

Conclusions

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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS



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CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Written by Jonas Larsen (RUC)

We now highlight some of this collaborative project's main analytical insights and findings. The first overall ambition has been to develop a multidisciplinary approach that can be used to study and improve local walking practices and walking environments from a pedestrian perspective. Moreover, we used these methods to study walking practices and make and test temporary designs in specific locations in three relatively big Nordic cities in: Copenhagen, Oslo and Gothenburg. Our methods, analyses, and concepts can help researchers and planners make cities more pedestrian friendly.

We have called our approach an 'urban walking lab'. It is informed by theories that understand walking as a uniquely embodied and emplaced practice and 'living lab' approaches that conduct research on the street with habitual users and various design experiments. Our 'urban walking lab' is concerned with studying local walking cultures, giving voice to walkers and understanding the many practical and sensuous facets of walking practices and how the built environment influences them. Such user research, and research of places from a pedestrian perspective, can provide valuable insights to designers and planners about what walking is, how the environment shapes it, and how it can be regulated and planned.

We have discussed the methods involved in our urban walking lab and how we worked in it. Our lab implied a street perspective where we conducted research on the ground and from elevated positions, involved various users and combined qualitative and quantitative methods (Chapters 2 and 3). Using this lab in four locations in three cities, we have detailed how specific locations condition local forms of walking, and how walking takes place and feels in these locations. While there are many similarities between the four locations and how people walk in them, we have also seen that walking is performed differently in these locations, partly because the locations have different affordances and functions, and are located in different types of neighbourhoods. *Where* people walk, conditions *how* they walk. But walking environments are also shaped by how people walk and socialise in them. Places are, in part, produced by how people walk in them. Pedestrians are latent designers who shape the life of the streets through their daily walking practices. Walking is a place-making practice that shapes the continuous becoming of places. Walking is much more than just transport; it is also a way of being in the city – experiencing it and mingling with others.

Our analysis had a specific focus on how these locations could be improved from a pedestrian perspective. Here we learnt a lot from interviewing users by talking with them about their aspirations and ideas about how this place could become a better space for pedestrians. Our research demonstrates that 'people on the street' can articulate exciting design ideas and provide insightful evaluations. While short street interviews have limitations in terms of 'depth', they can nonetheless effectively engage different users as latent designers that can enrich the

design process with local knowledge and insights. On this basis, we sketched prototypes (Chapter 5) that were later tested through another round of research (Chapter 6.1-3). While these temporary low-cost designs seemingly had limited effect on how people walked, the interviews suggested they addressed relevant issues. Moreover, our analysis of the designs provides valuable insight into walking practices and environments, including the difficulties of regulating them. We now discuss what we have learned about walking practices and environments.

WALKING PRACTICES

This report demonstrates the uniqueness of walking practices compared to other forms of travel, and we have coined some terms to capture the local nature of walking practices. The project shows that walking takes different forms and is given different meanings, occasionally crossing the line between transport and ‘going for a walk’. We have drawn on, and contributed to, sociological and geographical literature on how walking occurs, how people walk, and for what reasons (reviewed in Chapter 1). We have been preoccupied with sensuous accounts of walking in action. Walking is a slow form compared to cycling and driving, although pedestrians compensate for the lower speed by ‘shortcutting’ and taking the most direct routes from A to B. However, some interviewees find walking too slow and tedious, so they cycle and use public transport instead. ‘The reluctant transit walker’ mainly walks between using public transport.

Walking is a uniquely embodied and multi-sensuous mode of travel involving foot contact with the ground and immersion in seasonal weather. Many interviewees appreciate this sensuous entanglement with surfaces and especially the weather world, partly because the slow pace of walking makes it perfect for ‘gazing’ at the scenes one passes through and walks by. Walking is clearly also about visually consuming cities, ‘going for a walk’. However, on rainy or snowy days, walking is less desirable. On such days, the indoor comfort of public transport may be too tempting.

As with cycling and running, walking is an active form of travel that requires physical work, although it is less taxing than running. Nonetheless, many interviewees across the three cities find practices of ‘walk commuting’ appealing because they are healthy and a time-effective form of exercising. Some also see it as a form of mental relaxation – they listen to music and podcasts, process their thoughts, or enjoy the view or the vibrant human life. The fact that walking is relatively easy on the body for able-bodied people makes it ideal for talking – one is not out of breath when walking. Indeed, conversing is pivotal to what we have termed ‘social walking’ and ‘walking with significant others’. However, pedestrians are not only talking with co-present others; many walk with a mobile phone in their hand and some listen to music, the radio, or a podcast.

More broadly, we have seen that walking and public transport are closely connected in numerous ways in the three cities. We have discussed how people on Enghave Square, Stortorvet and Stenpiren walk to and from the metro, trams and ferries on their way home or to work. Our studies of these transit squares show that walking implies different temporal rhythms and paces than a steady 5 to 6 km/h pace; fast-paced ‘sprinting’ and static ‘waiting’ are part of the life of transit squares and walking practices. Another rhythmic disturbance to the usual walking pace is ‘stopping’ and ‘sitting down’. These practices prevailed on Istedgade and Enghave Square, where people stopped to look at window displays, chat with friends, sit down for a

coffee or drink, or to simply pause and people watch. Such sudden stops and direction changes make the walker unpredictable compared to the car driver or cyclist. There are few, if any, traffic rules or signal signs when it comes to walking: people stop without signalling, walk in both directions and chat in the middle of the pavement, to name a few examples. Moreover, they often walk in their own worlds, attuned to what they hear in their headphones, read, see, and text on their mobile phones, and follow habitual routes on autopilot. They are occasionally oblivious to what is going on around them, looking at screens or scenery as much as the traffic ahead, which reflects that walking, generally speaking, requires less attention and focus on the street than driving or cycling. Indeed, many interviewees found walking more relaxing than cycling. This intermittent inattention partly explains why it was challenging to nudge people to walk new routes or to walk in unison – through our gates in Oslo and along the footprints in Gothenburg (Chapters 6.2 and 6.3). Indeed, we argue that pedestrians are hard to nudge and channel in the urban realm. Such social practices also indicate that pavements and squares often are complex public spaces where many rhythms, practices, people and things come together and occasionally rub shoulders, sometimes in unison, sometimes in disharmony. Understanding this complexity is a valuable lesson for urban planners; urban walking is a multifaceted practice and urban designers must facilitate this variation in how people walk (and socialise) in specific places. This begs the kind of in-depth ethnographic work conducted in this report.

WALKING ENVIRONMENTS

This report shows that pavements and squares can be complex spaces where different activities coexist and claim their right to exist. The pavements and squares studied in this report are much less regulated than the adjacent streets and cycle lanes; these are spaces exclusively designed and regulated for predictable transport. They are transport spaces, not locations for social life.

Pavements and squares are both spaces for ‘pedestrianism’ and ‘civic humanism’ (Blomley, 2010). In other words, they are social and transport infrastructure simultaneously, enabling smooth and effective travel and rich, convivial social worlds.

On Istedgade, we investigated what the wide pavements do for the walking experience. Here it became clear that they enable quick and efficient walking. At the same time, they also enable social forms of walking. Parents can walk hand in hand with their children, and friends can chat while walking beside each other. People can stop and talk to each other without blocking anyone’s way. We argued that walking – and their associated practices of greeting, stopping and chatting – is central to creating the special atmosphere on Istedgade – its ‘sense of place’. The expansive pavements also enable outdoor serving, and Istedgade sometimes resembles a restaurant with outdoor heating and awnings. We argued that Istedgade is an exciting place to walk because it is more than just an infrastructure for walking. However, this is a balancing act. Excessive commercialisation of the pavement can harm walking and exclude people from this public good. We, therefore, designed an alternative: a public oasis with flowers and wooden benches to create a green public space. This installation was well received and fitted the vibe of Istedgade.

The good pavement and square are not just a thoroughfare, but also places where people linger, stop, window shop and chat with locals. They are meeting places with room for both movement and for being stationary. This is, for example, the case at Enghave Square, which is not

just an efficient metro infrastructure, but also a social infrastructure that creates a public square with a rich social life in a densely populated neighbourhood.

We have also studied two other squares with significant public transport flows. Stenpiren and Stortorvet are dominated by commuting flows more than stationary social life (it should be kept in mind that we studied Stenpiren in late autumn). They are complex pedestrianised environments populated by objects and vehicles.

On Stortorvet, electric scooters and food trucks block the pavements and access to the square, making shortcutting less obvious. During our design trial period in 2022, the square was less cluttered, and more people were shortcutting through the heart of the square. We concluded with loose design suggestions as to how this square could become attractive to the practices of ‘shortcutting’, ‘flower strolling’ and coffee drinking.

On Stenpiren, we have shown how cyclists and pedestrians weave in and out of each other on the faintly marked cycle lane and a large pedestrian area with shared space characteristics. These interweavings occasionally create trouble and insecurity. The problems are derived from more than just the design; they are also caused by pedestrians staring down at their mobile phones, having tunnel vision or by being preoccupied with conversations – intentionally oblivious or by pure accident. ‘Shared spaces’ can be conflictual, and soft pedestrians create problems too. That is why we did an experiment where we printed feet and “look up” signs to make pedestrians and cyclists more aware and attentive when crossing the cycle lane at high speed, sprinting in a hurry, or waiting for the bus and tram. However, our small-scale intervention only made a minor difference at best.

However, the diverse nature of the sidewalks and squares is not necessarily a problem. On Stenpiren, most people were OK with the diffuse transitions between the spaces for cyclists and pedestrians. They were used to navigating this *de facto* shared space. On Istedgade, outdoor dining creates life in the street, which many associate with an excellent urban walking experience. It reflects that pedestrians in this study seemingly want flexible rules for where, and how, they must walk. We have shown and argued that walking and pavements and squares are generally less regulated than other modes and spaces of mobility. Moreover, pavements and squares are complex geographical spaces that are as much about urban life as about flows and movement. However, this is a fine balancing act as walking must remain a master rhythm in a walking-friendly place, and it must never be too testing to walk on a pavement. Getting that balance between accessibility and social life right is a crucial role for urban planners and designers.

Walking is uniquely about commuting, going for a walk, chatting with people, shopping, exercising, and meeting others, and the design of walking environments must reflect and accommodate this complexity. Walking is about moving and living in the city; the street is an everyday lab for creating desirable sustainable cities. Our ‘urban walking lab’ is an invitation to scholars and planners to engage with this everyday lab, for them to become better at understanding walking and designing pavements and squares – ones that entice more people to walk and spend time in these valuable urban spaces.