# Identifying particular places through experimental walking

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#### Abstract

Experimental walking can be used to identify particular places, design strategies and spatial visions for urban landscapes. Walking designers can explore sites and, in particular, their temporal dynamics and atmospheric particularities – both essential elements in making particular places. This article illustrates the benefits of this method, using the changing German city of Freiburg as an example.

#### Key words

experiment, transformation, walking, specifics, dynamic landscapes

### Introduction

The sustainable transformation of urban landscapes relies on design processes that carefully identify particular places, notably their dynamic qualities that can be used as a starting point for designs. In Freiburg, identifying, representing and interpreting particular places was a crucial part of the project "Perspektivplan" because the strategic designs for the cityscape were supposed to express, reflect and develop distinctive dynamic elements of the city.

### WHERE? Freiburg



FIGURE 1 Freiburg – a growing city. The housing market is extremely tight because approximately 1,000 new jobs (net) have been created per year since 2009 and little available space is left within the citiy's boundaries. (Photograph by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2015)

Freiburg is a hugely popular, medium-sized town with an attractive proximity to France and Switzerland. The famous Black Forest on its doorstep, and tourists and inhabitants cherish the surrounding landscape (Fig. 1). Freiburg has been facing specific pressures for years, though. The housing market is extremely tight because around 1,000 new jobs (net) have been created per year since 2009 and people from all over the world are moving to Freiburg. The project "Perspektivplan" was an informal, large-scale design study, intended to creatively approach the following questions: What are distinctive places of the urban landscape? What is their role in a resilient fabric of the future city? What are the roles of open spaces, dynamic elements and historic aspects in a growing city?

For the city of Freiburg, this project is nothing less than a radical change in direction. After years of focusing on the development of new neighbourhoods like world-famous Vauban, it began a process of rethinking the fabric of the whole urban landscape, including inner city areas, neighbourhoods and villages, infrastructure and forests. The project aimed to identify hotspots of transformation and find a spatial vision and spatial strategies to function as inspiring guidelines for the process of restructuring the city. The existing zoning plans had not been able to provide such inspiration because they aimed to regulate rather than to identify dynamic places and formulate spatial visions.

The design team comprised different professions: an urban designer (Oliver Seidel, Cityförster), an architect (Sanna Richter) and two landscape architects (Henrik Schultz, Stein+Schultz and Börries von Detten, freiwurf). They worked closely with municipal planners and different groups of decision makers and stakeholders (Fig. 2).



FIGURE 2 Different groups were involved in the process: decision makers, stakeholders, administrative bodies and the interested public, all contributing to a co-creative process of planning and design. (Photograph by City of Freiburg, 2016)

### WHAT? Sensing the city, identifying places

During an exploration phase of three months, the design team walked the project area extensively searching for particular places and spatial elements that had not been portrayed in books and plans, and cannot be defined by generating quantitative data.

For instance, the design team bodily experienced the atmospheric effects of the large streets that cut through the city (Fig. 3). They appear as barriers in the city's fabric, prohibiting people from freely roaming the city. These streets are particular elements of Freiburg's fabric. They had been taken for granted throughout the last decades, but in line with the city's mobility transition and inspired by bodily sensing their dominance, the design team questioned the privileges of these large transport axes.



FIGURE 3 Large transport axes are typical in Freiburg today. They had been taken for granted throughout the last decades, but in line with the city's mobility transition and inspired by bodily sensing their dominance, the design team questioned their privileges. (Photograph by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2015)

With the "Capture" strategy (Fig. 4), the team proposed ways of transforming the streets into usable open spaces and occupying unused roadside greenery by building new soundproof houses with backyards protected from noise. As a result, the formally hierarchical transport axes can become part of the city's fabric, play diverse roles, and no longer appear as barriers.



FIGURE 4 Strategy "Capture": With the "Capture" strategy, the team proposed ways of transforming the streets into usable open spaces and occupying unused roadside greenery by building new soundproofed houses with backyards protected from noise. (Diagram by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2015)

While walking, the design team experienced places that offer an opportunity to grasp the city in its beautiful, unfolding complexity. The team mapped these places, traces and patterns of movement (e.g. paths used by people as part of their daily routines), landmarks and other characteristic elements of Freiburg's cityscape that can only be experienced by walking the city (Fig. 5). The sketches represent narrative qualities of certain places and of the whole city of Freiburg.



FIGURE 5 Walking and Mapping: Understanding Freiburg's fabric by exploring sites. (Photograph, Diagram by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2015)

Walking the city of Freiburg helped to identify particular places with potential for restructuring and reprogramming. For example, informal open spaces on Freiburg's fringes that are shaped by individual appropriation of neighbourhood initiatives offer unique development opportunities (Fig. 6).



FIGURE 6 Particular places` "Informal edge" can be framed as areas of free appropriation, preventing tabula rasa strategies (Photograph by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2015)

In existing formal plans, these sites are not marked. Designing the city of Freiburg without walking it and rooting out these places would mean missing the chance to work with these specific potentials. The strategy "SEAM" proposes ways of working with the particularities of these informal sites, for example by framing areas of free appropriation and preventing tabula rasa strategies (Fig. 7).



FIGURE 7 The strategy "Seam" proposes ways of working with the particularities of these informal sites. (Diagram by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2015)



FIGURE 8 The new framework shown in the spatial vision can be divided in three fields. The first, "riverscapes", addresses areas along the three major floodplains. Each new project in these areas must define its relation to the river. Riversides will be transformed from small, and in some places inaccessible, strips of green to a river park. The second field, "cross connections" follows today's linear intermediate spaces that will be transformed into dense, multi-layered hotspots of urban life. The streets themselves will be important elements of public space. They are designed to be multidimensional spaces. The third field is called "urban glades". These glades are parks and other green spaces, including an airfield, which will be kept open to provide expansive views of the cityscape and places to linger and breathe. (Diagrams by cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz, 2016)

The walking design team in Freiburg was able to feel the city's "vibe", to understand how particular dynamic elements interact, and to conceive of the city as a whole – as a living ecosystem. Experiencing the atmosphere, interacting with people, feeling the summer heat (Freiburg has one of the hottest microclimates in Germany), mapping particular places such as the large streets and the informal spaces on the fringes, and bodily sensing "where the music plays" – all these experiences were crucial to inventing a proper spatial vision for the whole of Freiburg, as well as tangible interventions (Fig. 8).

### HOW? The walking-method

To prepare the walks in Freiburg, the design team defined guidelines such as to walk parts of every neighbourhood of the city, to walk large sequences alone and in silence, to engage with the landscapes, and to enjoy being part of the landscape performance.

The nature of walking itself can be viewed as experimental (Fischer, 2011: 289). In this context 'experimental' means an act or operation for the purpose of discovering something unknown, in this case particular places and the characteristics of Freiburg as a whole. To walk as an experiment means to intervene and change the object of design and research. Rebecca Solnit calls walking not an analytical but an improvisational act (Solnit, 2000: 21). In walking experiments, a given framework fosters creative engagement and combines planned and unplanned elements (Seggern, 2000: 316). The character of a walking experiment can best be described by quoting Bruno Latour: "A good experiment is not one that offers some definite knowledge, but one that has allowed the researcher to trace the critical path along which it will be necessary to pass so that the following iteration will not be carried out in vain" (Latour, 2004: 196). Thus, experimental walking in Freiburg could not fail. In fact, it was rather a question of whether walks could be on these critical paths to identify particular places.

An additional experimental aspect in the context of planning and design in Freiburg was that walks were considered a kind of play. Playfulness means avoiding constant reflection, i.e. by not asking questions such as "What am I doing here?" and by trusting one's intuition when, for example, choosing paths or places to pause. The rules of the game are clear and simple; they guide walking designers and allow them to open up to the unexpected:

- 1 walk the whole day;
- 2 choose a direction rather than 'the right path';
- 3 experiment with following beaten tracks and with crossing the terrain by following a straight line;
- 4 walk alone most of the time, at least for half of your journey;
- 5 start a conversation with people you encounter on the way;
- 6 observe places with all their scents, flavours, views and textures;
- 7 open up to the landscape, play walking.

The rules were not intended to restrain the walkers. In fact, they were designed to work as guidelines. The team members made use of the opportunity to break or change the rules. These rules resulted from previous experiences of walking in research and in practical projects (Schultz, 2014). Walking is one of the most ordinary and simple ways of exploring landscapes. However, applied to design practice, it must be refined as an experimental method supporting a complex creative process of gathering knowledge, generating ideas, and reflecting and sharing findings immediately on site (Fig. 9).



FIGURE 9 Interplay between three walking-modes (Schultz, 2014a)

In order to do this, the method provides a set of rules to help inspire the interplay of intensive perception, intuition and reflection. In recent research, three modes were crystallised that are supported and integrated by the method: the 'discovery mode', the 'flow mode', and the 'reflective mode' (Schultz, 2014). The characteristic elements of the act of steady, long-lasting walking–strain, rhythm and intensive perception–enable these three modes. Bound together in the act of walking they facilitate engagement (allowing researchers to intensively perceive space), flow (encouraging intuition), and reflection (supporting organisation). Therefore, a walk can stimulate the complex, iterative process of large-scale landscape design that can also be a process of transformative science. Designers of large-scale landscapes, as well as researchers, need to engage in order to explore the object of research. Sometimes, they want their thoughts to stray and to experience flow in order to stimulate associations and new interconnections. Finally, they want to reflect both their experiences and initial ideas.

How can walking as an experimental method help to identify, interpret and design particular places? Today, landscape designers can draw from the widespread use of walking in other professions. First, there is social scientist Lucius Burckhardt's and his research on 'strollology'. Burckhardt's focus was on walks as a tool to perceive a space and to establish a critical attitude towards landscape planning (Burckhardt, 2006: 259). Though he did not focus on the ties between walking and the design process, Burckhardt influenced designers, including landscape architects, and pointed to the 'invisible' aspects of landscape (Fezer and Schmitz, 2012). His walks provided a way to analyse urban fabric and to identify pivots. Second, authors like lan Sinclair have touched upon the experience of walking in relation to urban landscape, for example, in his stories on the urban fringe in his book 'London Orbital' (Sinclair, 2005). Third, there is a growing number of performative artists making walking and identifying particular places a constitutive element of their work. Boris Sieverts, for example, combines paths, situations and views, and creates sequences of images while walking. He identifies particular places and connects them. Participants in his tours are guided to experience these places as part of a newly written landscape story. Fourth, there are geomorphologists. The researcher Sven Lukas, for example, walks to understand how glaciers grew. Walking helps Lukas capture the

complexity of a landscape and its genesis. On his walks he identifies particular spatial constellations (Lukas & Bradwell ,2010).

With an inspiring set of rules landscape designers can apply walking as a method. But, what exactly is the outcome?

## WHAT FOR? Understanding, ideas and critical engagement

The case study of Freiburg reveals the benefits of experimental walking as an element of large-scale landscape design. To understand the outcomes, one has to realise what informal large-scale landscape design aims for. The process of designing is understood as a process of understanding (Seggern, 2008) and of transformation (Diedrich, 2013). That does not necessarily imply that something should be constructed, but rather to create knowledge that informs different groups of people when realising projects. The spatial vision in Freiburg provides guidance for everyday decisions made by people of different professional backgrounds.

Landscape in this context is considered to have come into being through a complex, non-linear process of transformation. The European Landscape Convention builds on this concept of landscape: according to article 1A, 'landscape' means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors. People play a constitutive part by perceiving, using and altering the landscape both physically and in their minds. According to Hille von Seggern's definition of landscape as 'Raumgeschehen', all space that surrounds us can be understood only by actively becoming part of and perceiving its on-going process of transformation (Seggern, 2008). While walking, people physically interact with the world, not as subjects upon objects, but by being a part of it, as also theorised by phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

The fact that walkers can become part of the Raumgeschehen, and intensively perceive and change it, makes walking a process of understanding that helps to create knowledge (Seggern, 2008: 233). Walkers explore what is already there, immediately creating and thus changing this 'reality' by walking through it and connecting particular places and elements in their minds and with their bodies, and by reflecting on the insights gained. In this process of understanding, a crucial outcome of the simple act of walking is ideas. Only referring to rational strategies cannot produce ideas. Intuitional and bodily strategies are also needed. Walking is a bodily activity and the creative processes described by many different people are based on intuition (Schultz, 2014b: 129). Walking rhythmically merges the motion of the body and the lines of thought. It merges perception, physical challenge, and rhythmic movement. Thus, it brings perception and flow together, creating an interplay that is well suited to generating new ideas.

In Freiburg, the walks led to particular places and ideas for the whole urban landscape. Sensing and understanding the city as a dynamic landscape helped generate stark images that balance productive fuzziness and offer tangible starting points for new projects. New interconnections, for example, along and across the transport axes and at the urban fringe became an important element of the spatial vision. The walks helped to identify sequences experienced when moving through the city, windy "urban glades" with expansive views, and intermediate spaces between neighbourhoods. The walking design team experienced these particular places that offer opportunities for transforming, restructuring and reprogramming. The designers could respond to the qualities experienced on the walks when designing and

discussing the spatial vision and spatial strategies. They could easily oscillate between abstract vision for the whole and particular places.

It is a crucial finding, though, that working with particularities does not mean protecting and conserving them, but rather using them as a starting point for a distinctive design. In the case of informal spaces at the city's edge, this implies working with the initiatives to transform and maintain the sites in a sustainable way, and giving green spaces status as part of Freiburg's green grid. In the case of mapped landmarks, a strategy would not only imply respecting existing points of orientation but creating new ones and integrating them into the Freiburg's unique topology.

The fact that almost everybody is capable of walking makes the method a low-threshold activity. This is a crucial quality because it fosters the generation of 'socially robust knowledge' of Mode 2 research (Nowotny et al. 2001: 166). In Freiburg, walking fostered a special form of reflection in action. While walking the city, phases of engagement alternated with those of looking at the landscape from a distance. At one stage, the designers intensively perceived the atmosphere of a space and became part of the landscape. At another stage, they looked at the landscape from a distance and were inspired to reflect their findings. The knowledge generated during a walk was often implicit but it could be shared among other designers and members of the general public. Such sharing, when done right away and on site – for example when walking with others – can help make knowledge explicit. In other words, while walking, researchers can practise reflection in action (Schön, 1984: 76ff).

#### Conclusions

Experimental walking is a method of finding paths to particular places and ideas. In Freiburg, the walking method helped to understand the urban landscape, design a spatial vision for the urban fabric and come up with spatial strategies. Walks are also occasions for critical assessment of streets and routes through the city, both important elements of cities that can be transformed by its moving inhabitants.

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