

1. Projects



Theme 5: The experience of walking and cycling

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The experience of walking and cycling is a very important theme, as it refers to the way in which users experience these practices from a sensory and social point of view. It takes on an even greater value when we consider that the planning of spaces dedicated to these active modes is usually governed by norms, rather than considering the diversity of uses and user needs.

Research participants

- Renate Albrecher
- Sonia Curnier
- Vincent Kaufmann

Cycling and walking: literature review – The experience of walking and cycling

Several researchers have recently pointed out how literature on the promotion of cycling focuses mainly on issues of safety and network optimisation. However, the small scale of the infrastructure and the quality of the cycling experience remain poorly addressed (Silva et al 2010; Forsyth & Krizek, 2011). Some highlight the influence of public lighting, sound, vegetation and architectural quality in making the practice of cycling more pleasant, safe and comfortable, but do not go into further detail (Furth, 2021).

According to Anne Jariggeon (2021), “to envision walking as an experience means using a subjective, emotional and sensitive approach.” Walking is in fact closely intertwined with social life and the activation of all the senses — sometimes rewarding, sometimes exhausting. Pedestrians are permanently exposed and may be subject to a variety of potential inconveniences (e.g. the cold, wind,

noise, heat, looks from others, pollution, varying speeds, sudden movements, close proximity to others). Strength and speed are constantly at play among pedestrians, requiring each individual to persistently adapt their own movements. But because of its slow pace, walking also allows for social interactions, as well as a more intense relationship with the natural and built environment.

In an article about the promotion of walking and cycling as alternative travel forms, Robert Schneider identified “pleasure” as one of the five actionable areas to drive a major change in modes of travel (the others being supply and raising awareness, safety, convenience and cost, and finally habits) (Schneider, 2013). These themes deserve to be explored further in future research.

The sociologist Rachel Thomas (2020) has conducted many studies on the “sensory configuration” of walking. The pedestrian’s configurative activity consists of associating and ultimately appropriating the resources (visual, light, sound, tactile, thermal, etc.) offered by the sensory environment. This activity allows pedestrians to decode their immediate environment, to orient themselves and finally to adapt their behaviour to urban situations. Hillnhütter (2022) quantifies the visual stimuli that pedestrians unconsciously receive from their surroundings. By analysing pedestrians’ head movements, he measures the stimulation provided by urban squares and pedestrian streets. A pedestrian who is looking down is turning away from his surroundings and ignoring them. This is consistent with the empirical observations that have been carried out by Jan Gehl and his team for several years (see in particular Gehl 2010; Gehl 2011).

A subjective perception of comfort and insecurity

Walking as a mode of travel is particularly complex and demanding. The hazards and risks involved have many origins, such as the person’s own body, other people, vehicles and machines (buses, cars, construction sites), weather, etc., and they require constant attention. Walking therefore entails developing protection strategies, in addition to optimising travel time. Despite the pedestrian’s vulnerability, the infrastructures and facilities that support walking practices are often overlooked (e.g. neglect for the pedestrian’s point of view, lack of proper signage, few benches, few shelters, lack of reliable digital navigation assistance). Travel planning is based on knowing the amount of time required and the risks associated with using a given mode of travel. With a better knowledge of one’s environment (shortcuts, possibilities, risks, details, opportunities and constraints related to the chosen mode of travel and route), one can anticipate eventualities, which can then encourage walking.

The pedestrian experience also includes the notion of insecurity, which is expressed in two forms. On the one hand, there is “objective” insecurity, which is measurable and documented, such as road accidents or crime in public spaces, and which influences the pedestrian’s individual experience. This form of insecurity is widely addressed in research, no doubt because of the costs these risks generate for society and insurances in particular. On the other hand, there is subjective insecurity: a more complex subject that is difficult to measure or document. So far, it has mainly been subject to qualitative research, particularly in the field of gender studies, focusing on the layout of public spaces (lighting, visibility, street fronts), their use, and the transitions with private spaces (for example: Jacobs 1992; Königseder 1999; Ruhne 2011; Albrecher et al. 2022a). The perception of safety strongly influences how walking is experienced, which routes are taken, how trips are temporally organised and even how much time is spent in public space, but above all, it impacts the modal choice of walking.

Varied experiences depending on the context

How walking is experienced depends to a large extent on the pedestrian’s body, the circumstances and motives of the walk, the space-time framework, and especially on the physical environment, its layout and the other users of public space. The experience of walking necessarily varies according to the legal framework, but also according to local culture and mentalities.

Cross-cultural comparisons between Japan and Europe (e.g. Pelé et al. 2017, Hell et al. 2021) reveal differences with regard to uncertainty and risk prevention, which, according to the authors, is mainly due to different ways of relating to norms and rules. For example, in France, 41.9% of pedestrians cross at a red traffic light in a situation where other pedestrians are waiting, compared to only 2.1% of pedestrians in Japan. If the intersection is deserted, these numbers rise sharply — but relatively more so in Japan than in France, which itself reveals the influence of social pressure on pedestrian behaviour. Measures to improve pedestrian safety are often based on the three E's model: Engineering, Enforcement and Education. Pelé and his colleagues, on the other hand, conclude from their study that the majority of factors that influence pedestrian behaviour are not environmental, but are mainly related to human characteristics that may be of a personal, social, or cultural nature. In order to reduce the frequency of accidents, it therefore seems necessary to have a better understanding of human behaviour by considering the different mechanisms at play according to gender, age and culture.

Whether a person lives in an urban or a rural environment also has an impact on how they experience walking in their daily life and leisure activities. While this observation is obviously linked to human density and to locally available amenities, some studies have shown that the pattern between utilitarian walking and recreational walking is different in the urban world and in the rural world. A North American study comparing a large city (Seattle) with smaller communities (Stewart et al. 2016) showed that people in smaller communities walked less for utilitarian reasons, but more for recreational ones. The researchers also identified differences in which factors were perceived as positive or negative when walking.

Several meta-studies analysing how the built environment influences the physical activity of adults in rural environments have also shown that aesthetics, the presence of footpaths and parks, and the feeling of safety have a positive influence on recreational walking (Frost et al, 2010 ; Saerlens et Handy, 2008). Since these qualities are generally associated with recreational physical activity, we can conclude that walking in rural areas is primarily a leisure activity (Kegler et al. 2014).

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