

# PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

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### Walking as Anarchiving: An Aesthetic Analysis of the “Window on the World” Tour

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### **Walking as Anarchiving: An Aesthetic Analysis of the “Window on the World” Tour**

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#### **Abstract**

While traditional walking tours often erase the contributions and perspectives of minoritarian communities from the social fabric of cities, an emerging trend of alternative tours seeks to remedy this erasure with creative, immersive pedagogies. Examining Migrantour’s *Window on the World* tour as a paradigmatic case study, this essay explores alternative tours as site-specific performances of inclusive urban place-making. Recognizing that such tours face gaps in historical archives and the absence of material traces in the built environment, my research asks: how do the immersive pedagogies of alternative walking tours use creative performance tools to animate neglected minoritarian histories and perspectives?

Combining participant observation with qualitative semi-structured interviews, my inquiry examines the aesthetic dimensions of Migrantour’s tour of Milan’s Padua neighbourhood. Designed and led by immigrants, this tour highlights hidden migration histories and cultivates intercultural encounters by sharing personal stories of the contemporary lives of immigrant communities. In addition to creative storytelling, it encourages interactive social and sensory engagement, presenting audiences with archival images, offering them foreign foodstuffs, and inviting them into the worship space of the Muslim House of Culture.

This essay’s theoretical framework demonstrates how this alternative walking tour creatively engages with the fluidity and multiplicity concealed beneath the apparent fixity of place. Drawing on scholarship exploring walking as a practice of anarchiving that “attends to the undocumented, affective, and fragmented compositions that tell stories about a past that is not past but is present and an imagined future” (Springgay & Truman, 2018, p. 14), I argue that *Window on the World* participates in the contested politics of site as palimpsest (Kaye, 2000; Kwon, 2002; Turner, 2004) in order to shape more inclusive urban futures. By investigating the largely overlooked aesthetic dimensions of alternative walking tours, this essay contributes to the intersection of performance, cultural heritage, and tourism studies.

*Keywords:* walking tour, migrant performance, cultural heritage, anarchiving, place-making

## Alternative Walking Tours

Historical walking tours play a crucial role in constructing a sense of place through the articulation of local narratives and identities. However, because of their emphasis on monuments and other elements of the urban landscape's built environment, traditional tours often reinforce dominant state-sanctioned heritage narratives that have been shaped through unequal access to the cultural authority and financial resources required for historical preservation and commemoration. As a result, these tours often elide or erase the histories and perspectives of marginalized groups, including women, racial and ethnoreligious minorities, LGBTQ communities, and immigrants.

A growing international trend of alternative tours seeks to counter this erasure of minoritarian perspectives with immersive performance-based pedagogies. These alternative walking tour performances often struggle with significant gaps in historical archives and a lack of existing historical or commemorative sites within the urban landscape. Unable to rely on the conventional visual cues of the historical walking tour genre, these alternative tours incorporate participatory experiences and imaginative performances to animate their neglected histories (Dilliplane, 2025, p.14). Vibrant multisensory dramaturgies bring to life stories and perspectives otherwise rendered invisible within the quotidian experience of urban life.

Examining Migrantour's *Window on the World* tour as a paradigmatic case study within the alternative walking tour genre, this essay interrogates how participatory and immersive multisensory pedagogies deploy creative tools in the affective activation of minoritarian histories and perspectives. It examines the aesthetic dimensions of this tour of the multicultural Padua neighbourhood of northeast Milan, drawing on participant observation of both the tour and the broader life of the neighbourhood alongside qualitative semi-structured interviews with members of the Migrantour programme to illustrate the artistic strategies of the immigrant tour guides who design and lead the tour. I argue that *Window on the World* participates in the contested politics of site as palimpsest, (Kaye, 2000; Kwon, 2002; Turner, 2004) utilising walking as a practice of anarchiving in order to shape more inclusive urban futures through a sensory awareness of neglected pasts.

### Walking as Anarchiving Practice

This analysis draws on the concept of the "anarchive", developed by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, which describes an affective supplement to the traditional archive — the creative reactivation of archival materials as a "feed-forward mechanism" for generating new meanings and futurities (Massumi, 2016, p. 7). Far from serving as neutral repositories of the documented past, archives reinforce dominant ideological perspectives

through preservation practices of selection and exclusion that function as a form of historical gatekeeping privileging the voices of the powerful in the construction of memory. Anarchiving aims to disrupt the capacity of the archive to perpetuate the grand narratives of the state's authorised heritage frameworks by experimenting with the ephemeral affective excess of archival practice to inspire conceptual departures in the present that enable alternative futures.

Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman (2018) extend this concept of the anarchival to experimental research-creation and counter-cartographic walking methodologies. They argue that “anarchives, in contrast with official archives, are activities that resist mere documentation and interpretation ... approaching matter from new perspectives that may be incongruent with conventional archiving practices, in order to activate erased, neglected, and hidden histories” (p. 107), describing an anarchival approach to walking as “the undocumented, affective, and fragmented compositions that tell stories about a past that is not past but is the present and an imagined future” (p. 14). Walking as anarchiving is fundamentally concerned with how creative and affective engagement with place can generate new relationships between past, present, and future, disrupting the linear temporalities and hierarchical orderings that characterize traditional archival practices.

### **Migrantour's *Window on the World***

The *Window on the World* tour of Milan's diverse Padua neighbourhood offers a potent case study for examining walking as an anarchival practice. The *Window on the World* tour was initially developed in 2010 as part of the *Our Invisible Cities* initiative of the Migrantour programme. Initially conceived as a collaboration between the Italian responsible tourism company Viaggi Solidali, cultural anthropologist Francesco Vietti, and the non-profit ACRA, the Migrantour programme works with first- and second-generation immigrants to develop migrant- designed and led walking tours of immigrant neighbourhoods in order to promote values of global citizenship and cultural competence. Originating in Turin and Milan, the programme has expanded over the last 15 years beyond Italy to over 20 cities across Europe with more than 40 tour routes led by over 600 first- and second-generation immigrants. These immigrant tour guides — described by the program as “intercultural companions” — draw on their personal and familial stories as well as their knowledge of the life of immigrant communities to construct engaging and vibrant encounters.

One of the first tours developed by the programme, *Window on the World* was created and redeveloped by teams of intercultural companions who represent the broad geographical diversity of the Padua neighbourhood, including individuals from the Middle East, South America, Eastern Europe, and East Asia. The tour's itinerary is a co-creation of these guides and includes stops at the Scuola del Parco Trotter, the Eastern European

grocery store Euromix, the Inka Wasi Peruvian restaurant, and the Muslim House of Culture. The collaboration between the different intercultural companions empowers each guide to serve as a host of the neighbourhood's cultural diversity. The tour's itinerary indicates the neighbourhood's numerous and varied migration histories through creative storytelling, sensory engagement and embodied participation.

### **Embodied and Multisensory Engagement**

The *Window on the World* tour sets off from the Via Padova entrance of Trotter Park. This park is known for its role as the home of the innovative open-air school Casa del Sole, which was initially formed in the early 1920s. The oval shape of the park's central path reflects its origin as a racetrack, but the scattered structures — including its “little theatre” — demonstrate the historical significance of the Casa del Sole. When I attended the tour on Anthropology Day in 2025 (February 22nd), the tour's introductory remarks included an extensive discussion of the colonial ambitions of Italian fascism in the 1930s, as well as efforts of the current government to close down the free summer school for migrants organised by the Network of Schools Without Permits [Rete Scuole Senza Permesso] in recent years. The histories presented spotlight the park as a key battleground where public memory and cultural heritage become sites of political contestation.

Throughout the tour, guides pass around a variety of documents and materials that enrich the stories told at key moments along the route. For instance, just off Via Padova on Via Giorgio Chavez, our “intercultural companion”, Roxanna, shared a series of historical photographs depicting the make-shift homes of immigrant communities who moved to the area in the 1950s, following the Korean War. She described the cultural life of these communities, comparing and contrasting it with the present-day structures and lives that we were actively witnessing in the present moment. Situated in contemporary space in this way, these photographs don't simply document what was; they also generate new meanings about what the neighbourhood has become and what it might yet be.

The tour continues down the block at an Eastern European grocery store called Euromix. Here, the group had the opportunity to walk through the store to examine and purchase foods and snacks common to various Eastern European and Balkan cuisines. As we regathered outside the store, Roxanna encouraged the collective sharing of our snacks. She modelled this generosity by distributing an assortment of Romanian snacks that she said reminded her of her childhood, including salty corn puffs, a strawberry cream filled cereal, and a chocolate candy bar called Rom. In addition to providing us with an opportunity to participate in the neighbourhood's immigrant economies, this simple act of sharing and tasting unfamiliar foods became a moment of sensory connection to her experience of migration, allowing participants to inhabit, however briefly, another's cultural nostalgia.

**Figure 1**

*The author holding a heritage potato. (Photo by the author).*



This gustatory experience of cultural exchange took on additional significance later in the tour when, in front of a Peruvian restaurant, Roxanna passed around samples of traditional crops indigenous to South America, including heritage potatoes and quinoa (Figure 1). As we handled these samples, we were transported across space and time by their varied and unique textures. Placing particular emphasis on the fact that tomatoes originated in Peru, Roxanna explained how these foods, now staples of Italian cuisine, reveal the intercultural foundations of Italy's supposedly homogeneous national food identity. Here food functions as both an alternative archive and a feed-forward mechanism, revealing hidden histories while imagining more inclusive futures.

One of the most powerful moments of the tour occurred when we were invited to enter the sacred prayer space of the Muslim House of Culture. Removing our wet shoes as we entered the building, the soft warmth of the carpeted worship space was particularly welcoming. Gathering in a circle on the edge of this space, we listened as representatives of the local Muslim community shared the ongoing story of their effort to build a proper mosque in the city that would enable them to gather and worship in traditional ways despite their experiences of migration. Our presence in the space and participation in the cultural practices of this community was more than merely informative; it implicated us in the ongoing efforts of Milan's Muslim community to shape a future for itself in the city.

## Conclusion: The Politics of Performance as Place-Making

The creative and immersive pedagogy of the “Window on the World” tour demonstrates how performance can reconfigure urban space through multisensory acts of collective place-making. By acknowledging the contested political history behind dominant cultural heritage narratives, enlivening the historical and contemporary elements of everyday communal life, sharing diverse food cultures that unsettle nationalist myths, and inviting engagement with the struggles of the local Muslim community, the tour reveals the hidden multiplicity beneath the apparent fixity of site. In so doing, it enacts what Nick Kaye (2000) describes as “a working over of the production, definition and performance of ‘place’” (p. 3), while embodying Cathy Turner’s (2004) claim that performance contributes to place-making as “each occupation, or traversal, or transgression of space offers a reinterpretation of it, even a rewriting” (p. 373).

Issues of migration, belonging, and cultural diversity, continue to play a central role in a political moment marked by the global rise of far-right authoritarianism and anti-immigrant sentiment. In Italy — particularly in light of the electoral success of Giorgia Meloni’s right-wing populist Brothers of Italy party in 2022 — the multiplicity of site in the current moment seems to serve more as a kind of cultural battlefield than as an opportunity for inclusive place-making. Political polarisation emphasises the contested character of sites and their layered histories rather than their fluidity and indeterminacy. As Miwon Kwon reminds us, “the phantom of a site as an actual place remains, and our psychic, habitual attachment to places regularly returns as it continues to inform our sense of identity” (2004, p. 165). State-sponsored heritage narratives and the exclusionary nationalist identities they reinforce constitute a hostile environment for the cultivation of more inclusive urban futures. Against this backdrop, Migrantour’s *Window on the World* tour foregrounds multicultural realities through simple multisensory and affective encounters. Deploying walking as an anarchival practice, the tour creatively performs place in order to both remember differently and imagine otherwise, empowering marginalised immigrant communities to inscribe their stories onto the urban landscape.

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