Chapter 20

Walking as Kinaesthetic Experience of the City: A Historical and Conceptual Approach for Urban Design and Policies

Edna Hernández González
Université de Bretagne Occidentale, France

Jérôme Monnet
Université Paris-Est, France

ABSTRACT

In the last few years, the design of public spaces has been increasingly considering the multisensory experience of the environment by the users, in particular by trying to create attractive or comfortable “ambiances.” This chapter aims at clarifying some notions used by researchers and practitioners to analyze the city experience with regards to the practice of walking. The aforementioned analysis is aimed to serve the study of the lived space and also for future urban and architectural designs.

INTRODUCTION

Within a consideration on the sensory approach of city and its planning, the walk establishes itself as a phenomenon of immersive individual perception of the urban environment, involving the implementation of nearly all senses. These ones inform the walker about physical dimensions of the surrounding city, the one which is directly on his path within reach of his sensory abilities. This implies on one hand that the city’s perception is limited for each individual to the most commonly used areas and, on the other hand, that perception capabilities of different people visiting the same place are extremely diversified. But these two limitations are balanced by social representations on walking in the city, positives or negatives and shared between townsfolk and urban planning actors. User experience is the concept that most accurately reflects this imbrication of individual perceptions and collective representations.

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For some years now, public places design began to take into account this multisensorial or synaesthetic experience of users, mainly through the creation of attractive or comfortable atmospheres or “ambiances”. For example, user experience has been at the center of the postmodern transformation of malls’ architecture, following a model created by theme parks and casinos, but applying as of now to cities or villages central public spaces’ recent development. Our chapter aims at analysing historical evolution and heterogeneity of this experience, in order to understand how design can act on ambiance, in regard of ordinary walking (opposite to organized walking such as races, processions or demonstrations, which are not considered in this chapter).

This chapter relies on our research and urban planning practice in France and Mexico as well as on theoretical or empirical bibliography that sustains the generalization of our analysis. The first section will deal with evolution of walking experience in connection with urban transformations during the 20th century. The second one will identify precisely the challenges of walking in the city at the beginning of the 21st century. In the third section, we will open the discussion on elements that should be taken into account by design and urban planning when they aim at improving user experience walk in the city.

CITIES’ TRANSFORMATIONS AND WALKING EXPERIENCE EVOLUTION

When Walking Was Hegemonic: Before the Imposition of Western Modern Order in Cities

Since erection of first cities several thousand years ago till the 19th century, roadways were dominated by pedestrian mobility, which offered a comprehensive servicing of dense and narrow urban spaces. The walking crowd and ubiquitous activities in the streets imposed a slow speed for vehicles in roadways they could go.

In European cities of Renaissance, supremacy of pedestrian metric (Lévy, 2000) in urban space began to be breached in many ways. On one side, urban power has been concentrated within the hands of sovereigns and their administrations at the expense of local authorities and intermediary bodies such as merchant guilds. These new urban actors launched wide scale reconstruction works of roadways, where pathway’s logic was depending upon the aesthetic logic of sovereign magnitude’s claim. Rome gives a good example, with the opening of wide and straight avenues by the Popes (Gruet, 2006).

On the other side, at the same time, walking in the streets became inappropriate for social elites, because urban walking appeared to be uncomfortable due to nauseating odors, promiscuity, public queues, unwanted contacts and insecurity. This led elites, first, to adopt coaches as an inner urban mean for moving (Vaillancourt 2013), and then, develop the « art of promenade » in parks and private gardens (Solnit 2001, Monnet 2016).

Strengthening the Separation Between Leisure-Walking and Utility-Walking

In the 19th century, public authorities strengthened this antagonism. Utility-walking was progressively marginalized by street design aiming at easing traffic and speed for growing public transports (omnibus, tramway) along with personal vehicles. Meanwhile, leisure-walking was promoted in two types of specialized spaces: on one side, public green places dedicated to urban people’ recreation (parks and