

Place-based storytelling: from abstracting morphological forms to perceiving and narrating everyday life

By Benjamin Zagami, PhD candidate at RMIT University

Abstract

This paper describes a practice-based experiment undertaken in the context of the author's practice as a consultant urban designer which aimed to assemble an ideation tool to aid urban designers in the perception of the everyday life of a place. The hypothesis of the experiment was that by seeing and thinking about place in the ideation phase of a project as a space where everyday life unfolds rather than an architectural phenomenon and spatial system, new modes of designing may emerge. Although not easy, this paper argues that such a reframing is necessary in order to make urban design relevant to the needs of contemporary societies.

By assembling a technique of understanding place inspired by psychogeography, the experiment found that the relationship between urban design practice and non-fiction narrative art is close enough that particular ways of walking and filming might be useful for urban designers to deliberately shift ways of seeing to transform ways of thinking. The experiment suggests that a form of ambulatory discourse and film might assist to establish a critical and speculative mindset and posture that enables new ways of describing social and cultural realities of everyday life that might be termed 'knowing a place'. By problematising, provoking dialogue and holding back from the act of re-making, this way of knowing holds the potential to open up the space between 'perceiving place' and 'designing into place', allowing new modes of designing to emerge.

Urban design and the separation of everyday life from place

Urban designers are engaged as practitioners to give form, shape and character to buildings, streets, spaces and cities. In order to achieve these tasks, which can be collectively described as design, an urban designer seeks to first perceive these settings to understand what they are designing into. It is through the act of perception that the urban designer uses a particular manner of naming and framing that establishes the urban environment as 'morphological phenomenon' or 'spatial physical structures' (Kallus 2001). Although the formal-morphological approach to urban design accepts culture and history as meaningful forces, social and psychological issues are obscured through the treatment and manipulation of urban space as a series of physical volumetric entities. As a result, Kallus (2001) argues that little attempt is made in the early stages of urban development projects to relate objects or entities to human functional, social and emotional needs - or 'everyday life'.

The adopted visual-graphic tools of urban designers provide a useful way to explore how this manner of working manifests through practice. For instance, the commonly used site analysis plan shown below uses a one-dimensional aerial perspective to foreground the morphology and physicality of a place. Additional graphic and participatory methods such as architectural rendering and virtual reality environments produce more complex three-dimensional spaces, such as fly-throughs. Nevertheless, the transition of space into place requires urban designers to consider and accommodate social and temporal dimensions that are routinely neglected by such urban design visual-graphic tools.



Figure 1: example of how a 'site analysis plan' used in urban design practice foregrounds the morphology and physicality of place (David Lock Associates 2013)

By seeing and thinking about places as unrelated to social and temporal dimensions, urban designers are able to (in theory) distinguish wholeness, complexity and continuity of place from the partial, fragmented (and often subjective) real human situations and circumstances. Framing places as independent physical elements overlooks the continuity of urban space and the way that everyday life unfolds as if it is an uninterrupted spatial fabric.

The kind of professional discourse evoked by the visual-graphic tools described above seldom considers the way a place is actually used. Concentrating on the abstract concept of the spatial experience rather than on concrete day-to-day life ignores the fundamental relationship between space and actual social and cultural processes. Thus, although urban designers perceive and design place on the implicit premise of human experience, these tasks are often done in ways that are not capable of knowing who the people populating places are, why they are there and what they are doing. By working under the assumption that inhabitants are ungendered, ageless and declassified, urban designers are often involved in facilitating 'undifferentiated and neutral' (Kallus 2001: 130) modes of design.

During the 1960s, critical voices began to point out the deficiencies of urban design methodologies and the need to focus on the interactions between space and life. Among the critics of the time were William Whyte in New York City and Jan Gehl in Copenhagen. Independently of one another, Whyte and Gehl employed methodologies of direct observation, choosing not to question or actively involve the people they were studying but to directly observe and map their activities and behaviours in order to better understand their needs and how space was being used.

While working with the New York City Planning Commission in 1969 on how to best utilise incentive zoning, William Whyte sought to understand the pedestrian behaviour of the city's streets and spaces. To do this, Whyte directly observed particular plazas and small parks with the aid of time-lapse photography. By recording the urban experience at different intervals and angles, such as oblique rooftop and eye level, Whyte captured the wider context of small, unremarkable situations, including where people came from and were going to.

In order to reveal these new discoveries to himself, Whyte would interrogate his film by running it back and forth at different speeds to find movement and sitting patterns. Once edited, the film - The social life of small urban space (Whyte 1998) - became a powerful way to communicate new stories about the public spaces of Manhattan to decision-makers.



Figure 2: example of the omniscient perspective adopted by Whyte to study pedestrian behaviour (Municipal Art Society of New York 1988)

Around the same time, Jan Gehl began exploring the connection between public space and public life. Gehl has refined his method over a number of decades and continues to work today. Like Whyte, he analyses pedestrian traffic; where people stand and sit in public space, walking speeds and sequences. Gehl uses photography and film to assist with his work, noting its usefulness in discovering new connections or to go into detail with otherwise complex city situations that are difficult to fully comprehend with the naked eye (Gehl and Svarre 2013). For Gehl and his collaborators, techniques such as time-lapse photography and video sequences are used to indirectly observe human activity through traces or evidence of signs of pedestrian life.

The attention drawn towards pedestrian behaviours and activities by Whyte and Gehl has enriched the professional discourse of urban design and highlighted the biases of extant visual-graphic tools, however it does so in a way that seeks to quantify and systematise subjective experiences of the urban environment. Their approaches maintain the split identified by Latour and Yaneva (2012: 107-115) between subjective and objective dimensions because they propose that urban designers add human subjectivities to a material landscape that is satisfactorily described by geometry and mathematics.

For Whyte and Gehl, the places subject to their analysis are reduced to whatever exists in their films, photographs, notated plans and notebooks. As devices through which practitioners come to 'know a place', these visual formats are typically used for quantitative analysis rather than to draw out a place-based narrative about how everyday life unfolds.

The following section describes an experiment undertaken by the author in the context of his urban design consultancy practice which aimed to assemble an ideation tool to aid urban designers in the perception of the everyday life of a place. The hypothesis of the experiment was that by seeing and thinking about place in the ideation phase of a project as a space where everyday life unfolds rather than an architectural phenomenon and spatial system, new modes of designing may emerge.

Foregrounding the urban experience through non-fiction narrative arts

As narrative-driven art forms, non-fiction film and literature hold different relationships with the urban experience than urban design. This difference may be explained by exploring the purpose or intent behind the work. By considering each practice along a spectrum between self-motivated and client-directed work, urban designers might sit towards the client directed end for a range of reasons including professional training and expectations of collaborators and clients. On the other hand, non-fiction artists might sit towards the self-motivated end of the spectrum for similar reasons. While these practices can not be defined by these characterisations (and their tendency to either end is certainly open for debate), this spectrum suggests that certain types of moves may be made by non-fiction writers and filmmakers to render specific qualities into their work. This section explores how a particular form of writing and filmmaking which aspires to psycho-geographical readings of the city significantly widens the concept of place-based realities.

Walking as an elemental way of perceiving place

Beyond the field of urban design, the idea of the knowing subject and of the embedding of consciousness through lived experience is symbolised effectively in literary fiction by Walter Benjamin in the concept of the 'flâneur' - a person who relates to the city solely through the world of the senses, by direct experience of its places and spaces. The 'flâneur' is also embedded in de Certeau's classic essay Walking in the City, where he argues that the act of walking has its own logic or 'rhetoric' (de Certeau 1984). For de Certeau, the walker individuates and makes ambiguous the 'legible' order given to cities by urban designers and planners, like waking life is displaced and ambiguated by dreaming.

These early conceptions of walking as a way to perceive the everyday life of rapidly changing urban settings can be traced forward to contemporary artistic practices where walking has become a creative, performative and critical spatial practice (Rendell 2006). The practice of conceptual walking is popular with artists and writers as a way of critically building awareness of and inspiring and influencing creative understandings of and responses to place. Walking can be considered both a process of becoming acquainted with a place and a form of intervention in itself. Referring to conceptual walks, Rendell writes that they 'heighten awareness by rendering places strange' (2006: 151) and provides examples such as the deambulations, detours and the dérive of the Surrealist and Situationists groups, the wanderings of land artists and the psycho-geographical expeditions of literary writers. It is psychogeography's transformation from a political to literary movement (Coverley 2010) that makes the tradition of particular interest to this research experiment. Established by Guy Debord in the 1950s, the practice is termed as follows:

Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The charmingly vague adjective psychogeographical can be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery. (Debord 1981: 5)

The work of London-based writer Iain Sinclair fits these broad guidelines and represents the contemporary London based literary movement of psychogeography. Sinclair's work is deeply embedded in the mental and physical landscapes of place and his approach can be described as a form ambulatory discourse because it describes places through collating and scrutinising signs and symbols. Sinclair calls his method 'ambulant signmaking'. The following paragraphs entail a propositional outline of his technique, appropriated from London Overground: A Day's Walk around the Ginger Line in which Sinclair walks around the new circular railway project and describes the things it drags into existence as markers of the city's current state of affairs. The railway is the overarching plot device he uses to catalyse his exploration - from that flow place-specific insights and impressions that go beyond the common disciplinary boundaries of urban design, planning and architecture.

Notes on ambulatory discourse

For Sinclair, walking is critical to foreground the urban experience because the act inhibits reflex systems of censorship - it allows him to generate non-habitual thoughts or earworms and to avoid folkways. At the same time, he is deliberate, hyper-observant and alert to newness - engaging all the senses and reaching out to things that he is not an expert in, observing things of the everyday as if they offer glimpses of a much larger pattern at work in society.

Walking releases the lock gates of memory with greater effect. And the process is not so costive, smoke-stained, airless. Walking therapy, side by side, turn and turn about, counters inhibition. Roles are exchanged like hats. No hierarchy. No punishing fee. No guilt. Narratives bleed into the map (Sinclair 2015: 209)

A certain posture or stubbornness is associated with Sinclair's way of walking, he is compelled to go out of his knowledge, cross the river, scrape off a little of himself so that every encounter becomes a potential fiction - he is very keen to construct reality beyond the picturesque whilst acknowledging that a place will never be completely knowable.

In contrast with the tightly constrained point of view adopted by urban designers when analysing places, Sinclair deliberately expands his frame of reference in order to understand that everything happens in the present - the dead past, living present and future hope co-exist - his aim is to discover collisions.

Sinclair's means of unearthing new perceptions while walking uses the analogies of compiling the storyboard or taking the biopsy - he cuts out a sample of fractured compositions in order to establish the realities of everyday life. To move beyond observations of urban form, Sinclair forages for and samples visual trophies, language, dialogues, messages, secret alphabets, dormant energies, spites and spasms, disappearances, heat traces, spaces of slippage, daily shifts and time-ladders. These signs and symbols are then carefully and consciously stitched together to create a map of a further map or a map within a map.

Most of the world, he says, is dark matter. "You can't see it or touch it or feel it. But you can smell it. Every last inch of the way." Anxiety. Leaf death. Chip papers. Resurrection. (Sinclair 2015: 177)

Documenting the walk begins by exposing one frame, one image without premeditation and the rest follows - simply pull in the string. For Sinclair, the key in many ways is to discover the 'northwest passage' which is a tradition he traces to De Quincey in Confessions of an English Opium-Eater - the thread in the maze - a way that one has never gone before. Discovering the underlying and unexposed mythology through the storyboard provides a certain lustre for that other place, the place within the place, the place of his imagination. The storyboard describes the present condition of the place and becomes the oracle of the walk: the goal lies not in simply reading the entrails of place but to decide whether or not to heed the warning: 'fictions that, by some inexplicable magic, become mantic, prophesying - and making inevitable - future disasters' (Sinclair 2015: 146)

Sinclair's practice suggests that as an inescapable part of everyday life, walking is a mode of sensorially and reflectively interacting with the urban environment, firming up his relationship with particular places and their social activities.

Walking practices and perceiving places therefore appear fundamentally related. Yet, in the practice of urban design, walking is seen predominantly as a means of transportation, or a way of getting around, not as a mode of working. Sinclair's brand of ambulatory discourse proposes that walking is not only an insightful spatial practice, but an essential mode of experiencing urban space and an elemental way of perceiving urban places.

The reflexive relationship between place and film

Given film offers a representational technique capable of capturing and reproducing two fundamental dimensions of urban experience, time and sound, the cinematic arts offer urban designers a potential tool to perceive and reflect upon urban phenomenon, particularly social and cultural processes. Following on from Sinclair's psychogeographical reading of the landscape, certain types of documentary films also aim to merge subjective and objective records, usually depicting it as a lived space or a historical site. Such psycho-geographical documentaries pay particular attention to the emotional effects of the territory in the subject, who may be both the viewer, filmmaker or a character. These films typically adopt an observational *mise-en-scène* with an expository, reflexive or performative commentary.

Patrick Keiller's film *London* is one example of a psycho-geographical documentary characterised by a constant interaction between the fictional nature of the narrative and the documentary images. In practice, Keiller constructed the film by independently writing the narrative and posthumously connecting it with the images. This formal strategy has been described as a combination between 'elements of the performative documentary' and 'a more expository method' (Dave 2006: 128-129). *London* has also been defined as 'a reflexive journey documentary ... part of [a] growing tradition that takes the attributes and ethos of observational cinema (its interest in contemporary life, detail, personalities, mannerisms) as the basis for reflexive films that simultaneously debate these observational foundations' (Bruzzi 2006: 109-110).

From a narrative point of view, the narrator's voice takes the form of an internal monologue voice over and guides the audience during the main character Robinson's journeys through the territory. Simultaneously, the images show what Robinson finds in the landscape without ever showing his physical presence. The narrator is therefore a chronicler, while Robinson embodies a totemic figure in the psychogeographical tradition: he is 'the man of the crowd', a traveller, a visionary, but above all a walker who explores the territory in search of signs that allow him to study 'the problem of London'. Robinson can also be seen as Patrick Keiller's fictional disguise or at least his method of 'deferred narration' (Darke, 2010: 74). According to Darke, this character or concept serves to express Keiller's gaze at the world, a gaze that captures both the zeitgeist and the genius loci of a specific time and place (Darke 2010: 20,12, 74-6).

London can be interpreted in an objective or subjective manner within the fictional story because it uses real landscapes from the character's point of view: the camera. The mise-en-scène established by Keiller therefore frames the urban experience in very particular ways. Generally, all shots are locked-off or fixed with no movement between shots, and the length of each shot depends on the setting, shorter and more condensed in urban locations such as streets and markets and longer and wider in landscape settings such as parks. As a result, the journey that Robinson undertakes is stationary, movement only occurs between the shots. Each shot illustrates a place where Robinson has made a particular discovery or been distracted along the route.



Figure 3: examples of the typical mise-en-scène established by Keiller in London (BFI Stills, 1994)

The following section operationalises the technique of ambulatory discourse and film outlined above in the context of the author's practice as a consultant urban designer to understand the extent to which new thinking, discoveries and connections that delve into the detail of the complex urban experience can be evoked. The research experiment asks whether the concepts and strategies described above aid in foregrounding everyday life as it unfolds in place in ways that suggest tangible and accessible inputs into the design process?

Provoking new narratives

The practice-based experiment was planned as two individual yet connected wanderings. The first ran along Sydney Road, one of the primary north-south roads in the inner-north suburb of Melbourne known as Brunswick, where significant investment in high-density development had occurred over the course of the past decade. The second deviated away from the activity centre in a westerly direction where similar change was anticipated to occur in the near future. As directed by Sinclair (2015), the deliberate intent of the walk was to unearth those signs and symbols that represented the 'new now'.

Short spurts of narrative emerged around signals of change that were encountered; 24hr CCTV, ghost bikes, revamped shopping centres, climbing boulders, empty commercial spaces, real estate advertisements and property development marketing paraphernalia. Each sign was recorded on film using a similar observational *mise-en-scène* to Keiller. The films captured around sixty seconds of footage almost all of which was devoid of human presence and activity, providing space for reflective commentary to emerge later. Taller and denser apartment buildings were encountered one after the other. On film, they became entities with their own form of consciousness, entirely unreferenced to their surroundings. Upon reviewing after the walk, these short films provoked glimpses of larger patterns at work as illustrated by this piece of critical commentary:

This is place-making as mere speculation on a favourable response from the market. I imagine the building was once an image of success, a rendering held up to appease clients, the community and Council - it was a projection of who place-makers wanted to see here - consumers. Images of success feed our consumptive sensibility and satisfy our never ending aspirational state - but just looking like something doesn't obviously make you that thing.

The building is based on a strategy of consumption rather than production - assuming past consumer behaviours will repeat themselves and provide space for it. The strategy assumes people ask 'what can I get out of life' not 'what can I put back in'. The industrial reason for this brick facade has long disappeared. To avoid thinking about new ways of generating value, place-makers stick to cosmetic treatment.



Figure 4: film used to speculate on the virtual and actual life of a new building (Zagami 2015. Film screenshot)

By opening up space for speculating about what could happen or might have happened in these places, the films became an exposition of a state of mind. As a result, the place was reconceptualised as existing in the mind as well as physical space. The mental landscape of Brunswick was brought forth as Sinclair's 'oracle of the walk'. The oracle was seemingly a warning, that once summoned into being, these grand political visions were failing. Brunswick was mentally and physically divided in two: the true identity of old Brunswick was in its absence - the place grew around manufacturing, the brickworks, which was now gone. New Brunswick was defined by the spectral absence of a place-specific vision. Clearly a political and planning vision existed to bring New Brunswick into being however a place-based vision beyond the very culturally-specific expectation of consuming had failed to be summoned. Another example of the type of commentary provoked by the films is provided below:

Unlike Sinclair's *Overground*, this is not being led by a new railway but by the bolt-hole culture - the notion that a home is simply a bed, toilet, sink and carspace - the most important element being the ease of coming and going. Perhaps this is the curse of New Brunswick - by emphasising elsewhere rather than here, the new buildings of Brunswick are themselves ghosts. New Brunswick is a pending ghost city.



Figure 5: film used to explore the languages and representations of the future as depicted by marketing agencies (Zagami 2015. Film screenshot)

The first stage of the walk evoked a clear instruction: set forth and locate communities that actual exist. The second wandering headed westward, towards that part of the suburb characterised by declining industry. Here, the material landscape was yet to be transformed by apartment buildings, instead, the place was littered with material evidence of on-the-ground realities; dog wash pamphlets, graffiti works, a newly constructed skate bowl, well-trodden paths and vegetative caves full of beer bottles and spray cans. Such observations resounded with Sinclair's belief that behind objects are processes that finesse a narrative of a higher reality.



Figure 6: film used to unearth evidence of processes within a 'vegetative cave' (Zagami 2015. Film screenshot)

Through the process of reviewing and reflecting on the films from this phase of the walk, the material objects of the place were interpreted as evidence of processes of making, imagination, desire, belonging and performativity relating to self, identity and affiliation. By digging up and peeling back layers to reveal stories that implicitly existed in place, the films extended the plane of actors or entities that made up the place, attributing agency to non-humans as the sustenance and baggage of everyday life. In a sense, the films acted as an archeological tool to illustrate the ways in which people and things get by in the place.

The gaze of the films framed the place as a living cultural artefact in a continual state of being and becoming. A sense of everyday life emerged as one full of social processes rather than formal or technical conditions in need of change. A reflective proposition emerged as follows:

This place is alive because the people come together in it rather than being alone.

People do this for social reasons but choosing to be with others is also choosing to survive - it is choosing to have your existence verified by others.

New Brunswick has lost the knowledge of survival and existence - the sense of what it is to be living and what it means to be alive.

This place is a social space that is produced through essential social relations, a broad form of wealth that survival and existence are dependent upon.

The proposition suggested that the basis for a design intervention should be re-imagining the reason for the place's future existence, in other words, the renewal of that other essential social pursuit - producing wealth through economy. The walk forced an inquiry into the source of the varied factors that defined both places - it opened a perspective of each as a symptom of a lost industrial existence. In addition, the films provoked a narrative commentary which elasticised the links between the everyday life observed and how one thinks and feels about it. In doing so, the technique reconstructed the places by tying together divergent elements of the material and mental landscapes.

Knowing everyday life

This paper argues that the relationship between urban design practice and non-fiction narrative art is close enough that particular ways of walking and filming inspired by psychogeography might be useful for urban designers to deliberately shift ways of seeing to transform ways of thinking. Seeing and thinking about places as the realisation of minds may well represent the connection between the worlds of non-fiction narrative arts and urban design. The practice-based experiment suggests that ambulatory discourse can assist to establish a particular critical mindset and posture that enables new ways of describing social and cultural realities of everyday life that might be termed 'knowing a place'. By foregrounding sociocultural experiences, such a way of knowing reconceptualises place as a habitable territory in which life-supporting activities occur. Knowing in this way understands that everyday existence is more than a still-life volumetric entity.

Rather than replacing existing modes of experiencing and perceiving place, ambulatory discourse and film might become part of a spectrum of techniques that vary in formality and structure. Where in-studio analysis and discourse is more pragmatic and offers technical and formal ways to frame and define place elements, ambulatory discourse and film adopts particular formats in order to introduce more speculative, associative and explorative thinking.

As a more critical form of perceiving place, ambulatory discourse opens up the problem space, it is about providing a platform to hold back from the act of designing in order to allow everyday life to emerge from a space. By problematising, provoking dialogue and holding back from the act of re-making, the speed of the project can be adjusted, allowing room for the tension between perceiving and designing. It is therefore of particular interest for those practitioners looking to shift the focus from making decisions to asking questions. Establishing such a process at the beginning of a project might assist to rest aside the temptation to re-make the place in order to better understand why change should occur in the first place.

The technique can also be described as a form of sensemaking through media that is propositional. The films revealed social and cultural processes in a way that suggested they should be respected, verified and stabilised. As described above, the usefulness of the films unfolded in a reflexive manner, as if they were pages in a sketchbook, each catalysing a new and productive conversation. The films are presentations of the world to ourselves that might allow us to imagine how it could be different, in many different ways. The information divulged could be described as 'knowing the place' rather than 'knowing about the place'.

As something tangible and accessible, this form of knowing could potentially be used to bridge the gap between devising strategy and enforcing regulations. By revealing existing social and cultural processes, the act of design may be taken out of place-making into place-observation where certain place-based nuances are made visible and can be designed into as a way to create the possibility for a place to evolve. This way of knowing has significant competition, namely the political and planning urban visions which grip onto, shape and twist the material landscape without any deep engagement with place itself.

Bibliography

Literature

- Bruzzi, S. (2006) *New Documentary*, Second edition, London: Routledge.
- Coverley, M. (2010) *Psychogeography*, Oldcastle Books.
- Darke, C. (2010) 'Robinson in Ruins', *Sight & Sound*, 20, 12, 74–6.
- Dave, P. (2006) *Visions of England: Class and Culture in Contemporary Cinema*. Oxford: Berg.
- Debord, G. (1981 [1955]) 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', in Ken Knabb (ed.) *Situationist International Anthology*. Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 5–7.
- de Certeau, M. (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- De Quincey, T. (1821) 'Confessions of an English Opium Eater', *London Magazine*, 4, 21/22, 293–312, 353–79.
- Gehl, J. & Svarre, (2013) *How to study public life*, Second Edition, Island Press.
- Kallus, R. (2001) 'From Abstract to Concrete: Subjective Reading of Urban Space', *Journal of Urban Design*, 6:2, 129-150.
- Latour, B. and Yaneva, A. (2012) *Give me a Gun and I will Make All Buildings Move: An ANT's View of Architecture*, in *Architectural Theories of the Environment: Posthuman Territory*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Books Ltd. pp.107-115.
- Rendell, J. (2006) *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, London: IB Tauris.
- Sinclair, I. (2015) *London Overground: A Day's Walk around the Ginger Line*, Penguin: United Kingdom.

Online Report

David Lock Associates (2013) 14-22 Gaffney Street Coburg North Urban Design Framework. Retrieved from: <http://dsewebapps.dse.vic.gov.au/Shared/ats.nsf/>

Film

London: Dir. Patrick Keiller. *British Film Institute Stills*, Koninck, Channel Four, 1994. Film.

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces: Dir. William Hollingsworth Whyte. Municipal Art Society of New York; Street Life Project; Direct Cinema Ltd. 1988. Film