

## **THE OLD STRAIGHT TRACK: WALKING THROUGH HISTORY, ART AND PLACE.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The importance of site-based learning and the way this can be transferred from urban design to other disciplines and subjects where understanding place is (or is becoming) important is the overarching topic of this paper.

Central to urban design appreciation is the walk, the exploration of a place in time and space. It runs through from the founding fathers of Camillo Sitte and Raymond Unwin both give importance to this and it reaches its apotheosis in Gordon Cullen's Townscape. This paper discusses the various 'walks' undertaken in my own work in this tradition from my first undergraduate explorations through an extended perambulation of a dissertation and topic based post graduate research to teaching graduate and undergraduate students – introducing them to urban history and making sense of new and unfamiliar places. The paper concludes by introducing the idea of applying this approach to the geographical dimensions of art history ('Kunstgeographie' or what is now called 'Geohistory of art') through current work in place specific contemporary art in post-communist Romania.

**KEYWORDS:** urban walk; interpreting places; transfer of ideas; urban history; contemporary art; geohistory

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper discusses the importance of site-based learning and the way this can be transferred from urban design to other subjects where understanding place is (or is becoming) important. The examples used are all from my own work and this paper is very much a (brief and closely focussed) bildungsroman (The term means something like a 'coming of age novel' and dates back at least to Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship by Johann Wolfgang Goethe in 1795–96 and was legitimized in critical usage in the 1870's though it had been in use since Karl Morgenstern the German philologist coined it 1819).

Although I have trained in and practiced as a urban designer and conservation officer in local authorities (Jarvis, B 1994) and at a New Town Development Corporation and taught urban planning and design and conservation I am now doing research in 'Art History'. This paper discusses how the central, place-based experience that is at the core of urban design can be applied to art history. After a short coverage of the role of the walk and experience of the walk in the history of urban design, I review the development, first of my own urban design training and practice and then of my teaching methods in 'the old straight track'. I chose the title deliberately to evoke Alfred Watkins (Watkins, 1925) rather contentious but still influential book (it can be seen as a source to current psychogeographical writers, such as Iain Sinclair ) and so introduce a wider frame of reference that the all too often 'hard hatted' world of urban design.

I learned from my PhD research that the first-person narrative is a legitimate approach to social research – to be precise my External Examiner said 'Bob, we know this about you. It would be much easier to read in the first person', although I cannot claim this to be an original approach. The research drew on a tradition of naturalistic enquiry traced back to Glazer and Strauss (1969) and Glazer's earlier defence of paper written without field notes around long experiences and personal experiences (Davis, F,1959). The key reference of this methodology was the work of the American sociologist, Jack Douglas (1976) and his acceptance of shared personal experience as the best way of understanding the world and its meaning to participants; for him and his collaborators, self-observation was not introspection but concrete and situated reflection.

This paper first considers the precedents in the key urban design literature (it is not a full history, but a discussion of the relevant writers) and then proceeds to a chronological review of my own 'walks' – as an

undergraduate student, as professional in practice, and then as a tutor to undergraduate and postgraduate students. Though some of the reference material has been lost or mislaid a reasonable attempt has been made to reconstruct material where possible. The concluding section discusses the application of this approach – the walk-through places as a method - to my research in post-communist Romanian art. To steal a phrase from a Grateful Dead song – ‘What a long strange trip it’s been’ (Hunter R, Garcia, J, Lesh, P, 1970)

## **THE URBAN DESIGN LITERATURE**

The opening words of Camillo Sitte’s founding text on urban design place us in the squares and streets he is advising us about and invite the reader to imagine themselves in their presence:

“enchancing recollections of travel from part of our most pleasant reveries. Magnificent town views, monuments and public squares, beautiful vistas all parade before our musing eye and we savour again the delights those sublime and graceful things in whose presence we were once so happy... to linger!” (Sitte, p. 141)

A similar but much more explicit call for the designer, and one which combines the form of the reality of the site with the role of the designer’s imagination to visualize the future form of the city as he walks the site is embedded in core of Raymond Unwin’s textbook a few years later:

“The designer’s first duty, then, must be to study his town, his site their people and their requirements... As the designer walks over the ground to be planned he will picture to himself what would be the natural growth of the town or district if left to spread over the area ...as he tramps along there will arise in his imagination a picture of the future of the future community” (Unwin, p. 140 and p 152).

In his study of Oxford the distinguished planner, Thomas Sharp noted (although it is rarely cited and Sharp is hardly ever mentioned these days)

“A building is usually considered as a three-dimensional still life. But for practical purposes it is in fact always in movement (the fact that the movement belongs to the observer and not the building is incidental). The important thing is that as observer moves the building alters, not only in the relation of one part to another, but in relation to its environment. Thus, whether or not we admit it consciously our

architectural experience is mostly kinetic, the result of a complicated resolution of changing relations” (Sharp, 1948, p32)

The archpriest of the walking observer is Gordon Cullen who frames his whole approach to ‘Townscape’ with the idea of ‘serial vision’:

“Although the pedestrian walks through the town at a uniform speed the scenery of towns is revealed in a series of jerks or revelations... the human mind reacts to a contrast, to the difference between things, and when two pictures (the street and the courtyard are in mind at the same time a vivid contrast is felt and the town becomes visible in a deeper sense... from our optical point of view we have split into two elements : the existing view and the emerging view... since it is an instinctive and continuous habit of the body to relate itself to the environment, this sense of position cannot be ignored” (Cullen, 1961,p11-12)

## **UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES**

Throughout my undergraduate education in ‘Land Use Studies’ (‘Town and Country Planning was one (but in practice the only) optional route) there was repeated emphasis on walking and visiting. In our first week we were set an exercise - ‘clues and places’- in which we were sent to unfamiliar places across the North East (I studied at Newcastle University) for a one day visit with no notes or preparation and expected to write a short analysis – in my case I was sent to Alnwick in Northumberland and Shields Road, a secondary shopping centre in Newcastle upon Tyne. I remember, too, setting off to walk around Castle Rising (a small village near my hometown of Kings Lynn) with a copy of ‘Pevsner’ (Pevsner 1962) and exploring its lanes and the huge mound of the Castle itself.

In the second year, in the depths of winter I was asked to undertake an analysis of the North Sea coast from Blyth to North Shields. To do this I walked in the wind and sleet for two days with my fellow student, Pete Clarkson, and produced a pop-art illustrated poem ‘Not quite summer on not quite Bredon’ An oblique reference to A.E Housman’s poem ‘In summertime on Bredon’(Housman, 1896) which is full of romantic evocations of the English countryside

My tutors did not respond warmly, despite the complex sequences of text and photographs.

Two final year studies were substantial and had a lasting influence on my work and walks. My 'Special Study'(the equivalent to a dissertation) was a series of perambulations and musings upon the place and illustrated with 24 fold out maps and throughout with hundreds of tiny 35mm contact prints (approx. 35mm x 23mm) mounted marginally to the text which itself was organized topographically – the appearance of the town from outside, the patterns of the streets and finally the details of individual elements – in much the same way as a visitor would discover and unravel the place. The text itself is almost lost in this presentation.

A final year seminar paper was not so well received by my tutor. If I recall correctly, he stopped its presentation as being irrelevant. But it expanded the idea of comparing places from the different viewpoints of passing by, approaching and entering and finally moving around in two places that in crude 'land use' terms were the same (Chichester and Durham are both cathedral cities, administrative centres and tourist centres). This included driving as well as walking. The systematic approach to movement and place and the relationship of the observer to place was developed further and reused as a basis first for thinking about urban design at Milton Keynes (Jarvis, B, 1970) – again with questions about its relevance. Planners seem resistant to focussing on people rather than things: though that is another story (Jarvis 1996) and eventually published with a Calvino-esque title that I still savour (Jarvis, B 1984).

## **POSTGRADUATE WALKS**

A two-year research programme of zen-like isolation in urban design 'before urban design was re-invented' followed and included refinements of 'the walk'. Under the direction of David L. Thomas who has been almost totally written out of urban design history and as his former students – David Lovie, Dave Whitney, Steve Owen (and me) become less active and retire it becomes all the more important to include some outline of his work. He wrote what is probably the most difficult and impenetrable text on urban design and had defined 'topographical planning design' as the basis for our research 'tasks' as he called them. He would only let us read his book (Thomas 1970) and (to ensure we did not corrupt language further) The Penguin English Dictionary. He sent us – there were only two of us, me and a Venezuelan architect, Mercedes Ferrara de Perez, - on various tasks to watch and replicate ('simulate' in his words), 'normal activities' on and

around Newcastle. These ‘tasks’ involved everyday activities in urban places: walking and climbing stairways, going shopping and catching buses – nothing special or complex. There is some documentation of them and some of my drawings in James Stewart’s summary article. (Stewart, 2002).

## **TEACHING URBAN DESIGN THROUGH WALKING**

Prepared by all this I started teaching urban design at South Bank Polytechnic in 1987 (It became South Bank University (1992) and then London South Bank University (2003). My principal approach was to develop a series of place based experiential learning projects to focus on what I came to call the ‘real subject of urban design’: everyday life in real places. The title I chose for the , *The Arts of Planning*, was a deliberate stand against the sociologically based rationalism and procedural emphasis of many in the profession and the department , and to sustain the wild spirit of artistic creativity and the idea that planning and design was really ‘talking about places that aren’t yet’.

The evolution of this first-year module began with day visits to Oxford and Brighton and experiments in sequential experiences of space (‘serial vision’) and the ways they changed over time in place. Realizing that the students had little or no introduction to the history of urban form and towns, so a history related layer was added and the four part, walking and talking and drawing unit ‘The Arts of Town Planning’ took its basic form.

These guided walks, pointing out to the student’s places and times of special interest, were open ended and the students were left to focus the aspects of the places and times that they felt they could turn into illustrated displays. The students caught moments of time and place in a range of media – collages and drawings, diagrams and texts.

Urban history was crudely divided into four periods (appropriate to the UK at least) – mediaeval, classical, Victorian and modern – and a specific guided walk accompanied each of them with a piece of visual work (no essays here!) for each period in different media. Collage allocated for the first, mediaeval, period as the easiest to begin; line drawing was for the classical period, colour was held back until the Victorian age and the expression of movement for the modern age. Artists from other disciplines - Jack Rickards, a painter and art historian and Struan Leslie, a choreographer and later movement director at the Royal Shakespeare Company. were involved. The locations for these walks varied over the years as funding allowed. At first the students

work included not only place based studies but explorations of the architectural and artistic styles of the periods. Complaints that this involved too much work led to this being cut in later versions. But the walks still demanded the students walk round with their eyes open.

The walks themselves originally included Lewes – an almost perfect, essentially medieval town on Sussex that not only had all the urban elements – a castle, a ruined priory, a market, a street plan that had hardly changed – and even more helpful as an introduction a historical model with a light and sound commentary. But the costs of getting groups of students meant this had to be replaced with a London visit. Fortunately, the Borough High Street still has many of the characteristics of a medieval street – narrow frontages, rear yards (imagine Chaucer’s pilgrims setting off), relics of monasteries even a bishop’s palace – even if there had been successive rebuilding. And hidden away behind the Church was an excavated palimpsest that went back to Roman times.

The classical age presented no problem and from Horse Guards across the Mall and up and around St James and Regent Street to Portland Place and Regents Park was a varied sequence to follow. Just behind Borough High Street classical compositions for housing and hospitals were another source. The great railway termini (and their bridges and viaducts, goods yard and coal yards) the museums and the range of government buildings along Whitehall and upto Trafalgar Square were other models. The modern age focussed on movement and for several years included choreographic studies around the Royal Festival Hall and the South Bank Centre (Jarvis, B 1996; Jarvis, B and Leslie, S 2001)

Field trips with associated walks and explorations to Venice (over several years), Lille and Turin developed the teaching walk in less familiar places and the development of urban design work in Romania followed. Here the example of the final Venice visit and walk will serve to illustrate these far-flung explorations. It completes the circle: Mr Cullen goes to Venice was an invitation to students to apply his ideas of serial vision to Isola di San Pietro which had been suggested to us a ‘suitable case for treatment’. This island is at the far north eastern edge of the historic group of islands and as a ‘dead-end’ beyond the Biennale Gardens and Arsenale it is rarely visited, its neighbours boat repair yards and housing projects. The students’ walks there opened new possibilities and connections and they found there sites for new projects linking this forgotten part of Venice into the rest of the city.

## **CONCLUSIONS: APPLYING THE URBAN DESIGN WALK TO THE GEOHISTORY OF ART**

My current research in the Department of Art History, University of Sussex- Art in Post-Communist Romania –the of influence social and environmental contexts- focusses on the relation of the ‘reality’ of place to its representation in contemporary Romanian art : its working title is A review of sources as the introduction to compiling a ‘Catalogue Raisonné’ of the critical presentation of the topography and society of post-communist Romania in art. This research grew out of my urban design work and my interest in Romania (Jarvis, B 2010)

One of the strands of art historical research that is relatively underdeveloped, at least in the UK is ‘kunstgeographie’ (now usually referred to English ‘the geohistory of art) and this research will bring together art historical and urbanistic perspectives within that field. But even so kunstgeographie still focusses on the individual work (whether it is a painting, a sculpture or a building) and there is no evidence of methodology for dealing, as my work must, with the wider urban field and the selection and treatment of places. In Thomas DaCosta’s (re)introduction of the subject (DaCosta, 2004) for instance, there are only two maps – one from Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, one of the location of parish churches in Potosi, Bolivia.

An example to conclude. One of the key pieces in my research is Ion Grigorescu’s 1993 film Drumul: Noua axa a orasului (The road: New Axis for the city) Grigorescu (b. 1945) is the doyen of Romanian artists who worked both in the Communist era (largely ‘under the radar’ of state control and worked on church restoration while making more personal and critical works) and he is still active today. His use of a walk across the disrupted and disjointed urban landscape on the cusp of the new post-communist age – it shows a landscape of half-finished projects and discarded building materials – provided me with a key to organize my wider searches which was also part of my urban design repertoire of methods. (Serban, 2013; Museum of Modern Art Bucharest, 2018). This piece because it is itself a walk is especially relevant.

Once I have confirmed the artists and the localities which they depict (Jarvis, B 2019) it will be possible to undertake a series of walks setting their works against the real places – what they emphasise or omit, add or collage in, the way they treat light and space, -bringing topographical method as well as focus to kunstgeographie through the application of walking as method.

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