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Performing Architecture

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Performing Architecture: A Collaborative Educational Research in Acronafplia

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Abstract

Walking practice became central in architectural teaching mostly after the Second World War, within a broader context of transformation in pedagogical methods aimed at departing from the traditional approach of viewing architecture primarily as a matter of technique and form. Methodological tools and theoretical inquiries from social sciences and performing arts begun to interweave with those in the discipline of architecture. Walking is recognized as both an innovative and inherently intuitive method for exploring the qualities of the human environment and built spaces. Not only major figures of the 20th century's architecture pointed out the importance of the human body moving through space (as exemplified in *la promenade* by Le Corbusier), but there has also been a growing interest in urban planning that places walking in the very centre of concerns for designers, envisioning the reconstruction of cities and neighbourhoods. Walking thus has a central role, not only as an objective within designed environments but also as a *means* of understanding these spaces as experienced places open to redefinition.

In this paper, we present, reflect upon and discuss the results of the site-specific action *One hour, One Path. Narrations of Acronafplia* that took place in the area of Acronafplia in Nafplion (Greece). This site-specific educational workshop was initiated by ENSA Paris-Malaquais School of Architecture (Paris) and implemented in collaboration with the Department of Performing and Digital Arts of the University of Peloponnese (Greece). On the 4th of November 2021 twenty master students of ENSA Paris-Malaquais and ten bachelor students from the Department of Performing and Digital Arts met for the first time and for a three-hour session in order to explore the area of Acronafplia guided by a series of *in-situ* explorations and prompted by questions suggested by their supervisors. How does the body experience the distinctive landscape of Acronafplia? In what ways can movement through

space, lead to new forms of appropriation of the city and the public space, while considering the palimpsest of heritage traces?

First insights from the fieldwork experience highlight the potency of walking in stimulating engagement with the observed environment. By federating *in situ* different disciplines and ways of looking but also by enhancing a constant interaction with other bodies (co-walkers), the exercise aims to unveil ways in which walking can be a promising pedagogical tool at the intersection of disciplines concerned with spatial studies.

Keywords: Walking, place, performance, tourism, landscape design

Walking, Experiencing Place

Since antiquity, walking has been associated with the act of inhabiting the world. From the peripatetic school of Aristotle, where discussions were enriched by walking, to Henry David Thoreau's writings¹ celebrating the act of walking as a prerequisite of spiritual exploration, the act of moving on foot through landscapes is inherent to human conscientiousness as a fundamental expression of belonging. In the early 20th century, the sociologist Marcel Mauss (1934) was among the first to offer a critical examination of the act of walking, highlighting the richness beneath what might seem like a trivial mechanical movement of the body. The potential of walking to reveal sometimes hidden essences of the environment was already known by the mobile methods explored by the 19th century's *flâneurs*, as well as the Dadaists and Situationists movements. Literature is full of urban strollers who found in walking a means of expression (Hessel, 2020; Benjamin, 1999). The Chicago School offers a pioneering hypothesis for its time, suggesting that an understanding of the social realm, can be achieved through careful observation of public life (Simmel, 1903). While the advancement in computation systems and the predominance of quantitative methods in geographical science have marginalised personal observations and fine-grained fieldwork ethnography, the revolution of the 1960s opened the way to a renaissance of qualitative methods in the analysis of urban lived environments and landscapes. Jane Jacobs' work was illuminating in this regard, as she proposed a new understanding of order in public life and emphasised the importance of liveable streets in promoting a democratic city (Jacobs, 1960). Landscape architect Lawrence Halprin pioneered the city walk as a method for participatory design in the late 1960s. Some years later, the urban planner William Whyte (1980) searched in walking behaviours for a renewal of public space design tools. Michel de Certeau (1984) looked into the pedestrian's life, implementing its proper rules, making places significant and others not,

¹ *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* is a project that provides accurate texts of Thoreau's complete works and can be found online. <https://thoreau.library.ucsb.edu/index.html>

contrasting the top-down designed city. Explorations of walking practices and urban life were accompanied by the flourishing of political walking practices during the 1960s and the 1970s. In an article published in 1959 in the journal *Landscape*, Kevin Lynch and Malcolm Rivkin (1959) explore the connections the articulations between description and perception of urban environment through walking. After 2000, humanities and urban studies have witnessed the flourishing of qualitative methodologies occurring within a context of fertile intellectual debate on time-space theories. The landscape (whether urban or not) is not merely a static scene but rather a malleable construction that remains unfinished and constantly under definition (Massey, 2005). On the same line, the anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) insists on the need to understand territory and landscape, as embodied experiences that cannot be fully understood through measurements or geographical characteristics. Many geographers utilize walking as an efficient method for accessing urban experience in its entirety (Edensor, 2008; Middleton, 2009). This increased interest aligns with the proliferation of studies and policies aiming to facilitate and valorise pedestrianism (Blomley, 2011). In the turn of the new mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006), many scholars have delved into researching the ways in which mobility is experienced (Cresswell, 2006) bringing to the foreground place-specific methodologies. Anderson (2004) suggests that talking while walking reveals in a direct and unbiased way how the environment is embodied. Furthermore, the study of body movements in space not only reveals what people think about a particular environment, but also unveils the body as a repository of cultures, politics and beliefs that deserve to enrich the information gathered by the researcher (Edensor, 2000). In her fieldwork, Sarah Pink (2008) underlines the importance of “sensoriality” and “sociality” in shared walking experiences (researcher and participant) in order for the researcher to experience the object that he/she seeks to analyse and understand. She also reminds us that different bodies may experience the same place in different ways (Pink, 2007). The phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962) reminds us that it is in fact through the body that a human exists in the space. In his pioneer essay *Walkscapes*, Francesco Careri (2002) showcases –through the performances of the artists group Stalkers– the power of walking practices in reflecting on transformations that occur in everyday environments and in offering a means for a critical look on spatial changes. Walking, by its very essence, offers a sensitive interaction with the outside world. Senses are crucial in helping us understand the organisation of a space (Tuan, 1974) not as a Cartesian environment but as an emotional reality. Walking not only requires a certain engagement with the environment –towards which we cannot just be observers– but also brings us to socially interact with other beings (Knox, 2005), to be confronted to difference and sometimes even to be familiarised with the unknown. For Kate Moles (2008), walking served as a precious method allowing her to gather a multitude of observations over an extended period of time including diverse elements about park life. This process created a new space of theoretical debates.

Walking has been used as an artistic practice or medium for performance aiming to introduce new interpretations and understandings of public spaces (Philipps, 2005). Walking performances proposed by artists invite a reconceptualization of public space's perceptions, practices and imaginaries. Many artists have explored the duality of walking, recognising it both as a trivial human practice accessible to almost everyone, and as a means for creating something new, art, in space. The link between body movement and the rhythmicity of the city is celebrated not only by geographers² but also by artists like Francis Alys, Hamish Fulton etc. The possibility of improvisation while walking makes the latter a useful tool for experimenting with the appropriation of space. For land artists like Richard Long or Robert Smithson, moving through space becomes an integral part of the created art. Artist Janet Cardiff explores the relationship between sound and walking, introducing a personal form of art known as the audio promenade. Psychogeographer Tina Richardson (2015) invites us to examine the crossroads between artistic practice and academic research, in order to access the impact of urban phenomena to individuals. Ben Jacks (2004), emphasises on the capacity of everyday walking to become a rebellious subversive act in a computerised, globalised world as Tim Brennan's guides participants to a critical overlook of fragments of an urban environment (Brennan, 2005).

Ole B. Jensen and Tim Richardson (2003) underline that the connection of discourse to space is never neutral. Words transcend meanings, and sayings about a space are shaped constantly while being in it. Walking around the site under study has an importance in terms of pedagogy, but also the value of a common engagement "on the field" between different disciplines.

Several scholars have shown how walking serves a significant method for evaluating public space (Mehta, 2014). In the professional context of architects and urban designers, walking functions as a medium for perceiving architecture in an emotional, personal manner, while also of defining the quality of architectural space (Gehl, 2006).

Walking practice became central in architectural teaching in France³ mostly after the second world war, within a general context of transformation of pedagogical methods following the will to break up with a heritage of approaching architecture primarily as a question of technique and form (Violeau, 2005). Methodological tools and theoretical questions in social sciences and performing arts are beginning to intertwine with those in the discipline of

2 David Seamon (1979) with his concept of "place ballets".

3 After 1968, a major reform started restructuring architectural higher education in France. Until then, architectural discipline was taught inside the Regional Schools of Architecture (ERA), which were created in 1903. The aim of the reform was to rehabilitate the figure of the intellectual architect by opening teaching programmes to the human and social sciences and fieldwork experimentation. With the founding of the Educational Architecture Units (UPA), architecture schools gained autonomy and started integrating sociology courses and plastic arts courses. These new courses were using outside learning and contact with the built environment as structural tools of learning.

architecture. Walking is recognized as both an innovative and inherently evident means of exploring the qualities of the human environment and built space. Not only did major figures in the 20th century's architecture pointed out the importance of the human body moving into space (as exemplified in *la promenade* by Le Corbusier),⁴ but also a keen interest for urban planning has put walking in the very centre of preoccupations of designers and politics, envisioning the reconstruction of cities and neighbourhoods. Walking has then its central role, not only as an objective in designed environments but also as a means of understanding the latter as experienced places, open to redefinition.

A Site-Specific Experience: The Case Study of Acronafplia

In 2021, the Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris-Malaquais, started a master design studio focusing on the theme of Xenia Hotels in Greece, exploring the evolution of touristic accommodations of the 1950s and the 1960s. In this context, groups of 20 students travel every year to Greece in order to examine specific Xenia case study. The aim and objectives of this project are to understand possible methods of transforming modern built heritage, to become familiar with site analysis and building rehabilitation tools, and to experiment with qualitative methods of experiencing the landscape and the complex relationship between architecture and *topos*. On the 4th of November 2021 twenty master students of ENSA Paris-Malaquais visited the Xenia in Nafplio and collaborated with ten bachelor students from the Department of Performing and Digital Arts. The students met for the first time to explore the area of Acronafplia through a series of exercises designed by their supervisors. The main objective of this collaboration was to conduct a joint workshop *in situ*, and to explore the possibilities of re-examining the methods of "understanding" and "situating" architecture within a specific landscape. The aim of this fieldwork experience was to question –from a multidisciplinary perspective– the ways in which the body can become an active medium, not only for "measuring" public space and the built environment, but also for enriching the design process with less tangible or quantified inputs such as senses, atmospheres, rhythms and so on.

The meeting of the two institutions in the field was organised around a common "exercise" that lasted for approximately three hours. This exercise served as a pretext to encourage the students to negotiate in different ways the limits of the open space and the elements perceived - at first sight - in order to create new imaginaries about the relationship between architecture, sight and movement. Participants were invited to walk freely in space around the Xenia building and to create a path documenting their experiences. Mixed groups of students from both

4 See Flora Samuel (2010)

institutions began surveying on foot around Acronafplia. Some strolled, others stopped and danced. Students invented various ways of spontaneous interactions with the environment.

Several questions were addressed in the beginning of the fieldwork exercise in order to guide the teams and to facilitate the surveying and the collection of information on the site: How does the body experience space and in which way is this experience linked to the particular landscape of Acronafplia? Can new kinds of walking practices offer new readings of the *topos*? In which ways can moving in space and taking into account the palimpsest of heritage traces, lead to new forms of appropriation of the city and the public space?

Building upon these questions, the students were invited to rediscover the site and shape narratives about its identity, perception, function and atmosphere. Each group traced their route first on a map and then on the site itself. They then physically walked the route to propose a narrative around the following questions: What do you think of this route? Why did you choose this point of departure and arrival? What emotions does this view evoke? How does our body interact with changes in the environment? The above questions served as entry points into the theme.

In practice, the teaching team primarily invited the students to walk along their chosen itineraries. Secondly, students were asked to freely explore the site and to write down questions about how to perceive the landscape, the built and the natural environment. Thirdly, they were asked to collect material and to document their path in order to create a storyboard that would serve as a baseline for the creation of short films.

The participants were invited to propose different methods for transcribing their embodied experiences. Therefore, different media were used, including drawing, photography, video, and text. The act of transcribing their experiences of walking along a path led the students to articulate their body movements through variety of other forms of expression, such as drawing, writing, and singing.

During the final hour, groups presented and discussed their first impressions and narrative guidelines with the teachers and other participants, using public space as the setting for their presentations. In these presentations, the students expressed the elements of the path within the framework of a narrative trajectory.

They engaged in discussions about potential narratives arising from the sequences of experiences. They explored diverse approaches to framing architecture by navigating through the landscape with the body being strongly integrated into the final presentation scene of the narratives through live performances of dancing and singing.

By the time their work was returned, the students had produced a large number of A4 papers, notes and videos. The groups arrived at the space for the final presentations with other baggage, including a collection of found objects and natural materials. An interesting complicity developed between the students as they tried to produce a final synthesis of their experiences.

Moving Bodies. Explorative Languages

Walking by its very definition is a form of intervention in urban space, underlines Filipa Matos Wunderlich (2008). The researcher distinguishes three kinds of walking practices; “purposive, discursive, conceptual”. While the last two promote discovery and interaction, even purposive walking inevitably adjusts to the environment as it is performed (*ibid.*). In this relational way of creating the act of walking, we cannot but admit that walking has the capacity to re-create space. At the same time, the solicitation of senses and emotions increases the sense of belonging in space as it is proposed by Rodaway (1994). The final restitution of the *in situ* “exercise” was above all a shared experience in place. Students arrived with various types of mediums for restitution (e.g. architects insisting on drawing a body movement, students of the Performing Arts Department searching for inspiring places to test movements directly in space), as well as ways of narrating what happened while walking on the path. The shared time of the exercise hides, in reality, a multilayering of individual ways of experiencing the time of the walk. Contrary to a linear perception of time as a “time passing-by” says Jennie Middleton (2009), urban space, particularly through walking, can evoke an experiential dimension of time. Students’ walks were formed by hesitations, accelerations, delays and turnovers.

Students have *reproached* the place, claiming an alternative reading of it through fragments of “looking, hearing, drawing, dancing, singing”. Ultimately, “walking encourages us to think with all our senses” (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017, p. 4). At every stop, and in between stops, students used the generic format of an A4 paper as well as photos and videos, to “capture” the experience of the body “in space” creating their own “Embodied Field Notebooks.”

This seemingly spontaneous act was in reality influenced by several factors: the intensity of stimuli, the interplay between shadow and light, wind patterns, various smells, noise intrigues, the topography of the area, the shapes of architecture, design elements and found objects. A noteworthy trend among performing arts students was their inclination to revisit choreographic exercises that they had previously been introduced to, during the dance classes as part of their curriculum earlier in that year.

The performing arts students had previously been introduced to performance practices that emphasise the strong relationship between the human body and the notion of space, including the surrounding natural, urban and architectural environment. They had already gained experience with a range of site-specific choreographic exercises informed by the pioneer choreographer Rudolf Laban’s research on spatiality (1963) and Mary Overlie’s (2016) Six Viewpoints method, which includes practical exercises for researching and opening up the relationship between space and bodies. Moreover, these students had already been introduced to important dance works and performances that highlight this relationship between

bodies, space and architecture, such as Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* (1971), Valie Export's *Body Configurations* (1972-76) and Willy Donner's *Bodies in Urban Spaces* (2007).

Their influence by such practices, is evident in some of their photographic and video documentation (Fig. 1) as they followed their group walk and interacted with their surrounding environment. In these spontaneous interactions with space, bodies took on various forms, exploring balance, force, release and resistance to gravity. Some groups emphasised the significance of playful physical interaction within a particular space, echoing the approach of the artist group Wrights & Sites (2013) who view the city as both a playground and a playmate. Other students highlighted the importance of details during an otherwise trivial itinerary in the city, reminding us of Andrea Haenggi's research on experiencing the city through urban plants that grow in the cracks of the asphalt (Avgitidou, 2020).

First insights from the fieldwork experience highlight the power of embodied interaction in fostering engagement within the surrounding environment. As Haenggi (cited in Avgitidou, 2020, p. 56) suggests, "the pause, the stillness, to stay in place, is a dynamic configuration that allows for any moment to react and change the body in place." It is also important to note that in certain groups, the barrier of language was overcome by the simple act of walking together as a group. In these instances, the students focused more on getting to know each other during their walk. For these students the exercise provided a framework for meeting each other through the sharing of personal stories that revealed their relationship to music, dance and architecture.

Conclusions

In summary, by bringing together on-site different disciplines and ways of seeing, and by encouraging a constant interaction with other bodies, the exercise has demonstrated how walking can be a promising pedagogical tool at the crossroads of disciplines concerned with space. Combining diverse cultures and disciplines in the field provided an opportunity to highlight the significance of cultural dimension of place in the production of body movement in space (Ingold & Vergunst, 2008). Through practical research, students became aware that every movement changes the space (Robinson, 1981) and that the act of walking in space, not only engages the body (Solnit, 2001) but also disrupts our "established" way of looking at our surroundings (Phillips, 2005). The collective act of walking and crossing paths in space, revealed ways of appropriating space and informed possible reinvented tools of investigation and positioning, both as a researcher, a practitioner and as an artist in this context.



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