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The power exerted by urban atmosphere over our choice of walk

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Abstract

Research presented here was financed by the National Research Agency (ANR) between 2005 and 2007. It brought together sociologists, architects and town planners around the question of the prerequisites for city-dwellers to decide to walk in town? Four districts, two in Grenoble (France) and two in Geneva (Switzerland), served as a basis for field work in three phases: surveys combining an architectural and sensory approach to the terrain; interviews with users; and ethnographic observations of walking practice. The results of the research throw doubt on the spatialist approach, still influential in architecture, which maintains that space determines usage. The findings suggest the need for a reappraisal of the power exerted by atmosphere over walking and urban practices. Atmosphere, by influencing both registers of walking (doing and experiencing), demonstrably contributes to the walkability of a place, just as much as its design does.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF Dr. Rachel THOMAS

Sociologist, researcher to CNRS, she works about accessibility and mobility of pedestrian in urban public space. Her research raises two questions : which is the role of perception and atmosphere in the practices of walk ? which methodologies develop to analyse bonds between perception, walk, atmosphere and urban environment ?

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Introduction

What are the pre-requisites for a city-dweller to decide to walk in town? Is the quality of urban design sufficient to encourage city walkers?

These two questions were the focus of a Franco-Swiss research action funded by the National Research Agency (ANR) between 2005 et 2007¹. Teams of sociologists, architects and town planners observed the real walking practice of pedestrians in Grenoble and Geneva. They then analysed the modes of action and the type of relationship to the urban environment implied by such practice. In other words the aim was not to watch walking from a distance but on the contrary to address it *in situ*, in its concretism. Work was guided by two assumptions. The first, theoretical assumption, questioned the commonly held idea that walking is a uniform, generic activity. On the contrary there are different ways of walking in town depending on the practical and sensory context. The second, methodological assumption, emphasized the need to reconcile the purpose of research and the approach adopted in the field. This meant that to address walking practice we too should get walking.

Field proceedings


To this end an innovative methodological protocol was tested in four districts – two in Grenoble (France) and two in Geneva (Switzerland) – the three-person walk². By dividing the survey into three phases we were able not only to address the ordinary pedestrian experience in an urban environment but also to share its various dimensions – practical (walking savvy), social (being together) and affective (walker perceptions and feelings).

In the first-person (“I-walk”), the researcher is immersed in the study zones taking photographs at whim for half a day. He or she walks freely, without previously defining a route, drawn onwards by the terrain and atmosphere. A dictaphone is used to record passing impressions, in conjunction with a digital camera to fix noteworthy events, situations or vistas. Once this non-directional walk is complete the researcher produces a summary

¹ Research was coordinated by Yves Winkin, Deputy-Head of the Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines in Lyon. The results presented here are taken from the work done by the Cresson team: Thibaud Jean-Paul (ed.), Bonnet Aurore, Leroux Martine, Thomas Rachel (2007). *Les compositions de la marche en ville*. Grenoble : Rapport Intermédiaire Cresson, volume 1, January, 105 p.

² Thibaud, Jean-Paul. “Je-tu-il, la marche aux trois personnes”, *Urbanisme*, n° 359, 2008, March-April, pp. 63-65.

document in which the narrative and photographs bear witness to the route as it was perceived.

QUALIFICATION OF WALKING	REFERENCE TEXT PHOTO ILLUSTRATION	ELEMENTS BROUGHT INTO PLAY BY WALKING
<p>SHOP FRONT STROLL (Along the Cours)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stroll, without hurrying, but marked by pedestrian vigilance, the need constantly to avoid bumping into or rubbing against the bodies of others - Being carried away by the sights and physical feelings. Sense of being drawn despite oneself by the street and pedestrian flow (required by other bodies to walk at a given place and pace, avoiding contact). - Pleasure accompanying walking. 	<p>Fluid traffic on Cours Berriat. Long, wide thoroughfare, stretching into the distance, pulling a well-ordered flow (everyone has their appointed lane) but comprising several forms of traffic (trams, pedestrians, cars, cyclists). Impression of being carried away visually and bodily by this flow.</p>  <p>At the St Bruno tram stop the impression of fluidity is broken. From here on everyone is constantly re-negotiating the trajectory and pace of forward movement.</p>	<p><i>Buildings</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Long, wide thoroughfare - Homogeneous, low-rise buildings <p><i>Senses</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Framed vista but opening onto distant prospects. - Coloured lights at night - Sound trail: tram - Emergence: tram bell - Rhythmic sound and vision - Metabolic: steps and voices at the St Bruno stop - The street has a certain beat <p><i>Social</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organized flow of people on the move, with various means of locomotion (trams, bikes, cars, walking) - Quiet, unhurried activity, loitering. <p>Valid day and night</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social throb of the street, at the St Bruno tram stop, with large numbers of pedestrians arriving and departing

Drift down Cours Berriat (Grenoble)

In the second-person (“you-walk”), the researcher carries out a series of pavement interviews with pedestrians. Accompanying them on a portion of their journey he or she questions them on the reasons for their journey, the choice of route and how they see the neighbourhood. A dictaphone is used to record their answers as they walk. The recording helps to plot the routes taken on a map and serves as the basis for a transcription of the answers given pedestrians.

Lastly, with the third-person (“he or she-walk”), the researcher carries out "route reproductions". He or she follows unidentified pedestrians at a distance, paying attention to their practical actions (how they cope with the developed space) and social conduct (how they handle encounters, the presence of others or a crowd). This sort of tailing, also recorded on a dictaphone, is transcribed in two ways: plotting on the map of the observed route; and a written description (gestures, trajectory, speed of movement, events, etc.) recorded *in situ*.

This survey protocol was experimented in two districts of Grenoble – Ile Verte and Europole – and two others in Geneva – Pommier and Cressy. In Grenoble, which will be the focus of the present paper, we chose the neighbourhoods to be studied for several reasons: powerful identity close to the city centre, direct access to the centre on foot or by public transport, extreme heterogeneity of the urban contexts on offer for walking. Whereas Ile Verte offers its inhabitants a large number of parks and residential areas where they may stroll, the new Europole business district confronts pedestrians with more recent developments, in which the minerality and transparency of glass surfaces offers a uniform setting for walking.



The minerality of the Europole district



The landscaped setting of the Ile Verte neighbourhood

However the walkability of these districts should not only be judged by their landscaped or commercial attractiveness. On the contrary, walking is the result of a complex combination of conditions determined by practical possibilities, the pedestrian's own wishes and the ability of the environment to stimulate perception.

The sensory configurations of walking

More exactly architectural and urban atmospheres contribute just as much to the choice of walking as the quality of urban design available to the pedestrian. The analysis carried out as part of this research action shows that some sensory configurations are more conducive to travel by foot than others. By "sensory configuration" we refer to the result of the process by which pedestrians select, organize then shape the sensory material structuring their perception and action during the journey (Thomas, 2005). Six sensory configurations were identified: attractive, spreading out, mobilizing, suspensive, accelerating and inhibitive. Each one operates jointly or separately on motor action and at an affective level.

For example, the attractive mode encourages exercise through walking and triggers pleasure in the pedestrian. This sensory configuration is characterized by powerful, rhythmic sound, numerous visual openings and lively sociability. The combination of these characteristics not only contributes to setting a tempo for walking but also awakens the subject's senses. Caught up in and carried away by the atmosphere pedestrians adjust their gait to the pace of the place, listening to their surroundings and extending their visual attention. Bodily and perceptive immersion prompts a state of harmony that procures a feeling of pleasure and well-being. Strolling or ambling embody this pleasant relationship. Walking in this way, pedestrians are open to others and to outside events. This "particular form of walk imply obviously any desire to arrive some share. Walk is an end in itself. (...) it frequently implies

breaks to look at or converse ; it is often combined with physical contacts between the companions of walk" (Morris, 1978).

The pleasurable feeling is also prompted by the suspensive configuration, but unlike the previous one it replaces walking with loitering or longer stays. In other words the suspensive configuration suddenly breaks the pace of progress, raising the pedestrian's perceptive acuity and reducing contacts with others: under the influence of crystal-clear or reverberating sound atmospheres, rough or slippery surfaces, a landscaped or stylized backdrop, the pedestrian stops walking and adopts a contemplative pose. In this case, the aim is to take the time to enjoy the environment's remarkable qualities.

However the quality of the urban environment is not always sufficient to encourage city-dwellers to go by foot. The inhibitive mode is a perfect illustration of this assumption. Such places offer pedestrians ideal conditions for walking – wide, unencumbered pavements, smooth surfaces, agreeable night-time lighting, visual directionality, etc – but paradoxically they also make walking somehow inadequate. More exactly, although this type of environment facilitates walking it nevertheless makes the pedestrian feel ill at ease and out of place. Faced with an anti-septic environment the pedestrian feels foreign and, at the same time, exposed to the glances of local inhabitants. Moving through this vacuum, walking turns into flight, a brief crossing or a form of infiltration. In the first case the pedestrian suddenly starts to hurry. In the anguish of this precipitation their body shrinks in on itself, gestures become jerky, the torso and face turn downwards, bowed over in self-protection. In the two other cases the style of walking betrays a functional relationship with the surroundings. Crossing involves taking advantage of design features that facilitate faster progress and a more streamlined gait. Infiltration is a slower, more cautious way of walking, the aim being to enter a place discreetly while keeping watch for visual and sound events that may reveal another's presence.

For each of these sensory configurations the architectural and urban atmospheres consequently exert an influence on the two registers of walking, doing and experiencing. By providing pedestrians with a sensory basis for their conduct and awakening in them a range of emotions, they contribute just as much to walking as does urban design. Furthermore they prompt ways of relating to the city that are probably related to our daily choice of a means of locomotion.

Heterogeneous walking situations

In other words, architectural and urban atmospheres also play a part in the intensity of the relationship between the pedestrian and the city. We may distinguish walking situations that reflect such relationships: paradox, opposition, adjustment, neutrality and conniving. These situations are neither predefined nor stable during an urban journey. They evolve, succeed or confront one another depending on objective material conditions, fuzzy, fluctuating sensory conditions, and the affective state of the pedestrian.

Paradox thus reflects an ambiguous relationship, a disparity between the (physical and sensory) contexts of walking and the pedestrian's (perceptive and emotional) expectations. This situation is observed in two specific cases. Firstly the quality of urban design fails to make up for the poverty and the unappealing atmosphere. Walking is chosen and the location traversed for strictly functional, practical reasons: doing shopping, going to a meeting or to work. In this type of context, walking does not become a set habit and another form of locomotion, less in keeping with the environment, may take its place:

Immersion on 6 April 2006: I "enter" the avenue walking along the left-hand pavement. The pavement is wide and comfortable, easy on pedestrians. Ahead the Chartreuse range rises, but it is not at all overwhelming, more a goal to

achieve on which my gaze is concentrated. Perhaps too because nothing much in my immediate surroundings is really captivating. The avenue is deserted and I am walking into the wind, which is unpleasant. The facades of the building that line the avenue are very forceful in the landscape, a constraint on the way I walk and where I look. I am not ill at ease, just bored, looking for a way out.

In the other case the quality of the atmosphere makes up for the shortcomings of the design and makes the place genuinely attractive. With the prospect of various routes, a pulsating sound atmosphere, an open visual field that excites the senses, instils a feeling of freedom and well-being, and contributes to the overall good mood. Pedestrians really settle into this environment, to such an extent that they frequently walk through here or turn a simple walk into a pleasant stroll:

Immersion on 20 April 2006: the thoroughfare is immediately attractive. There is a quiet bustle of activity on the shaded left-hand pavement: young people around a cash point, others sitting outside a café, passers-by, cyclists, trams. There are not many cars at this time of day. The contrast between sunlight and shade, that one cannot fail to notice, is both an invitation to take sides and an ingredient all the way along the route in some ephemeral spatiality. I am inclined to start by walking along the street, without hurrying, fitting in with the easy-going springtime mood, then perhaps to digress.

To conclude, the situation of neutrality is fairly close to what Richard Sennet describes in reference to contemporary towns. It reflects the fit between the conditions for walking due to urban design, the atmosphere of the place and the aims of the pedestrian. More specifically such situations are found in environments that reassure people that nothing disturbing nor demanding will happen outdoors. In the neighbourhoods we studied, this situation of neutrality may be observed in urban fabrics and various configurations, but they all share at least one feature: the capacity of the place to permit the practical realization of walking; the low ability of the atmosphere to "catch" the pedestrian's visual and sound attention.

In other words architectural and urban atmospheres modify the way we walk and shape the pedestrian's relationship with the city. In addition such atmospheres play just as large a part in the attraction, or repulsion, exerted by a place as the degree to which the pedestrian settles into the city. Awakening or neutralizing the senses and the body, giving places a strong identity, or dispelling it, architectural and urban atmospheres maintain an almost carnal relationship between the pedestrian and the city, which we may assume is largely decisive in the choice and style of walk.

Conclusion

These results prompt us not only to reconsider the power atmospheres exert on our daily urban practice but also to propose lines of thought for developers, taking atmospheres as our starting point.

Architectural and urban atmospheres are not neutral for the pedestrian. Along an urban route they operate as resources or hindrances for walking. More than just a medium for motive action they operate as sensory levers and as forces creating affection. By awakening the senses, proposing alternatives to the rigidity of the material space, punctuating urban travel time with noteworthy events, atmospheres give substance to walking and enable multiple modes of action and affection to express themselves. Seen from this point of view proposing quality spaces for walking means thinking of pedestrian areas primarily as a carnal space, and only then as a space for movement: "streets, pavements or pedestrian precincts are places where bodies avoid or approach one another, embrace, totter, hesitate, turn away, bend and settle into the city matter with a very special sensuality" (Thomas, 2007). It is the

sensuality of walking that we must now articulate with the physical and aesthetic qualities of the urban space in order to adopt alternative ways of conceptualizing the pedestrian cities of the 21st century.

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