

## EXPLORING AND DESIGNING DYNAMIC SITES THROUGH EXPERIMENTAL WALKING

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### INTRODUCTION

Experimental walking can be used to explore sites, and in particular their dynamics and atmospheric particularities, which provide a treasure trove of inspiration for designers. This article illustrates the benefits of this method, using the changing German city of Freiburg of an example.

### TRANSFORMING FREIBURG

The sustainable transformation of urban landscapes relies on design processes that carefully identify the particularities of sites. Designers want to understand local conditions, in particular the dynamic qualities of places, and use them as a starting point for their designs. The process of designing is understood as a process of transformation (Diedrich 2013), in which the designer is just one of many driving forces.

Freiburg is a hugely popular, medium sized town with an attractive proximity to France and Switzerland. The famous Black Forest is at the doorstep and tourists and inhabitants cherish the surrounding landscape. 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 move to Freiburg. The project *Perspektivplan* was an informal, large-scale design study that was 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.

For this task the exploration of Freiburg's urban landscapes was crucial because the strategic designs for the cityscape were supposed to express, reflect and develop distinctive dynamic elements of the city. These elements such as scenery and sequences experienced when moving through the city, windy "urban glades" with expansive views, and intermediate spaces between neighbourhoods, had not been portrayed in books and cannot be defined by generating quantitative data. They had to be sensed by getting in touch with ephemeral properties.

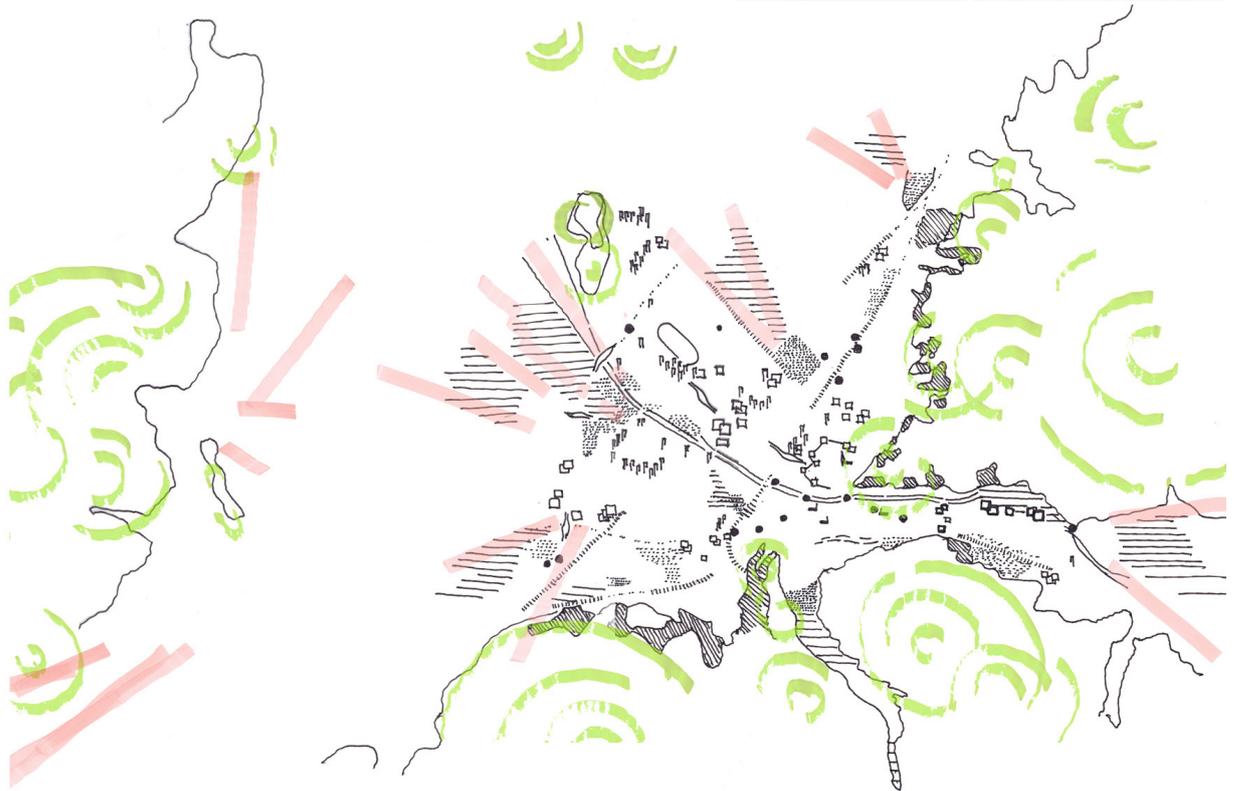


FIGURE 1: Walking and Mapping © cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz. (Photo by Sanna Richter).

The design team walked the project area extensively and made use of walking as experimental method. (Figure 1) The team comprised of different professions: An urban designer (Oliver Seidel, Cityförster), an architect (Sanna Richter, architect) and two landscape architects (Henrik Schultz, Stein+Schultz and Börries von Detten, freiwurf). They worked closely together with municipal planners and different groups of decision makers and stakeholders.

#### **WALKING AS METHOD OF URBAN LANDSCAPE DESIGN**

Walking is an act of movement, perception and creativity, and is deeply rooted in our history. 'It was by walking that man began to construct the natural landscape of his surroundings. And

in our own century we have formulated the categories for interpreting the urban landscapes that surround us by walking through them,' says Francesco Careri (Careri 2003: 19). Today, landscape designers can draw from the widespread use of walking in other professions. In his research on *strollology*, Lucius 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.

Since the 1960s a growing number of performative artists make walking a constitutive element of their work. Boris Sieverts, for example, combines paths, situations and views, and creates sequences of images while walking. Participants in his tours are guided to experience these newly written landscape stories. The works of artist Richard Long can be understood as walking performances that directly translate into sculptures. Long arranges existing material in a slightly new way. The movement of the walk carries into Long's actions in making the sculpture. The walk binds material to action and connects the sculpture with the landscape. Long's work shows that two aspects of walking cannot be separated—mentally altering space and altering space by drawing lines or by rearranging existing materials. Invisible changes and tangible action are interwoven in the act of walking. 'For whenever we walk or talk we gesture with our bodies, and insofar as these gestures leave traces and trails, on the ground or some other surface, lines have been, or are being, drawn' (Ingold 2011: 177).

But artists aren't the only ones to value walking – some scientists consider walking crucial to their research. The geomorphologist Sven Lukas, for example, walks to understand how glaciers grew, as well as to reconstruct aspects of the palaeo climate. Walking helps Lukas capture the complexity of a landscape and its genesis (Lukas and Bradwell 2010).

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. In order to do this, the method provides a set of guidelines 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. (Figure 2) 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 and 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. And finally, they want to reflect both their experiences and initial ideas.

#### **EXPERIMENTAL WALKING IN FREIBURG**

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 the characteristics and potential of the city of Freiburg. 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

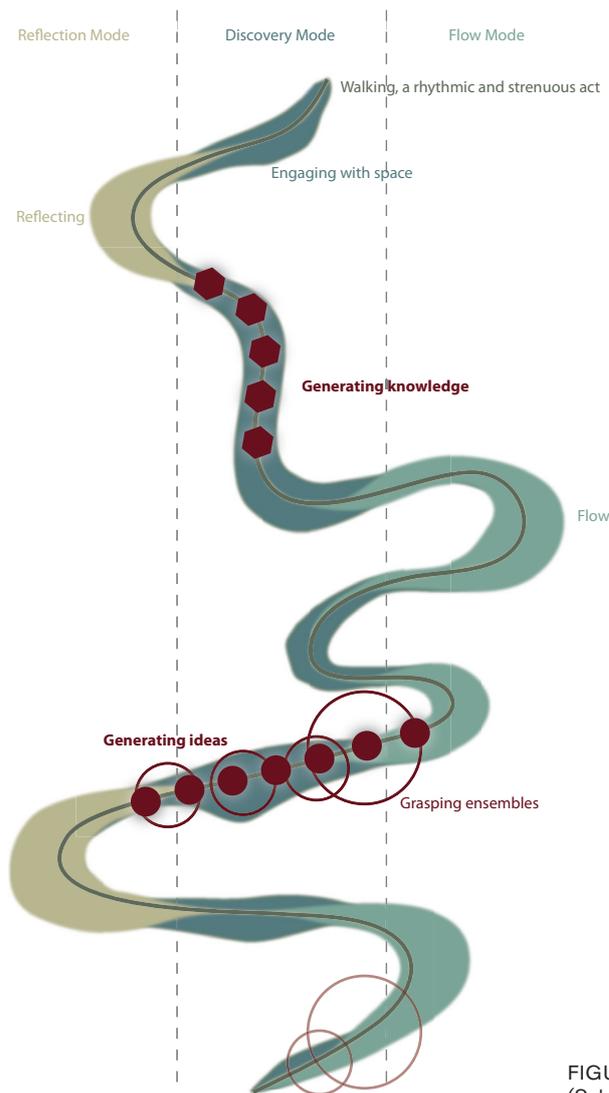


FIGURE 2: Interplay of three walking-modes (Schultz 2014a).

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’ (2004: 196).

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 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.

The case study of Freiburg reveals the benefits of experimental walking as an element of large-scale landscape design.

First, sensing and understanding the city as a dynamic landscape helps generate stark images that balance productive fuzziness and offer tangible starting points for new projects. For instance, the design team bodily experienced the atmospheric effects of the large streets that cut through the city. They appear as barriers in the city's fabric, prohibiting people from freely roaming the city. These dominant elements had been taken for granted over 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. With the "Capture" strategy, 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 become part of the city's fabric, play diverse roles, and no longer appear as barriers. New interconnections along and across these streets became an important element of the spatial vision.

Second, the walking design team experienced places that offer an opportunity to grasp the city in its beautiful unfolding complexity. The team mapped particular places, traces and patterns of movement (e.g. paths people use as part of their daily routines), landmarks and other characteristic elements of Freiburg's cityscape that can only be experienced by walking the city (see figure 1 "Walking and Mapping"). They represent narrative qualities of places and of the whole city of Freiburg. The designers could respond to these 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 tangible situations experienced on the walks.

Third, 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. 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.

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 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. (Figure 3)

#### **CAPTURING PARTICULARITIES & FINDING QUESTIONS**

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.

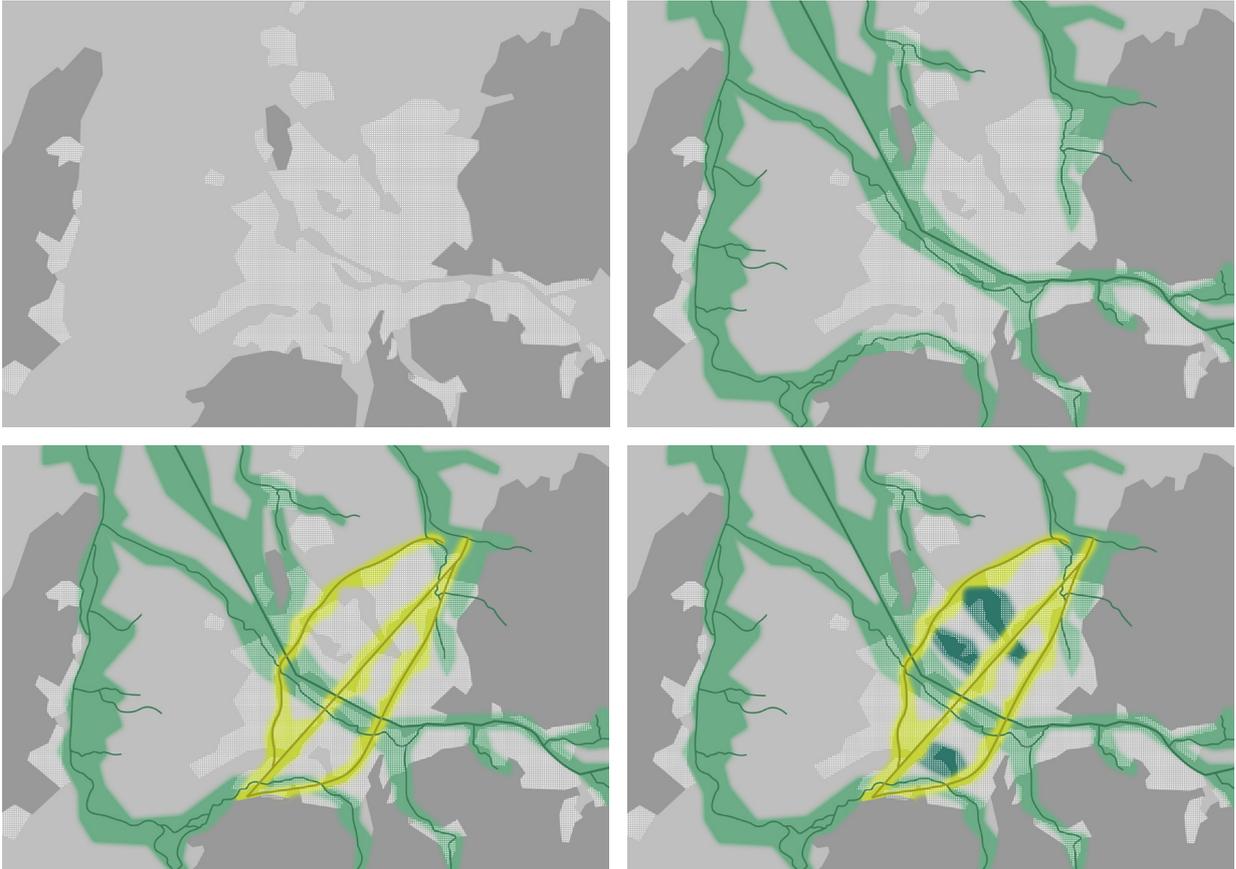


FIGURE 3: Spatial vision © cityförster, freiwurf, Stein+Schultz  
 The new framework shown in the spatial vision can be divided in three fields, all resting upon Freiburgs topological basis (first image). The first, "riverscapes" (second image), addresses areas along the three major floodplains. Each 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" (third image) follows today's linear gaps 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" (image four). 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.

While moving and connecting views, feelings, and places, the walking designers gained new perspectives and saw things from different angles, or in a different light. The scenery became a spectacle in which the continuously moving walkers played an active role. Through walking, the design team were able to sense narrative qualities and contribute to the ever-changing meshwork of paths and stories. In fact, walking brought together processes of landscape performance and landscape design.

In his studies of the everyday life, Michel de Certeau analyses walking as a crucial means of constructing social space (Certeau 1980). 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 (1968). Landscape in this context is considered as coming 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 (2008) 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. Thus, landscape is not simply a physical entity that can be analysed by measuring and observing; studying landscapes needs to take the moving designer into account.

The fact that walkers can become part of the *Raumgeschehen*, and intensively perceive and change it, makes walking a process of understanding that is directly linked to design (Seggern 2008: 233). Walkers explore what is already there, immediately creating and thus changing this 'reality' by walking through it and by connecting elements in their minds and with their bodies and by reflecting on the insights gained.

In this process of understanding an outcome of the simple act of walking becomes explicit: Questions and ideas. 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.

When dealing with complex objects of design and design research, formulating relevant questions is a creative act that benefits from 'walking around the problem' rather than sitting at a desk, reading books and extrapolating. As Jonas (2007: 1365) puts it: 'No information is available, if there is no idea of a solution, because the questions arising depend on a kind of solution, which one has in mind. One cannot fully understand and formulate the problem before it is solved. Thus, in the end, the solution is the problem'. The process of walking helps grasp an idea of the solution. Ideas cannot be produced only by referring to rational strategies. Intuitional and bodily strategies are needed as well. Walking is a bodily activity and the creative processes described by so many different people are based on intuition (Schultz 2014b: 129).

## CONCLUSIONS

Walking fosters a special form of reflection in action. While walking, phases of engagement alternate with those of looking at the landscape from a distance. At one stage, designers intensively perceive the atmosphere of a space and become part of the landscape. At another stage, they look at the landscape from a distance and are inspired to reflect their findings. The knowledge generated during a walk may be implicit but it can 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). Through the mutual sharing of conceptions that people have of landscapes they gain insights into their dynamic and ever changing object of research. 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).

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