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Korolija Fontana-Giusti, Gordana Mapping the Experience of the Walker: A Spatio-Dynamic Method of Designing a Responsive Environment for the 21st Century Pedestrian Culture. In: Walk 21 Zurich 2005 conference papers on line.

DOI

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Paper presented at Walk21-VI “Everyday Walking Culture”, The 6th International Conference on Walking in the 21st Century, September 22-23 2005, Zurich, Switzerland
www.walk21.ch www.walk21.com

Mapping the Experience of the Walker - a Spatio - Dynamic Method of Designing a Responsive Environment for the 21st Century Pedestrian Culture

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Abstract

This presentation will be discussed in the context of the London site located within the central city area. Apart from London, three other European cities are researched within the Agora project, a three-year urban design and research undertaking in part sponsored by the European Commission. The site is selected with the aim of promoting pedestrian culture and improving the environmental conditions and the quality of life for pedestrians and cyclists, while promoting good sustainable public transport and marginalising the usage of cars.

The methods used are based on the attempts to bring the usually abstract traditional urban research and design vocabulary into a more intimate relationship with the citizens/users. The effects of the overall experience of the city and its public spaces, their spatial configuration, and effects upon the users are studied, mapped and represented as the project's data. The data representation aims to explore the new possibilities offered by the computer technology to assist in the complexity of the urban environment.

The aim is to capture the experience of the pedestrians and walkers not previously articulated in this way. Various aspects are studied, observed, measured and mapped down in relation to a variety of the selected and defined urban components. They have been articulated to address the main sustainability aim, which strives towards promoting a new twenty first century ethos for the pedestrians who had found themselves under the threat of a vehicular culture and often insensitively placed overbearing infrastructure.

The approaches taken in the project vary. The urban choreography approach and the one which studies the urban experience, will be presented at the conference as most relevant for the subject of walking. The comparison is made between the city life and the theatre, by examining the mutually

effecting relationship for civic life. Urban choreography embarks upon and engages in the concerns about the nature and the effects of urban movement i.e. flows of people, cyclists and cars, the logic of their clustering into assemblages that are differentiated in relation to the variety of actions and activities.

Urban experience of walking will be examined in relation to the perennial issue of culture addressed within humanistic discourse beginning with Plato/Socrates, Peripatetic philosophy, Cicero and Stoicism. Walking has often been related to the issues of health and the body but equally so to the issue of psychological health and mental sanity. The difference between the experience of walking within the city and walking outside the city walls will be addressed in relation to the often presumed opposition of the inside and the outside. The implications will be examined in the context of the renaissance city and within modern urban conditions.

These articulations will contribute to the analysis of the concept of the urban landscape - the term widely circulated today and bound to the experience of the urban walker today as it was in the past such as during the picturesque movement of the eighteenth century.

Biography

Gordana Korolija Fontana Giusti is an architect who has been involved in teaching, research and design at the Architectural Association London and more recently at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London. She has lectured across Europe and is the editor of the latest 4 volume publication on the complete works of Zaha Hadid Architects. Currently she is the coordinator of the AGORA European urban research and design project.

Mapping the Movements of the Walker - a Spatio - Dynamic Method of Designing a Responsive Environment for the 21st Century Pedestrian Culture

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September 2005

In this paper the following will be presented: firstly, the question of the attitude and the experience of the city walker and secondly, the outline of certain aspects of the developing research methodology concerning urban design.

Walking in the City - Intensification of the experience

Attitude of the Modern City Walkers

Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and the Modern Life" (1903) provides one of the most distinctive insights into the life of the citizens in the modern metropolis. According to him (and some other well known writers/observers of modern life), the modern city dweller is distinguished by many aspects from his or her more rural counterpart, but there is one underlying attitude which determines this particular kind of behaviour. This attitude is often referred to as - blasé. The blasé attitude is a laid back, nonchalant manner that is itself considered to be the product of urban experience. According to Simmel, this experience is the result of the intensification of perception and of the thinking processes, which occurs in urban environment.

The condition also engenders a certain autonomy, and the modern individual becomes an intellectualised creature, whose own disinterested circulation within the metropolis reflects the circulation of money and commodities themselves.

Simmel's portrait of the metropolitan individual as over-stimulated by sensory experience and distracted by the fragmentary existence is not dissimilar to Walter Benjamin's description of modern life. The blasé character is comparable to Benjamin's *flâneur* of the arcades. There are some differences as well as the *flâneur*, becomes analysed and its inner motives explained through various examples as in the work of Baudelaire. Simmel's analysis of the subject on the other hand, belongs to the realm of sociology albeit of a particular kind.

The modern metropolitan type can be seen as both the product of and the defence against the modern city life. In that respect it is worth looking at the original paragraph by Simmel:

"The psychological foundation upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli. Man is a creature whose existence is dependent on differences i.e. his mind is

stimulated by the difference between present impressions and those which have preceded. Lasting impressions, the slightness in their difference, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them consume so to speak less energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli. To the extent that the metropolis creates these psychological conditions – with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life – it creates in the sensory foundations of mental life, and in the degree of awareness necessitated by our organisation, as creatures dependent on differences, deep contrast with a slower, more habitual more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory mental phase of small town and rural existence.”¹

This paragraph by Simmel articulates the difference between the experience of living in the city from the one in the countryside.

For most people being and walking in the countryside is pleasurable². The moments when we open ourselves to the colours, textures, smells and sounds of nature and its life are moments of connection to first experiences of this kind. It is soothing and similar to the regression into childhood, even if we grew up in the city. The comforting power of life assures us that it will always be there (the promise which is increasingly becoming difficult to keep). The experience is calming and peaceful, and we sink into the apparent tranquillity of the surrounding as we walk down the quiet, serene and naturally fragrant country lane.

Walking in the city is of a very different kind. For many people walking in a busy metropolis like London is not necessarily a pleasurable experience. Apart from the walks in the parks, by the river, and some well kept residential areas, walking is usually an annoying experience that consumes plenty of useful time which could be devoted to something more pleasurable, meaningful, or productive. The sounds are noises, the fragrances are often foul smells, the colours and textures are uninspiring. Only certain pockets of the city space provide us with some insight into the cultural make-up and achievements of its citizens. And one often needs to have a good local knowledge of how to reach there.

The currently overused term ‘cityscape’ aims to erase this difference and to point out towards the parallel between the land and the city. We can also talk today of the common characteristic of both. However a significant distinction remains.

In Simmel’s argument the essentially intellectualistic character of the mental life of the urban walker becomes intelligible against that of the small town dweller. In his analysis the country type relies on feelings and emotional relationships, while the metropolitan person can no longer respond emotionally because of the intensification of stimuli.

¹ Simmel, G. “The Metropolis and Mental Life” in *Rethinking Architecture* edited by Neil Leach. Routledge London and New York (1997)

² There are of course those hard core city dwellers who would be against the country life at all times. England in particular is quite specific in this respect as this difference tends to correspond to the remnants of the class structure within society. The rest of Europe is very different and mostly people do not look down upon their metropolis as a dirty old city where one has to come and do business. In most of the case metropolis have the glamour and the prestige associated to its lifestyle.

This dichotomy between the city and the country has been a well visited *topos* in literature too. In Plato's dialogues Socrates conducts most of his dialogues in the city of Athens. He rarely steps out to conduct his discourses. There is however an interesting moment in *Phaedrus* when Lysias and Phaedrus manage to trick Socrates out of the polis by introducing the subject of love and surrender between men and boys. Socrates, whose attention was caught, became involved in the conversation and blindly followed his collocutors. When he found himself outside the city Socrates uttered the following:

*"..I am the lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the polis do. Yet you seem to have discovered a drug for getting me out."*³

Cicero wrote about the need to take part in the intellectual debates of Roman Senate, but also to withdraw into the seclusion of the *hortus* outside the capital for comfort and emotional regeneration.

We can equally think of the production of writings that had exploded in the second half of the nineteenth century in relation to the city and the writers' experience of the city. These drew upon the new sensibility which the city life provided and often contrasted it to the life in the countryside. The story usually takes the line of the landed gentry that came into the city to attend the opera and appreciate the arts, while doing business. In that way they followed the latest achievements and had a chance to update their taste according to the latest fashion. Later on these characters usually withdraw into the soothing countryside for emotional pleasures found in walks, animals and the company of local types (in Tolstoy, Gogol etc). Indeed people who wanted to keep their sensibility up to date had to make these trips at least twice a year in order to keep up with the new and rapidly developing world that was greatly exclusive to the metropolis. Some that were more driven by this new sharpened sensibility and its logic have moved and lived in places like Paris on a permanent basis.

This comes to fruition in the production of new modern genres of arts and communication such as modern novel, poetry, film, music or ways of thinking such as psychoanalysis, and also writings which bridge the gap between traditional philosophy and modern life. The development of the avant-garde art photography and film above all testify to this change, but also the formation of genres such as detective novels etc.

There are writers whose work is methodically dependent on the city. The work of thinkers such as Dostoyevsky, Freud, Kierkegaard, Oscar Wilde, Balzac, testify about this new mentality sharpened and acquired within the city.

Maxim Gorky addressed the problem of the individual coming from a small city who became introduced to the life and sensibilities of the metropolis only to be returned by some fatal stream of events back to their town. They usually experience dissatisfaction. Moreover, if they haven't made an emotional connection with someone (new found love, marriage, love of nature), they became profoundly unhappy. The character in Gorky was later cursing the life circumstances that let him into the sensorial openings during a particularly rich urban life he had but only for a short time. He cried that after being introduced to the big city once, there was no true happiness to be found in going back to rural simplicity.

³ Plato *Phaedrus*

According to Simmel's argument, the emotions are rooted in the unconscious level of the mind and develop most readily in the steady equilibrium of unbroken customs best exemplified in rural and small town living. The metropolis disturbs this profound balance in its citizens. The locus of reason, on the other hand, according to Simmel, is in the lucid conscious upper strata of the mind and it is most adaptable of our inner forces. In order to adjust to the shifts and contradictions of urban events, it does not require the disturbances and inner upheavals that are the only means whereby more conservative personalities are able to adapt to the rhythm of the variety of stimuli in the metropolitan context.

The metropolitan type – which naturally takes on a thousand individual modifications – creates, what Simmel identifies as a 'protective organ for itself' of apprehending the variety of stimuli by reason, against the profound disruptions with which the fluctuations and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten it.

In this manner instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner, thus creating a mental predominance through the intensification of consciousness, which in turn is caused by it.

The reaction of the metropolitan person to the multiple sensations and events of the urban life is moved to the sphere of a mental activity that is therefore least emotional. By the same shift this type is the most removed from the depths of the personality.

And as Simmel argued at the very opening (and we can agree that this remains even more so today) the biggest problem for the individual in a modern context is to maintain its independence and individuality of existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of historical heritage and techniques of life.

This intellectual quality, which is thus recognised as a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis, becomes ramified into numerous specific phenomena.

The metropolis has always been the seat of money economy because the multiplicity of activities and extended commercial involvement has given the medium of exchange an importance which was never needed in the rural context. Money and its exchange value reduce all quality and individuality to a quantitative level. This is an important form of life of the metropolis. Indeed to provide and nourish this interaction is structurally, probably its most important role. The example of London testifies to this as many have observed that London through the entire course of English history has never acted as the heart of England but rather as its intellect and always as its provider of money.⁴

The walker in the city is exposed to all these effects including the monetary. While the individual might take pleasure in some interesting and rewarding moments in experiencing the city, the individual is also always in resistance to be levelled, swallowed up in this socio technological mechanism.

⁴ Simmel quotes "most outstanding English constitutional historian" to support his statement on this matter.

This is what Nietzsche and Ruskin often seem to have addressed in relation to the modern city. Nietzsche saw in this relentless struggle of the individual the prerequisite for development of the individual. Indeed they both had such hatred for the metropolis mainly because they saw the value of human lives only into reduced unschematised human expressions, they hated the money economy and rationalised intellectualised existences.

Therefore blasé attitude is at the same time the product of the intensification of the metropolitan life as it is a defence against it. This ultimately leads to the incapacity to react to the things and new stimulations with the required amount of energy. It leads to indifference and reserve. But this external reserve, Simmel warns us, is not only indifference. It is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which in the close contact that may arise can often slip into conflict and hatred.

The Landscape of the City

In the genealogy of the word landscape⁵ we have an example of nature imitating art, at least insofar as the development of the meaning is concerned. According to the National Heritage Dictionary, landscape was first recorded in English in 1598, and was borrowed as a painters' term from the Dutch during the 16th century, when artists of this country explored the landscape genre. The imagination about the land in the Netherlands was always fuelled by a lack of it, the difficulty to maintain it and the yearning to create it. The Dutch word *landschap* had earlier meant simply "region, tract of land" but had acquired the artistic sense, which it brought over into English, of "a picture depicting scenery on land." However the word came to circulation much later, i.e. only once people were introduced to landscapes in paintings and subsequently began to perceive landscapes in the actuality of life.

Without exploring this etymology any further, and in regards to the currently spread term cityscape (and many other *scapes*), we can conclude that the cityscape builds up its meaning upon the term landscape. At a first glance it suggests a framed *singled-out view* of the city. It is therefore a chosen *expanse of urban scenery* which we acquire and comprehend when watching the city. In that sense its structure is more of a *picture* itself and less of an event. It is therefore affiliated to the discourse of the picturesque that understood and treated the landscape as the superimposition of the framed view upon nature. By virtue of being a picture, the cityscape would primarily be static in its nature. However through the developments of film and television in the past century, the landscape / cityscape incorporated time and movement. In this sense we can incorporate the moving images as part of the structure of the experience of the cityscape when walking today. This experience of a contemporary city walker is qualitatively different to the seated eighteenth century gentleman observing the nature via Claude's glass.

As with landscape itself, the city comes to inform our inner prospect, our mental views and contributes to our knowledge and memory of cities and places. But as we have explained, this

⁵ According to dictionaries, *landscape* has several meanings. Landscape is primarily understood as: a) an *expanse of scenery* that can be seen in a single view, b) a *picture* depicting an expanse of scenery, c) the *branch of art* dealing with the representation of natural scenery, d) an extensive *mental view*; an interior prospect: "they occupy the whole landscape of my thought".

mentality of the walker is now considerably different. The intensification of the experience has contributed towards the creation of the ability to react more cerebrally to all sensory experiences.

Walking in the City – The Notions of Flows, Assemblages and the Theatre of Events

Our thesis argues that pedestrian flows create a particular spatiality of the city. They determine the spatial configurations and directly address the primary sense of the word route and walking along it. We have examined the role of the theatre, which is connected to the formation of public spaces in cities. In analysing spaces and urban events new categories were established. Apart from the pedestrian and other flows, the category which emerged is the one of assemblages. The assemblages are formed by one or more pedestrians who become involved in a particular activity which takes them out of the flow and are involved in activities such as listening, talking, performing, waiting, eating etc.

In this approach, the theatre is not understood metaphorically, rather we refer to the set of common spatial conditions, which had existed for the public space and the theatre and we trace these conditions back to their common denominator.⁶

For example a brief analysis of actual contemporary spaces such as Trafalgar Square and the Royal Festival Hall can explain this position. In both cases we can trace tangible relations, interconnections and merging of the public space of the city and the theatre. For the New Year, during the time of national celebration (such as the rugby World Cup victory) or in the occasion of public protests (such as the ones against the war or the poll tax), and indeed in daily life, Trafalgar Square is a theatre with a clearly marked areas and rules of performance for both the protagonists and the public. In the other example, we can observe the Royal Festival Hall with the auditorium inside the building allowing for its public spaces to be flanked all around its core. By overlooking the piazza outside, the theatre foyers visually join the space around the building and across the river. This amalgamation of two different public spaces made the foyer space of the Royal Festival Hall one of the best loved meeting places of London.

There are many other examples: the winning bid for the Olympics in London did not only propose the building of the new stadium and sport halls, it rather utilized many existing London squares: such as Trafalgar, Leicester Square and others. Therefore it is not impossible to acknowledge and constantly review the close relationship between the public spaces and the theatre. The walker in the city needs the theatre of events that he can join in while walking.

Understanding this relationship is valuable for understanding urban contexts and any urban design. In order to fully acknowledge the conditions of urban events we need to address the position of the city dweller and the needs of the walker more comprehensively as the everyday participation in the city life is mainly experienced through walking. it is possible to improve the design of cities and

⁶ See the forthcoming paper by GKFG *On Public Spaces in European Cities* part 1, where genealogy of this relationship tracing it back to the Greek *agora* has been outlined.

the experience of the walking public by addressing city squares as places where social exchange and urban events take place. In that respect the role of contemporary theatre could be of great significance.

In the Agora – Cities for People project under the approach entitled urban choreography⁷ what is being attempted is to map down, the topology, texture and temporality of the urban motions. The mapping of the major urban flows and assemblages is then analysed in relation to a variety of physical conditions in the city within the overarching concerns for sustainability.

Our analysis looks at the apparent chaotic flux of city movement in search for its logic. It addresses movement understood as flows and assemblages and involves the notion of public space and people. The notion of public space does not exist without the procession of people, the formation of their assemblages that determine spatial configurations. Once mapped down, these configurations can act as guidelines for the responsive design.⁸

Something new is always being produced by acknowledging and articulating the complexity of a given urban drama in a novel approach. The more unforeseen and apparently messy roles we detect, analyse and stage manage for improvement, the more potentially responsive we might be in setting our urban design in a receptive way. As the city is an extremely complex system, the sensitivity towards this condition is a necessity.⁹

In re-negotiating the role of the architect somewhere in between the experimenting artist and the regulator, the Agora project seeks out to empty any design work of its figurative and decorative character in order to foreground the architectural and consequently urban condition at stake. In aiming to set the stage for the public life of the 21st century city, we as architects and city planners could be compared to the contemporary theatre director staging a complex drama.

The construction of significations for this drama is displaced from any presumed script to the spatial field between the participants and the map of their experiences captured in the project: a fluid zone of spatial interference populated by moving bodies and the effects they produce and receive. This is the zone of urban flows, assemblages and events. As products of different fields of events, flows and assemblages are not exhaustive, hierarchically ordered and closed. They are rather capable of

⁷ This term has been often overused in the magazines of architectural and urban studies. But I am not aware that it has been studied in depth and that the assumed significations have been analysed.

⁸ The problem with the term of urban choreography is that it suggests a choreographer. This choreographer could be the unwritten set of ever changing rules that guide our behaviour in society. The scope of a theatre-like structure for public spaces provides for the conditions for renegotiation of these terms. And indeed for any sense of social freedom which is not to remain an impossibility, we need to have certain spatial provisions as well.

⁹ This condition of complexity is an unstable system often related to the mathematical field theory, to non-linear dynamic processes and to computer simulations of evolutionary change. Above all in urbanism the complex infrastructural elements of the contemporary city linked together in open-ended networks, offer examples of field conditions. This is due to complex and dynamic behaviours of city's users. This had led us to speculate on new methodologies to model programme and space. The field condition would be any formal or spatial matrix capable of unifying diverse elements, while maintaining the identity of each. Field configurations are loosely bounded aggregates characterised by porosity and local interconnectivity. Field conditions are bottom-up phenomena: defined not by overarching geometrical schemas but by intricate local connections.

Field configurations are inherently expandable; the possibility of the incremental growth is anticipated in the mathematical relations of the parts.

permutation: open to time and only provisionally stable. The whole condition of the city drama cannot ever be given at once.

Our project methodology actively encourages participation of all citizens but underlines the critical role of the experimental projects in determining various fields of creative tensions in any realm of city life. In this economy the role of the experimental endeavour is not simply to produce an object, which would then be displayed in the city. The aim is to go beyond the object, which is to spread and capture the field of influence and analysis in its complex diversity.¹⁰

Therefore in our renewed and revisionist urban modernism we aim at an articulation of appropriate spatial configurations which can protect and empower the citizens. In doing so, we need to take the lessons from the present and from history.

It is fascinating to find out how pertinent Simmel's postulates about the metropolitan mind still are. At the same time the city has also changed in the last hundred years and the high stimulation of the urban walker has gone significantly up, while the whole planet is experiencing different conditions. The legitimate question is: are we not over-stimulated and overexposed? We almost cannot be blasé enough about it. Is not our individual sustainability threatened?

The question of sustainability is something which always needs to be addressed on three levels: on the level of the environment, on the social level and on the level of each particular individual. The three are interrelated and contribute to the overall sustainability, vitality and welfare of the city, its inhabitants and its walkers. Social and individual sustainability were the guiding presuppositions in leading this research. Individual and group lives of the people were studied in relation to the environment and its conditions in order to highlight the nature of this relationship. Movements, activities, experiences and attitudes of people were observed, collected and mapped down. This will be used as a driving force for any design intervention.

¹⁰ Field and its conditions for architecture and urbanism have at least a twofold meaning: it can refer to architecture's site as context, or it can refer to a proposal to relate to it.