied rhythms: '... the odours of the morning and evening, of hours of sunlight or darkness, of rain or fine weather' (22). Embodied space can be seen as a way of being in the world, taking part and engaging in an existential and phenomenological reality of space with all its smells, feelings, colours and other significant sensorial dimensions (Richardson 1982).

### **Summing up**

This article has focused on how space can be said to be constructed by the way people experience and make use of their surroundings. The descriptions of Stine, a blind woman, and her distinct ways of relating to her environment, referring here both to

the physical and social, may contribute to challenging traditional perspectives within the field of social and cultural studies, which often seem to take such matters for granted. The discussions presented throughout the text attempt to widen up perspectives of issues not only describing blind people's ways of coping with their lives, but also to present extended understandings of ways of perceiving the conceptions of body, space and relations as central phenomena within social science in general.

The present article has described and discussed different ways in which space can be seen as being made and experienced through practice, and in the relation between the body and its surroundings. Throughout the text it is argued that space cannot to be seen as, or reduced to, a location; in contrast it is fruitful to grasp space as created in the relation between humans and their material and physical surroundings; through a blind person's mind, custom, knowledge and bodily practice. By motion, and active ways of experiencing the surroundings, visually impaired people create their own space.

In addition, it is argued that these perspectives can provide richer insight into the analysis of everyday life. The exchange in analysis, between the general and particular, between the abstractions of concepts and the concrete analysis of the everyday life, hopefully has enabled the article to make a fruitful contribution to the understanding of everyday life and embodied spaces, rather than being a description of the obvious. The aim has therefore been to gain insight into the double sense of the notion of the everyday (Lefebvre 2004, ix).

By having looked closely into the different ways people with visual impairment actually produce and make sense out of space, one can conclude by stating that these ways of constructing space are made out of capacities and abilities they *have*, in contrast to focusing on what they *lack*. The aim has not been to describe compensatory strategies, but rather to focus on other and different ways of experiencing and constructing space. People with visual impairment make use of the body in 'different ways, through other senses than sight. They construct their own scopes of action. Those of us who are not visually impaired have a tendency, literally speaking, to overlook such other ways of sensing and experiencing space. Such knowledge described in the present article as dealing with life in different ways and manners is of significance of the field of policy-making as well as the field of research.

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