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► **To cite this version:**

Vedrana Ikalović, Ana Ruiz-Bowen. Learning by Walking: Re-Interpretation of "Repellent Spaces" as a Method of Urban Exploration. CIST2023 - Apprendre des territoires / Enseigner les territoires, Collège international des sciences territoriales (CIST), Nov 2023, Aubervilliers, Campus Condorcet, centre des Colloques, France. pp.91-94. hal-04389328

HAL Id: hal-04389328

<https://hal.science/hal-04389328>

Submitted on 11 Jan 2024

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Learning by Walking: Re-Interpretation of “Repellent Spaces” as a Method of Urban Exploration

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ABSTRACT

What element in urban space makes prickly space prickly and slippery space slippery? How can we make such experiences useful for the first stage of an urban project proposal? This paper focuses on the identification of intentional and unintentional leftover (or “repellent”) spaces categorised by Steven Flusty (Dear & Flusty, 2001). He defines “stealthy”, “slippery”, “crusty”, “prickly”, and “jittery” spaces as spaces repellent to the public, as they cannot be found, reached, accessed, occupied comfortably, or utilized unobserved. The paper includes photographs collected by students who use walking as a means of urban exploration. Photographs are employed as a form of data, and visual methods (Pink, 2012) are applied to identify particular and common spatial elements perceived as hidden, inaccessible, and uncomfortable. Each category of repellent space is discussed separately to identify its spatial characteristics, and to recognise the spatial elements that cause it to be interpreted in a specific way.

KEYWORDS

Walking, Photographs, Visual methods, Dérive

RÉSUMÉ

Quel élément dans l'espace urbain rend l'espace épineux « épineux » et l'espace glissant « glissant » ? Comment rendre ces expériences utiles pour la première étape d'une proposition de projet urbain ? Cette étude réinterprète des espaces « répulsifs » catégorisés par Steven Flusty (Dear & Flusty, 2001). Pour lui, les espaces « furtifs », « glissants », « croustillants », « épineux » et « nerveux » sont des espaces répulsifs pour le public, qui ne peuvent pas être trouvés, atteints, accessibles, occupés confortablement ou utilisés sans être observés. Le matériel présenté ici sont des photographies recueillies par des étudiants qui utilisent la marche comme moyen d'explorer la ville. Des méthodes visuelles (Pink, 2012) sont appliquées pour identifier des éléments spatiaux perçus comme cachés, inaccessibles et inconfortables. Chaque catégorie d'espaces répulsifs est discutée séparément et leurs caractéristiques spatiales sont présentées pour reconnaître les éléments spatiaux qui suscitent une interprétation spécifique.

MOTS CLÉS

marche, photographies, méthodes visuelles, dérive

In this paper, we present the results of walking sessions conducted during the Creativity and Means of Expression module within the Smart and Resilient Cities program at the Graduate school of Engineering (HEI) –in the Catholic University of Lille. In this module, multiple tasks introduce walking as a method of urban investigation, with the purpose of identifying the character/nature of one's immediate environment. Tasks focus on walking as a metaphor for reading (de Certeau, 2007), with four specific purposes:

- Understanding socio-spatial characteristics of space (mapping its tangible and intangible aspects –morphological features and programmes/flows within the area),
- Identifying intentional and unintentional leftover spaces as categorised by Steven Flusty (Dear & Flusty, 2001) (stealthy, slippery, crusty, prickly, and jittery spaces) (Zardini, 2005),
- Mapping and tracing one's own trajectory and its memorable elements (Lynch, 1964),
- *La dérive* (Debord, 2015) as a communication with the city space, aiming at a walk with an (un)intended destination that explores encouraging and discouraging points along the (un)intended route.

This paper focuses on task 2: the identification of intentional and unintentional leftover (or “repellent”) spaces categorised by Steven Flusty (Dear & Flusty, 2001). He defines “stealthy”, “slippery”, “crusty”, “prickly”, and “jittery” spaces as spaces repellent to the public, as they cannot be found, reached, accessed, occupied comfortably, or utilised unobserved.

One of the purposes of the exercise for students is to find inspiration in one's immediate environment, to react to specific (un) favourable urban conditions, to re-think, re-conceptualise, re-design, and finally transform spaces taking into account their distinct character. In other words, the purpose is to highlight existing spatial in/equalities and to reflect on urban living conditions, as well as to juxtapose the designed/planned/intentional with the spontaneous/unplanned/unintentional (space).

Despite Flusters' definitions, the proposed typology allows individual interpretations of repellent categories, as objective spatial constraints are inseparable from students' subjective perception of real spaces. Previous knowledge may also have a significant role in the process, as familiarity with one's place of residence can take the observer to a specific previously experienced space which, at the time, was hidden, out of reach, uncomfortable or observed. Hence, multiplication

of subjective interpretations is valuable because, besides the subjective experience, it highlights objective obstacles that “afford” (Gibson, 1986) specific behaviours in multiple individuals. The experiences of persons who have previous knowledge and persons who do not are simultaneously juxtaposed to decode “repellent” spaces. Throughout the analysis of the collected data, the question we ask is: What element in an urban space, makes prickly space “prickly” and slippery space “slippery”?

The visual material presented was collected by 101 engineering students in three consecutive years (31 students in 2020, 36 in 2021, and 34 in 2022). Each category is discussed separately to identify spatial characteristics and elements that trigger a specific interpretation in students. On the one hand, the goal is to discuss the methodology; on the other hand, it is to analyse photographs and identify the characteristics of each typology of repellent space, their interpretations, and (potentially) overlapping characteristics (similarities and differences).

METHODOLOGY

Students use walking as a means of exploration and only the photographs taken during these walks are considered for analysis (photographs from the internet or from personal collections are excluded even though students occasionally do submit photographs of places they remember to be repellent). The students are given a set of simple instructions, including definitions of spatial categories. No spatial or time limits are imposed: the participants capture “repellent spaces” on their common daily routes. The intention is to bring awareness to the “repellent” character of their daily environment. Visual methods are applied following Pink (2012), as are previously used urban ethnography methods (Covatta & Ikalović, 2022) –in this research they are applied to the collection of photographs. In the first stage, students work together in class to classify the photographs into the five typologies set in Dear & Flusty (2001). They then compare and discuss understandings of repelling spaces with others. The content of the collection is then highlighted, extrapolated, and analysed after the class, as the second part of the study. To analyse and discuss the photographs’ content, a multiscale approach is proposed. The smallest scale (S) is the scale of street furniture and architectural elements (stairs, walls, windows). The medium scale (M) is the scale of an ensemble, which could be a composition of multiple objects and/or multiple independent elements (e.g., two walls that create a sensation of narrowness). The large scale (L) is the urban scale including urban elements (house, street, and block). The XL is the scale of high-rise buildings and massive infrastructure. The study also considers the notion of rules that allow or forbid specific behaviours, that are invisible (intangible) but represented by the presence of a specific subject and/or a person. When identified in each category, these five scales allow us to gain an understanding of the character of spatial typologies and how they compare.

RESULTS

Stealthy spaces that “cannot be found”

Small pedestrian roads, passages, walls without openings in close proximity to one another, and fences were identified in the photographs of stealthy spaces. Places that cannot be found are mostly scale M urban spaces –traditional shared gardens and narrow alleys. They are “hidden” from the outside world in the sense that they are often private, not exposed to anyone other than residents (e.g., shared garden) and surrounded by walls without windows (e.g., narrow streets). Occasionally they are remote, in parks or in leftover spaces without specific use or activity.

Slippery spaces that “cannot be reached”

Water surfaces (such as ponds, rivers, etc.), construction sites (and their props that block the traffic), highways or high traffic roads (which cannot be crossed by pedestrians at the point of observation), and elevated areas (perceived as inaccessible even though they are accessible) are the main common elements found in photographs of slippery spaces. Slippery spaces are mostly visible and exposed, but they are not easily accessible; often they are vertically and/or horizontally distant large-scale places (e.g., high-rise buildings or towers), and places with no visible entrance (an entrance may exist but is invisible from the point of observation). They are landmarks that dominate the space and are memorable. Notably the door, as an architectural element, was found in photographs taken during the Covid-19 isolation. This is significant as it highlights rules and regulations rather than spatial obstacles to make something “out of reach.”

Crusty spaces that “cannot be accessed”

Props, such as signals, construction elements, and common fixed street furniture (e.g., bollards, fire hydrants) are the predominant elements found in photographs of crusty spaces. Even though they are intentionally placed for a specific use, they are seen as obstacles. This category also covers fences and gates as barriers which were intended to forbid specific behaviours and block access. These are complemented by forbidden places –those that are privately owned (such as private parking, or military space, etc.), which are often also represented by photographs of doors and/or people/guards as a symbol of inaccessibility. More unusual spaces included in the crusty category are cobbled roads with bumpy and uncomfortable surfaces that hinder movement, making spaces at the end of the road inaccessible, as well as places abundant with nature. Finally, similarly to abandoned and unoccupied natural spaces, the photographs also include elements of the built environment such as urban leftovers, abandoned houses, and buffer zones at traffic intersections.

Prickly spaces that “cannot be occupied comfortably”

The question of comfort is mostly understood and represented in terms of comfortable sitting: Photographs include horizontal surfaces which are abandoned, not well-maintained, or which are intentionally designed to be uncomfortable, to prevent people from sitting. In addition, they include spaces where there is potential to sit because of their interesting location (e.g. in close proximity to water such as a river or pond, or in a park), or because they have a suitable height and dimensions in general. Sense of comfort is also linked to surfaces and materials (elements are made of concrete, often suggesting an uncomfortable, cold surface). In some cases, “going through” places with potential (for example a spot on a bridge with nice views, where loitering is forbidden) is presented as uncomfortable. Dimensions cause discomfort too (small and narrow alleys are uncomfortable). Surprisingly, an unconstrained natural environment both in terms of space/ambience and surface (grass, field, rocky beach) is prickly.

Jittery spaces that “cannot be utilized unobserved”

Even though the focus is on space, in the category of jittery spaces students collect mostly photographs of cameras, rather than photographs of spaces that cameras observe. Hence, this category becomes a collection of objects –notably of cameras and signs for alarms, and the focus is on digital (virtual) surveillance, which is obviously present in multiple public zones for safety reasons, and around private spaces with limited access. In pedestrian zones, as well as in open spaces such as squares in city-centres, the presence of people makes places constantly observed. Similarly, shared spaces next to residential areas (such as playgrounds or gardens where windows of surrounding buildings allow exposure) are also, but less frequently, interpreted as jittery spaces. Jittery spaces are controlled spaces, and the notion of “being observed” is rarely considered positive.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Street furniture and small-scale architectural elements caused significant interruption of movement, and were perceived as elements that make places inaccessible, out of reach, and uncomfortable. To a lesser extent, they were also perceived as objects that hide space. Hence, urban (street) furniture can be identified in photos belonging to four out of the five categories (stealthy, crusty, prickly, and jittery) and played the most significant role in the perception of repellent spaces. This notion is even more significant considering the original intended purpose of the furniture: in some cases, objects were designed to be comfortable but failed to fulfil their purpose. Small pedestrian roads and narrow streets as well as shared gardens were perceived as hidden, inaccessible, and occasionally uncomfortable. This gives a particular character to typical small-scale urban spaces, as they trigger

multiple, sometimes opposite feelings. On the one hand, they are an intimate and safe setting (stealthy) while, on the other hand, their spatial features, or the fact they are not well cared for, may cause a sense of discomfort (prickly). Large-scale infrastructure and high-rise buildings had dual meanings too: they were memorable and interesting to look at, but at the same time they were physically out of reach, inaccessible, protected, and observed. Privately owned spaces were seen as inaccessible and observed spaces (crusty and jittery). At the same time, public spaces, and the “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 1961) quality intended to make one feel safe has become “too many (virtual) eyes” on the street, and this was perceived as leaving one “too exposed”. The causal relationship between safety and exposure in the virtual and real presence or absence of “others” in contemporary public space, therefore, was evident.

Urban environments were deeply linked to practices of maintenance and care: lack of maintenance was experienced as uncomfortable, distant, and inaccessible.

The notion of repellent places in urban environments remains a tool for identifying favourable and unfavourable spatial conditions in contemporary urban landscapes. To avoid subjective misinterpretations and biases, the methodology that multiplies subjective experiences is proposed for the identification of spatial elements. These elements may be at different scales and may trigger various perceptions. The data collected by multiple subjects becomes a resource for visual analysis, which is used to identify the specific and common features of each typology. In this study, engineering students used to measurements, calculations, and scientific rigour, but with no previous training in urban exploration encounter urban spaces through walking. They capture previously overlooked everyday ambiances, focusing on the non-measurable and uncountable qualities of technology and infrastructure in the city. Through discussion with others, they multiply, confront, and juxtapose individual perspectives. As participants in the process of urban spaces’ transformation, they identify the potential of previously overlooked and/or abandoned ambiances on the one hand and their own potential impact as designers on the other. Students emphasize the increased awareness of their surroundings and the “I walk around this area every day, but I’ve never noticed this place before” moment. Hence, finding inspiration and responding to the needs of the self, of the body that inhabits prickly, jittery, stealthy, slippery, and crusty environments, lead towards a greater sensitivity and (more) responsive (urban) design/engineering practices.

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