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# **Reimagining Walking**

## Four Practices

The simple act of walking has been rendered alien and almost obsolete in the contemporary land-scape. In modernity, we imagine technological progress improving the human situation by eliminating exertion through our makings and devices such as automobiles, computers, and cellular phones. Indeed, postmodern theory has even questioned the position of the body itself. Ordinary walking has become a rebellious and subversive act.

In Wim Wenders's film, *Paris, Texas* (1983), Travis — vacant-eyed, parched, scarecrow thin, homeless — walks into and out of the oblivion of the undifferentiated desert. Like a truly alienated modern, Travis seeks the clarity of boundaries along and against fence lines coming from and going nowhere. As Travis's recovery unfolds, Wenders contrasts the vulnerability and tenderness of walking with the automobile-dominated landscape, exposing the status of walking under modernity.

Postmodern academic theory has reinforced the sense of alienation originating in modernity. As Susan Bordo writes, "If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all."1 Three decades of postmodern theory describe the body as a passive object. In the face of modern alienation and postmodern absence, walking is a subversive act that enables us to contemplate bodily connections within the built environment. Walking restores a sense of connection; the act of walking penetrates the supremacy of abstraction and theory that has been compounded through interdisciplinary translation, according to political philosopher Bernard Yack.2 In spite of the unimaginability of walking under modernity and postmodernity, we continue to walk. Walking connects us to earth; walking is a persistent characteristic of the human.

### Walking Beyond Modernity

In Wanderlust: A History of Walking, Rebecca Solnit describes a relationship to walking different from the one that has developed in the second half of the twentieth century:

Many people nowadays live in a series of interiors — home, car, gym, office, shops — disconnected from each other. On foot everything stays connected, for while walking one occupies the spaces between those interiors in the same way one occupies those interiors. One lives in the whole world rather than in interiors built up against it.<sup>3</sup>

Solnit argues in favor of a more whole experience of the world. Automobiles, roads, and car culture have dramatically reshaped both the built environment and the design professions, obscuring the potential role or effect of walking in contemporary life. But walking, and thinking about walking, have hardly vanished.

Writers on walking reveal the extent of the hold of walking on the human imagination in various literary genres. Among examples of short prose, Thoreau's 1862 *Walking* is the most widely known of a kind of literature anthologized by Donald Zochert in *Walking in America*. Another old and continuing genre connects countryside or wilderness with the idea of self-improvement. Artists and poets have also found something essential in walking and "the walk," and no fewer than five monographs explore walking in romantic and modern poetry. Lesser-known visual and performance artists, and the well-known "earth artists," have used walking for their art.

The body of literature specifically focused on walking and the design of the environment is more circumscribed. In "A Walk Around the Block," Kevin Lynch and Malcolm Rivkin focused on perception and memory of streetscapes. William H. Whyte, in

The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, turned his sharp eye to how people interact while walking.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Francesco Careri, in Walkscapes, positions and promotes walking—transurbance in his manifesto—as a significant avant-garde performance.<sup>9</sup>

Authors and artists of widely different backgrounds and sensibilities understand walking as a subversive activity. Walking is subversive and revolutionary because it is immediate, essential, and fiercely human. Besides, as Solnit so eloquently explains, the history of walking is riddled with the down-and-out, marchers and protestors, madmen and poets.

But the idea of walking as a subversive activity obscures its ordinariness. The everyday persistence of walking recognizes that breathing and walking give access to something tangible and deflates the importance of abstraction. The bodily experience of moving, by challenging the objectivist account of the world, opens a space for a theory of imagination. Mark Johnson writes,

As animals we have bodies connected to the natural world, such that our consciousness and rationality are tied to our bodily orientations and interactions in and with our environment. Our embodiment is essential to who we are, to what meaning is, and to our ability to draw rational inferences and to be creative.<sup>10</sup>

Meaning, understanding, imagination, and reasoning depend upon our upright moving bodies; up, down, higher, lower, forward, backward, future, and

past extend from our bodily experience. Our conceptual modeling of the world and our imagination of our place in it is the very basis for intellectual capacity, according to Johnson. Bodily experience creates the recurrent schemata necessary for organizing our concept-making ability and comprehension.<sup>11</sup> Walking is, therefore, fundamental to human knowledge and understanding about self and the world.

#### Practices of Walking

As we walk, we are in the world, finding ourselves in a particular space and turning that space by walking within it into a place, a dwelling or territory, a local habitation with a name.

James Hillman<sup>12</sup>

This essay explores four aspects of walking practice that challenge current conceptions of the activity and are of value to the designer: sighting, measuring, reading, and merging. Although separated and categorized here, these aspects of practice are usually woven into a singular practice of imaginatively walking the land.

In walking with attention, or what Johnson calls imagination, we accomplish a turning outward. James Hillman describes this shift as anima mundi — the animation of the world — as a way of thinking. Anima mundi turns our attention and imagination to the things of the world with some sense of equality - the natural and the artificial, the beautiful and the ugly, the pine forest and the strip mall. From this perspective, the walker sheds cultural perceptions and beliefs. We turn away from humans as the only force of animation and away from diseases of the self such as narcissism and egotism that we have been taught is "selfexpression." We begin to notice and tend to the cultural repression of the world and recognize the beauty inherent in its compelling and demanding presence.13 Hillman's vision of anima mundi, in which our attention is recalibrated to include everything that makes itself known, begins the task of making the world a better place. This is a vision in which walking, the experience of the human body, and the design of the world matter. This is a vision for seeing and undoing the alienating aspects of modernity and postmodernity through a thoughtful and attentive walking practice.

#### Sighting

As we walk, we make visual connections between parts of the landscape, as Kevin Lynch described in

1. Sighting: Henry Hoare, Stourhead Garden. (Photograph by Peggy Shaffer.)



his framework for understanding common ways of negotiating familiar and unfamiliar urban environments. <sup>14</sup> To use Lynch's terms, one walks along edges and paths to nodes and landmarks. *Sighting* is a process of walking in which the casual walker intuitively understands the relationship among physical objects in the landscape. When practiced intentionally by a designer, sighting makes conscious the unconscious negotiations of landscape. Sighting involves understanding location and alignment independent of measure, like surveying without numbers. What is of concern is what things look like (or will look like, or might look like) from a few feet above the ground.

Sighting is integrative and engages both the abstracting and the embodying faculties of the designer. Drawing and other methods of abstracting and representing data in architecture rely on the practice of sighting. Even the largest and most complex building projects eventually demand some checking of alignments and discovery of object locations through walking. Conscious testing of future interventions, from the probable or possible points of view of walkers, confirms and aids in the development of a design. Paper geometries benefit from understandings gained through the experience of the walking designer and on-the-ground experience of phenomena.

A pictorial approach to landscape is the gaze with which most consider the landscapes of the United States, and, through this lens, designers find themselves frequently dissatisfied with what they see in the built landscape. This way of seeing seems

natural, essential, and inevitable, although it was an invention of the romantic movement in art, garden design, and literature. (See Figure 1.) Emphasis on literalized, pictorial vision returns us again and again to consider intervention in terms of reordering undesirable large-scale visual conditions. In the modern landscape, the scale of intervention is increasingly intended to satisfy the visual needs of the automobile driver rather than the walker, with a view toward maximum efficiency.<sup>15</sup>

Pleasure for the walker relies on foot and eye engagement at a more intimate scale. In the English landscape garden, both the eye and the foot traveled over diverging and converging paths, "the eye to see, the foot to travel through; the eye to encompass the whole and know it, the foot to remain with it and experience it." <sup>16</sup> This tension, together with visual and tactile engagement with close-up detail, provides most of the pleasure for the walker. Sighting as a walking practice has broad applicability for understanding sites as they are and for predicting future interventions; sighting as a walking practice is fundamental to our negotiation of landscape.

#### Measuring

Measuring — whether setting up a laser transit, pulling a tape, or counting strides — involves ordinary walking to determine the dimensions of land and the relative locations of objects. Every time a piece of land changes hands, there is a marking of metes and bounds. Persons note and witness the measure of the land and commit it to memory, on site perhaps if the owner, or on paper if the surveyor, lawyer, or recorder of deeds. For someone buying land or a home, the act of walking the features and boundaries of the site seems to carry with it the quality of a ritual. Such rituals of knowledge and possession continue in the modest habits of ownership and the passion of gardening.

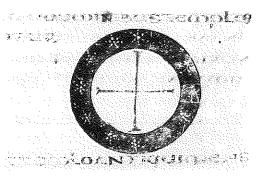
As modernists, we tend to think of surveying as little more than legal data collection or site mapping; we think of the groundbreaking ceremony as little more than local politics. However, in *The Idea of a Town*, Joseph Rykwert seeks to demonstrate the inseparability of geometrical surveying and ritual inauguration, both of which involved walking boundaries.<sup>17</sup> He recounts that the ancient Romans inaugurated towns first by divining omens using the flights of birds or the livers of sacrificial animals. If the omens were determined by the *augur* to be auspicious, the augur would draw the diagram of the heavenly *templum*, a pair of crossed lines within a circle. The setting of the precise boundary of the

town involved walking the boundary, plowing the sulcus primigenius. The party of new inhabitants walked behind the founder in procession, carefully watching to see that all the soil cut with the plow fell inside the boundary. Any soil accidentally falling outside the boundary would be picked up and thrown inside. In Rykwert's analysis, the depth and richness of this rite is all the more significant for its relation to geometrical surveying.

The idea of a town, captured in the diagram of the templum, represents the point of origin necessary to both ancient and modern surveying. (See Figure 2.) The rectilinear organization of the Roman town was not the mere product of the technique of surveying, but had in it the magic determination of divine laws. And although modern surveyors, walking the boundaries of property with precision instruments, recall the spirit of ancient augurs performing divine rites, paradoxically, Rykwert concludes, "we have lost all the beautiful certainty about the way the world works." <sup>19</sup>

Rykwert seeks to counter "the conceptual poverty of our city discourse" through the exploration of examples "full of implications for anyone thinking about the way in which we take possession of our homes." He concludes we must look inside ourselves to understand what we describe as the difficulties of the landscape of the modern city. The enormity of the task he proposes is clear when he suggests that not even Freud was imaginative enough for the task of taking measure of, and therefore ritually claiming, the modern city. Freud's imagination of urban life was as "a curable disease," suggesting that the modern city is a simple analogue to hysterical or neurotic pathology.

 Measuring: heavenly templum. (Corpus Agrimensorum Romanorum, Codex Arcerianus a der Herzog-August Bibliothek zu Wolfenbuttle (Cod.Guelf. 36.23A). Lugdani Batavorum: A.W. Siltjhoff, 1970, Pennsylvania State University, Special Collections Library, University Park, Pennsylvania.)



Rykwert imagines Freud as a harried modern, a bourgeois urban dweller, who was hindered rather than helped by his encounter with "the mere tissue of anecdote" that the modern city retained:

Even to Freud, the inveterate visitor of museums, the indefatigable sightseer, the city yields either isolated aesthetic experience or the fascinating obscure conundrums, to dwell on which would get in the way of "going about one's business in the hurry modern working conditions demand."<sup>21</sup>

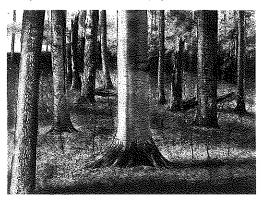
Freud's failure to see the diagram of the templum encoded in the city, "even in the Paris he so much enjoyed," is the failing of all modern persons. Rykwert suggests that Freud's failure reveals the urgency of the modern condition. The modern citizen's alienation and isolation is the direct result of a failure to observe and measure the city through the imagination, work described by archetypal psychologists such as Jung and Hillman. We need rituals of measuring that reject the language of disease if we are to nurture, and to develop a sense of belonging. An attentive walking practice of measuring is fundamentally about taking possession, literally and imaginatively, of the landscape even while becoming possessed by it.

#### Reading

Literature and landscape have long been in dialogue, as Anne Whiston Spirn suggests in *The Language of Landscape*.<sup>22</sup> *Reading* allows and requires the naming of objects and features of the landscape; reading calls forth the skills of the sleuth in making sense of things seen wholly or in part, in city or countryside. The traveler navigates the landscape using stories as a guide, and landscape helps the traveler to remember stories. Whether in the songlines of Australian aborigines whereby storytelling brings the world into existence or the heritage sites of contemporary American tourism, landscape and narrative are inextricably linked in reading through imagination and are most accessible through the act of walking.

As suggested by the pioneering works of May Watts and J.B. Jackson, the land and landscape also can be thought of as narrative to be interpreted and represented.<sup>23</sup> Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton take this approach, uncovering numerous examples of vernacular and self-consciously designed landscapes.<sup>24</sup> But the idea that landscape is text and text is landscape is such a well-worn trope in con-

3. Reading: beech forest. (Reprinted from Reading the Forested Landscape, Brian D. Cohen, reprinted with permission of the publisher, Countryman Press/W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.)

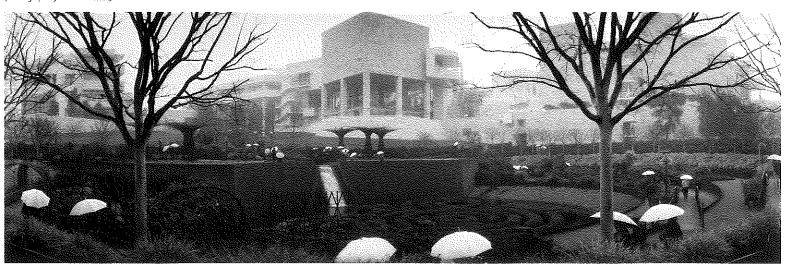


temporary discourse that its metaphorical richness may now be somewhat diminished. Within the field of architecture, the influence of literary theory and cultural criticism helps explain the clichéd deployment of symbols and allusions under historic post-modernism. A similar literalizing has made the production of intentional "narrative landscapes" widespread. These landscapes can be criticized as too easily promoted, accepted, and digested interpretations of cultural history. Nevertheless, when appropriately complex and layered, these material stories are a pleasure to read and engage the imagination, suggesting fiction and teeming with complex metaphors.

The modern suburban and urban dweller often has an antipathy toward, and inexperience with, the woods, forests, prairies, and other natural landscapes. This distance isolates people from other rich landscape narratives of natural processes and conceals the text of the other-than-human world. Tom Wessels, inspired by May Watts, approaches reading through an ecological focus in *Reading the North American Landscape*, building a series of stories around etchings of forest scenes. (See Figure 3.) Each story documents forest transformation through growth and disturbance. The environment of these stories is highly dynamic; the forest suggests a constantly changing book.<sup>25</sup>

Only by walking the land, fully engaged and immersed as we read carefully and deeply, can we truly know a place. Thought of this way, the walking practice of reading involves data collection and assembly, interpretation and representation, and imaginal fictions. In this sense, it is useful to think of the "text" of landscape as analogous to hypertext—ever changing and navigable on many interconnected levels. The possible complexity of such

4. *Merging*: Robert Irwin, Central Garden, The Getty Center (Photograph by John C. Lewis.)



an exercise in reading also suggests the transcendent potential of the last of the four categories: *merging*.

#### Merging

Merging, or plunging into the immediate environment, involves heightened awareness of time and consciousness as a special quality, distinct from everyday life. The sense of time changes, a sense of timelessness is induced, and the practitioner becomes aware of noticing. This practice generates a kind of awareness of, and sensitivity to, the world. Merging may be thoughtfully translated as a way of understanding land and sites for design.

Robert Irwin has practiced merging in his long career of questioning the assumptions of the art world, extending the ideas of modern art, and asking fundamental questions about the nature of perception. Irwin's early investigations in the 1960s and 1970s into how we perceive were undertaken through his painting and environmental installations and through inquiry with scientists. Irwin sought a way of making art that was intended to make the viewer stop and notice.

What Irwin manifestly wishes to do is *to slow the viewer down*, to prepare him, in effect, for an encounter. A certain measurable duration of time is necessary before one can even see what there is to be seen, so that the viewer will either see it the way Irwin wants him to see it or he will — quite literally — not see the painting at all.<sup>26</sup>

The reward for taking the necessary "certain measurable duration of time," as Lawrence Weschler elaborates on Philip Leider's observation, is that "for a few moments, we perceive ourselves perceiving." The experience of perception dissolves subject-object distinctions as they have traditionally been made in the art gallery.

Irwin's later work has more consciously focused on change as "obviously the most basic dynamic or physic of our universe." Irwin intends for the viewer to notice that perception occurs over some period of time, and that the universe with which he finds himself merged is ever changing. Change is essential for perception, because humans function as "a kind of perpetual motion assimilator." Irwin positions the phenomenal experience of the everyday as the next step for art. He has taken this step toward, "something (art?) I can live with." The everyday, including the built environment, is joined together in the sculpture.

Here the sculptural response draws all of its cues (reasons for being) from its surroundings. This requires the process to begin with an intimate, hands-on reading of the site. This means sitting, watching, and walking through the site, the surrounding areas (where you will enter from and exit to), the city at large or the countryside.<sup>28</sup>

Reading and merging with the site inaugurates the process for Irwin, and this also describes the process he plans for and induces in the visitor. In

one of his latest and most celebrated works, the garden at the Getty Center in Los Angeles, the horizon of possibility with respect to perception and time has been vastly expanded. (See Figure 4.) The forms, colors, textures, and juxtapositions of plants and their compelling existence overwhelm the visitor. Fresh perceptions of the presence and beauty of the place becoming could not be exhausted in a lifetime of walking the Getty garden. Merging, as a walking practice, has perhaps the greatest potential for accounting for a site's infinite and unfolding qualities, akin to the Buddhist practice of mindful awareness.29 To build our understanding of the lively body in space we might begin to think in terms of the Japanese word for body, shintai, that understands the physical properties of the body in dynamic relation to the physical properties of the world.30

#### **Aisthesis**

I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think; my mind only works with my legs.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau31

Rousseau understood walking as the source of the ability to make sense of the world. Perhaps it is for this reason that walking strikes such a deep chord. As Johnson suggests, in upright moving around we are in touch with the source of embodied or sensory schemata; we think and feel in metaphor. The ancient Greek word for sensation or perception, aisthesis, means the breathing in of the world. In walk-

g, we breathe and encounter persons and things ther than self. The bodily experience of walking and the pace of engagement with the world opens are space to recognize its beauty and distress.

Rousseau argues that he can think only when a is walking. Perhaps it is our lack of walking that is allowed us to become immersed in the alienating and body-denying aspects of modernity and estimodernity—thinking fully split from feeling. Freud as "diseased," a world that lacks the companding presence required for a healthy confrontation with beauty. Rather than encouraging an intelectualized formal or pictorial beauty, walking acourages an encounter with anima mundi, with a greatly of presence and animation.

Elaine Scarry argues that the concept of justice lows out of experiences with beauty. The appresension and appreciation of beauty leads to an iderstanding of right and wrong, to a finely eined weighing of things, to careful comparisons at lead ultimately to justice. 32 The dynamic experice of a beauty of presence and animation transms thinking and feeling, and right action in the orld. The gasp of recognition when one walks bound a corner and suddenly encounters a beautifithing is not unlike the gasp of recognition in the courtroom when something is understood to

The discourse of progressive modernity has mething to offer, built upon justice, that should t be jettisoned as we address and adjust moderty's alienating conditions and postmodernism's certainty: the imperative to make the world a tter place. To put it another way and to use Rich-fl Rorty's framework in place of common idealism, a goal of discourse is to support social hope and tirelessly advance a vision for greater human ppiness on earth. 33 Although suspect in postmodicial ideology, this has been the modern project and torically the guiding principal of architecture and vironmental design.

Without accepting the unrelenting optimism of odernity, we can accept a vision of hope. This ion brings us back, in a strange way, to the sential human practice of walking. If walking—rough sighting, measuring, reading, and merg-

ing — supports aisthesis, and the breathing in of the world leads to the recognition of beauty, then walking leads imaginally to justice. The practices of walking — modest and ordinary, rebellious and subversive — offer a grounding and a path in which beauty and social goals are united.

#### Acknowledgments

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