

## Future History : The Art and Design of Walking

### *Why Walking as an Educational Tool?*

*Walking serves as a metaphor for understanding space and place; builds awareness of human pace — speed, time and motion; and enhances observation of detail. In a pragmatic sense the designer, as conscious pedestrian, establishes a more intimate relationship with the surrounding environment. This closer understanding creates better wayfinding systems, encourages meaningful pedestrian narratives in urban environments, and sets higher ecological goals. For the student, walking is experiential — a sense building action.*

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Walking is one of our first milestones. It is an achievement that becomes so much a part of us that, like breathing, we take it for granted. While walking seems perfunctory, it is profoundly significant in many ways. Early man established paths—our first imprint on land—to define spaces, determine direction, and understand the world. Walking was a necessity for survival. For the Greeks, walking became a social, political and aesthetic act. Philosophers and schools centered thinking and ideas around walking. “By modifying the sense of the space crossed, walking becomes man’s first aesthetic act, penetrating the territories of chaos, constructing an order on which to develop the architecture of situated objects.”<sup>1</sup>

Numerous art and design movements utilized walking. The “visit-excursions” of the Dadaists/Surrealists in the 1920’s practiced *deambulation*, described as “a sort of automatic writing in real space.”<sup>2</sup> The *dérive*, or drift, of the Lettrists, considered the walk an action, fleeting and immediate, to be experienced in the present. The psychogeographic maps of the Situationists reinvented the city as a place to playfully waste time rather than a series of functional zones. The land artists explored the intervention and transformation of nature. Richard Long and Hamish Fulton conduct extreme treks. Their art is the *act* of walking, the experience itself. Performance artist Mark Thompson provided an alternative way of communing with space, time and the landscape by walking across Japan with a living beehive on his back. Architecture and walking have always been intrinsically linked. To navigate the site and its surroundings helps the architect *read* the space. To tap into its history and meaning encourages construction that intersects with the current story. Beyond the reinforcement or reinvention of “natural” spaces, the landscape artists may transform pedestrian spaces into physical narratives. Often in collaboration with the sculptor or graphic designer, these narratives interpret the location and provide another level: history, information, poems and/or stories. Public projects by Sheila de Bretteville at Yale and the concentration on *Public Sphere and Urban Space* at Post-St. Joost portend a pedagogical interest in the role of the graphic designer in shaping urban environments.

Walking, like handwriting, loses importance in the technologically accelerated world of automobiles and airplanes. With cell phone and ipod, the pedestrian is removed from the here and now — oblivious to surroundings. Perhaps because there are so many ways to detach, it is imperative to maintain an intrinsic relationship with the world. Physical space must be experienced in order to know it, and walking is an intimate method for getting to know public and private space—of understanding and defining our place in the world. Walking reinforces familiarity with the mental as well the physical, as we traverse from internal thoughts to external landscapes. Ideally, it is “a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned.”<sup>3</sup> For students, walking as an action and idea inspires a dialogue about observation and speed. The observations are more keen as we move at a pace and distance that allows attentiveness and focus on the situation and surrounding details. Our scale, the height of our bodies, our stride, shape our relationship with the world. When we have only ourselves, not the protective bubble supplied by most other modes of transit, we are closely affected by the elements of wind/rain, hot/cold, dark/light, indoor/outdoor, safe/dangerous. On some level, it may be likened to Diane Ackerman’s opening line of *A Natural History of the Senses*, where we are reminded of “how sense-luscious our world is.”

It is argued that since man is natural, everything man makes is of nature. But as makers, the designer benefits from a first-hand acknowledgement of the world in which we design. As a pedestrian within urban spaces, the language of location informs and shapes the designer’s role. As a pedestrian within rural environments, the designer connects to the land and ecology. Walking through places makes them familiar, and familiarity encourages allegiance, community and a vested interest in their future. Whether an interior or exterior place, a walk through a shopping mall or remote territory, the peripatetic designer may better serve people, place and self.

<sup>1 & 2</sup> Francesco Careri, *Walkscapes* (Barcelona, Editorial Gustavo Gill) 2002. <sup>3</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Penguin Books) 2000

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