

# Walking Narratives in a Hybrid Urban Space

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**Abstract**—Walking, as an active, continuous, and embodied process of experiencing the urban environment, spans from an everyday activity to an urban design method. Re-reading the city and re-using it, in terms of a narrative kinesthetic experience, evokes social participation and shared experience – practices that have become very popular in the contemporary hybrid city. New technologies change the way that the urban space is perceived, experienced, and interpreted, as they link the material urban space to digital realms. This hybrid condition, where the physical and the digital aspects of the city are interconnected, forms, at the same time, an abstract and concrete place, where “here” and “there” fall into “now” and call for design strategies that create a single engaging reality.

The paper suggests that “Walkability”, the new trend in urban design that transforms former industrial zones and harbors into leisure promenades and pedestrian zones, and promotes the exploration of the city without any use of means of transport, is the appropriate method for the exploration, understanding, overall experience, and reactivation of the contemporary hybrid city. Walking, as a strategy, becomes something much more than a mere everyday practice, as it can virtually create routes and narratives that can participate and transform hybrid urban experiences.

The proposed people-oriented, instead of technology-driven, approach envisions a design strategy that can create situations in the contemporary city that surround the individual, that is, habitable worlds that fuse the digital and the physical in a single, holistic realm.

**Index Terms**— city, digital, hybrid, narrative, route, smart, space, urban, walkability.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

THE city of the third millennium, a city in absence, a place that is abstract and concrete at the same time, where “here” and “there” fall into “now”, is characterized by its composite nature of urban spaces; material and digital. This hybrid condition is understood as an opportunity to reconfigure public urban spaces and, furthermore, to reactivate them by inserting conditions that engage people and re-establish their relations to the cities. Hybrid spaces have the advantage of provoking the public for both their physical and their digital aspects, and so they can target a wide range of groups to get involved and interact with physical aspects of urban public spaces as well as digital representations, interpretations or versions of those.

The paper presents the importance of walking, as a somatic everyday practice, and the integration of the body into the urban environment, while moving and exploring it, as a practice for the exploration of hybrid urban spaces and the creation of urban narratives. Walking, the physical movement in the urban environment is characterized primarily as an individual everyday practice and an elementary form to inhabit the city, and furthermore, as an art of expression, as *is to the urban system what speech act is to language*. [1] The reactivation of the senses offers an embodied kinesthetic experience while city and body *supplement and define each other* [2]. Walking, as an active, continuous and embodied process of experiencing the urban environment, offers a broader experience than the remote visual experience of our cities, and transforms the subject from a passive observer into an active participant. This relationship between subject and environment and the evolution from a distanced subject to an active participant is furthermore analyzed, through examples from the history of art and urbanism.

Digital technologies play a significant role in our perception of traditional dipoles, such as subject - environment. Material interfaces that permit subjects to relate to their physical environments where for a long time the object of architectural and urban design; but, nowadays, architects are faced

with the new challenges offered by digital technologies that incorporate digital realities in material realms and their fusion in a single, all-inclusive, engaging reality. Walkability can be comprehended as a tool that allows architects to understand and to configure hybrid situations of material and digital narratives and project all in one, as an inseparable totality.

The paper is organized following the elements that are juxtaposed in designing situations, namely, configurations in which people interact, according to Bernard Tsumi, that is: *events, movement, and space*.

## 2 SPACE: HYBRID URBAN SPACE

According to Virilio, we already saw the “end of geometry”, when two complementary aspects of globalization (namely, tele-surveillance and the extreme reduction of distances resulting from transport evolution) gave the “real” city’s place to the “potential” city, the city without place, the delocalized metropolis. [3]

The city of the third millennium is characterized as a city in absence, a city where an inclination towards abstraction is manifested, as citizens are subjects in a constant transformation, in a new somato-mental condition, as they are traveling in various directions in a complex space-time. [4] Body, landscape, and space, as scenes, progressively disappear, objects become interactive, and thus, time, and not space, characterizes our participation in the city, which is already an extensive network, an urbanity of infinite possibilities. [5]

Architecture, as a mediator between subject and environment, faces the challenge of transforming itself from a material mediator to a mediator between the old expression of the subject, i.e. its body, and the immaterial spheres of the emerging new digital worlds. The body nowadays is a mediator, in need of new mediators, in order to connect to the new digital mediators [6], as it is often left out by digital technologies. Societies have transferred most of their activities to the digital realm; the market, the government, as well as other forms of public

space have all been largely replaced by media [7], and cities reflect this change in society's interactions. These new social and urban conditions force the constant transition from the digital to the material and vice versa, but being always present in the material, physical environment and almost always present in digital spheres is counterproductive and malfunctioning. [8] Being present in both, should imply that there is a way to be simultaneously and consciously part of two worlds [9], or understand this distinction as operative and not actual. [10] Interweaving quotidian digital spheres in the material aspects of our everyday analog worlds [11] supposes a syncretical approach, one that doesn't refuse the analytical, but applies its benefits in order to go further. As the theoretical approach is giving way to a narrative way of relating to the world and as immersion and engagement are becoming equally important to exteriority and distance, a paradigm shift emerges. [12]

Urban public space is the ideal space where digital spheres are not solely superimposed to the physical, material surroundings, but where there can be co-penetration, association, amplification, multiplicity and diversification. Hybrid urban spaces, referring to the profound hybridization of physical and digital spaces, entangle not only digital and physical, but also past and present, as well as near and distant places. They adopt the basic characteristics of the digital, namely connectivity and simultaneity, making distance an irrelevant matter and making past and future times possible to coexist, as multiplication and amplification are empowered. [13] This hybrid new reality, that could become an integral part of our reality in the near future [14], [15], is the new environment that the architect is called to mediate for the subject and, furthermore, to configure as a principle medium for social interaction. [16]

Apart from "Hybrid", there are also different terms and concepts used to describe contemporary cities, such as "Smart", "Digital", "Virtual", "Ubiquitous", "Green" etc. Digital or Virtual cities usually don't have concrete relations to physical cities; Ubiquitous cities focus primarily on technology and infrastructure, while Green or Sustainable cities focus on environmental aspects; Smart cities transform urban environments to interactive, adaptive and smart spaces, through pervasive computing and ambient intelligence. Hybrid cities focus on the connection and interrelation of physical and virtual worlds and aim at supporting social life and motivating citizens to get involved and be actively engaged to their public lives and enjoy their everyday life. [17]

The digital aspect of the hybrid city would consist in an ICT-infrastructure that has different types of connectivity (wired and wireless networks), embedded sensors and actuators and, at a more advanced level, integrated smart materials; also known as the Internet of Things (IoT), or the Internet of Everything (IoE). Computers and smart devices should tend to "disappear" (as "visible" distinctive devices), either physically, due to being integrated in the environment, or mentally from our perception [18], in order to provide the basis for establishing a calm technology that surrounds citizens and immerses them in an engaging hybrid reality. Such hybrid urban technologies should include adaptive, personalized, location-based services, such as applications that deal with public and individual transportation (optimized bus routes and smart

navigation), smart streets (adaptive lighting and solar roadways), and characteristics of the city, such as feedback on air and sound pollution level in the city.

However, a debate has been established between the "intelligent city" and the "social city", as many critics suggest that new technologies are a threat for urban society as a whole, [19] while others support that they provide greater control over urban lives. [20] There is no doubt, nevertheless, that urban space, which has always functioned as an "interface" [21], is transforming into a new kind of interface, through the use of urban technological media, such as smartphones, navigation systems, location services, sensors, and all kinds of "smart city" protocols. [22]

Contemporary views on the hybrid city aim at the reanimation of the public urban space and its restoration, as a place for meetings and unexpected encounters, a series of events and social synapses.

### 3 MOVEMENT: WALKABILITY

Following the previous recent transformations of the cities, through walking promenades in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and Pedestrianism and Street Culture that flourished in the '60s and '70s, "Walkability", the new trend of an embodied- kinesthetic experience came under discussion, as cities could not be "invented" or "explored" anymore. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, promenades gave way to bourgeois' leisure entertainment urban space [23] and Pedestrianism and Street Culture that flourished in the '60s – '70s highlighted everyday practices, as the Situationists, in the '60s, explored and reinvented urban space by constructing situations, as descendants of Charles Baudelaire's *Flâneur*, the urban type who strolled through the Parisian arcades and enjoyed unexpected encounters.

Nowadays, "Walkability" is presented as the necessary condition for the creation of a sustainable urban environment and aims at a new perceptual approach of the hybrid urban environment. Following the society of the "spectacle", where vision was empowered, "walking", as a kinesthetic practice, is proposed as the most suitable sensual and embodied way to inhabit the hybrid urban environment, where city and body, once again, supplement and define each other.

Similar to Art, in Urbanism, the act of seeing merged with the act of being seen. [24] Derrida describes the new urban phenomenon and the city as "the place where the spectator, presents himself as spectacle". [25] Earlier, in the Enlightenment, Rousseau introduced the *festival* as a model of total participation, opposing to the *theater*, where spectators and actors were spatially divided. [25] In the contemporary *theatricalized* city [23], people are not simply observers of a spectacle, but are an essential part of it, on the stage, along with the other participants. [26] The embodied everyday experience prevailed and, thus, the urban environment became an intimate action field, and the body was set at the centre; not only as the viewing point of central perspective, but also, as the locus of reference, memory, imagination, and integration. Human senses were activated and alerted in order to inhabit the city, contrary to the isolated visual experience of Cartesianism [2] and, as Merleau-Ponty [25] noted: "*The live perspective is that which we actu-*

*ally perceive, and not a geometric or photographic one". [27]*

Body movement provokes an embodied and active experience of perceiving the city. As for Marcel Duchamp, the observer needs to walk around his *ready made*s in order to perceive and interpret them, making the movement of the observer indispensable for the meaning of the image to appear, and calling for a new form of participation, for a dynamic involvement in the process of creation. [24] In urban terms, physical movement in the city offers various experiences and images that are evolved through time and unfold in cinematic terms, [28] setting in the centre of the moving experience the moving eye and body, in contrast to Alberti's static optical centre, and transforming it into a kinesthetic one, while all senses are participating. Bergson also proposed movement perception, as a time-bounded perception, as the most important sensual experience. [25] The temporality of the embodied experience becomes, therefore, crucial, as it appears always *in action*, and time becomes as important as *space*. [24]

Contrary to the idea of the contemporary city that is mostly conceived as a visual distanced object, where subjects are isolated and distanced from the urban space, walking reestablishes their relationship, by revitalizing and reusing all senses in order to inhabit and explore it. So, the *walker*, without eliminating the role of the *observer*, restores the sensual and physical contact of the subject to its environment, and walking is understood as the process where the live being *loses and reestablishes equilibrium with his surroundings*. [29]

As the city is understood as the place where people and objects are in constant motion and change [23], and as the urban environment is being transformed from a physical into an empirical one, walking can also be considered as an architectural form, where the moving bodies shape dynamically the urban space. [30] An interactive relationship between the *walker - subject* and the *city - object* is being established, that creates the condition for shared experiences, unexpected encounters and interplays between the walkers, and their hybrid surroundings.

Walking can be both a social activity, and a personal, isolated one, in the way that each walker has a personal character of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Walking paths, similar to itineraries, are indeed organized around the *subject - centered* journey of each traveller, and, thus, the swarming mass is an innumerable collection of *singularities*. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces and create a composition of interdependent *walking rhetorics*. [1]

The Route, defined by the footprints of a walk, is the methodological tool to approach walking theory and transform it into an urban practice. The route is methodologically distinguished in two main categories: the "everyday" route, as a means of transport to a final destination, and the "leisure-linger" route, as a pleasurable performance in the urban space. The first category describes a process of "wayfinding", while the second one emphasizes on walking as a process. Different urban route categories can also contribute to the revitalization of the city, such as the "thematic" route, the "tourist" route, and the "navigational" route. The main differentiation among all these categories is between the predicted route and the unpre-

dicted one. On one hand, the process of "wayfinding" and, on the other hand, walking as a process itself, based on the Ruskian distinction between numbering habit and unmediated sensory experience, respectively, distinguishes predefined routes from open-ended ones, that is, routes with no final destination. [31]

Daily itineraries, for instance, impose their repetitions and rhythms [31], are mapped out before being actually realized [32], and their goal is to reach the destination as soon as possible. Similarly, the navigational routes are actually a starting point with a destination point, by indicating the shortest possible route. The extended use of mobile phones and GPS systems provide new possibilities and by giving directions, destinations are easily found.

Conversely, when walkers become performers [1], walking becomes a pleasure - leisure practice and the route actually "disappears", as it is substituted by experience. In 1960s this kind of experience was defined as "drifting" by the Situationists. The "drift" was conceived as a playful constructive behavior that offered new ways of surveying urban space, where getting lost was not about dislocation, it was more about getting a feeling of freedom while experiencing the urban environment. Psychogeographic maps documented the results of these experiments, representing the surreal disorientation of their drifts. The drifts were therefore described as radical re-readings of the cities, offering unexpected encounters and experiences. [33]

As the widespread use of smart phones gave access to information, maps, knowledge, etc. at all times and places, new walking patterns emerged, such as mobile mediated walking tours, that provide new possibilities and modify the way people explore cities, for instance by giving proper directions to easily find destinations, by displaying exact locations on maps, by creating personal tours by picking points of interest and interconnecting them to create routes. Such apps act as interactive ones, as they filter users' interests, movements, etc. Discovering a city on foot and visiting interesting sites and landmarks, became very easy, and has been revolutionized through the help of navigational and other applications.

Contrary, though, to the re-invention of the city, as suggested by the Baudelaire's *Flâneur* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to the construction of situations by the Situationists in the '60s, new smart technologies do not encourage people to "get lost", as they follow and record their moves. In the case of strolling or drifting around the city, "getting lost" is desirable, as the goal is not "wayfinding" or the destination, but the experience of walking itself. The use of hybrid, smart technologies that are not seamlessly integrated in the urban environment can cause a disembodied experience, as the urban environment is perceived in a fragmented and distanced way. Relations with the city can then become similar to Alberti's *isolated viewer*, detached from any urban stage. Isolated devices become mediators, we interact directly with and, consequently, indirectly with the environment, as the body itself is being detached from that experience.

The reactivation of the hybrid urban environment and the reestablishment of its relationship to the body can be realized through the dynamic recreation of routes, which would break



the "social borders of the city", explore its lost corners, create new encounters, whereas the search of channels, in the existing urban tissue, would reveal the porosity of the city and the enhancement of degraded areas, and, finally, open up new cultural and social potentialities. Hybrid technologies that are seamlessly integrated in the environment can play a significant role, as the routes' time unfolding structure resembles the plot of a story and is conceived as a narrative experience. The plot can be partly known by the user, in the everyday or already executed routes, or it can be unexpectedly evolving while surprising experiences can occur during it.

#### 4 EVENT: NARRATIVE

Bernard Tschumi [34], [35] suggests that, in designing situations, *space*, *movement*, and *events* are juxtaposed. Events are essential components of narratives, which can be a valuable tool for the reanimation of public space and the incitation of a sense of belonging.

Hybrid urban environments that merge cutting – edge technologies with conventional physical spaces, activate subjects and enhance their experiential relationship with public space. Narratives can perform as such tools, as they can embody culture, education, and communication. Narrative is an "art" of time, as the Greek word itself reveals, primarily meaning "leading", and secondly "storytelling". [36]

A narrative space is neither specific, or predefined, tangible, or realistic, but, rather, "imaginary". It is composed by the events of the history that forms it, and gives a new dimension in space and time, as those are formed by the events, as well as the relationship between them.

In contemporary hybrid urban space that is characterized by the widespread use of smart technologies, the relationship between urban space and the events taking place in it has changed. From the Flâneur and the blasé subjects [37], to the wallpaper person [38] and the thematization of public space, the relationship between subject and urban public space has been questioned and gradually changed. Smart interactive media, public space and walking as an urban strategy, have the opportunity to create augmented scenarios where stories are told, through the invention of routes.

Our perception of the urban environment through the invention of routes can be improved, as artists, like Wilfried Hou Bek, have already explored. The artist tried to set rules in order to define a route as both endless and unpredictable. [30] Following undefined routes opens new potentialities to reinvent the usual and the porosity of the city. The Grenoble based group Ici-Même, in a workshop called "En marche", in Paris, 2009, investigated the porosity of the city, by following a straight line on the map. Each path was not corresponding to existing moving networks, but could pass through buildings, patios, etc. "Some cities offer multiple routes parallel to public streets", mentioned Corinne Pontier, member of the group. [30] Consequently, the search of channels [33], in the existing fabric, reveals the porosity of the city and the enhancement of degraded areas.

The reactivation of the urban environment can be realized by the dynamic recreation of routes, paths and directions across

the city. The itineraries, in terms of urban narratives, can introduce new *urban artifacts*, [39] according to the terminology of Aldo Rossi that can contribute to urban renewal.

The networks of these moving, intersecting writings can compose manifold stories that have neither authors nor spectators, but are shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces. [1]

#### 5 CONCLUSION

The material city coexists with the virtual dematerialized mental city and together they constitute the perception of the contemporary hybrid city, a city in absence.

Walking can manipulate and transform the existing spatial organizations, as it provokes encounters and shared experiences, gaze crossings, and the opportunity to explore the porosity of the city.

Narrative is a way of creating new worlds and a means of communication between subjects and worlds.

Hybrid public space is reinterpreted, redesigned, and reactivated through integrated smart technologies and walking narratives that meet the needs and desires of contemporary urban society.

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