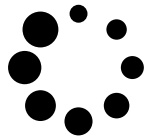# ...Or We Will Do Without the Theatre.
Challenging the Urban Space, Drafting a New City Map Through Performances

by Alice Volpi

Urban
Maps
Flânerie
Theatre
Performance

...Or We Will Do Without the Theatre. Challenging the Urban Space, Drafting a New City Map Through Performances.

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Abstract

The article discusses the evolution of urban mapping and innovative urban design. It explores the transition from functional urban planning to more creative approaches inspired by artists such as Guy Debord, Yoko Ono and others. It suggests that the city is a stage for events, similar to Antonin Artaud's vision. The central question is how the city can be transformed into a theatre through practical design rules. The paper presents two experiments. The first involves random map rearrangement, encouraging new exploration of familiar neighbourhoods. The second experiment introduces guidance and unpredictability, reflecting the uncertainties of architectural projects. These experiments aim to apply theatrical concepts to urban design. The article seeks to develop a manual for dramatic urban navigation, highlighting the inherent dramatic structure of the city and promoting innovative design regulations.

Keywords   Urban   Maps   Flânerie   Theatre   Performance

Since we started to be aware of the concept of *urbanity* – since humans began to organize their settlements and to design their cities – simultaneously we have left traces of this exercise. Over the years, the finest technique for representing the forms of communal living – the cities – has been sought. Surprisingly early on, this practise begun to be regulated and detailed cartographies have been consequently elaborated. Today, city maps take different forms and are composed of different layers each time, in accordance with the information needed by the specific target user.

Urban planning nowadays follows strict rules, meticulous, and unfortunately not always exhaustive territory plans – primarily devoted to the ideas of functionality and *services per-capita*. Those guidelines should help the architect in the elaboration of schemes, and in the *design of a reality*, capable of satisfying the needs of those who live in it: the citizens. As designers, we learn early on that choosing to draw certain elements instead of others and consequently reporting selected information on a blank sheet of paper, is itself already a creative process – a selection. The act of drawing represents nothing more than translating a preliminary impression from reality to a two-dimensional surface. In most cases, this choice will evolve into a deliberate synthesis of our intents, while at times it will end up being nothing more than an unpredictable personal discovery. The information presented changes across different maps and over time, making the analysis of these visual representation a fascinating archive. By examining these maps, we can gain insights into the goals that were established during each specific period and era.

The process of designing and mapping cities with a focus on functionality and services is just one approach to cartographic representation. On the other end of the spectrum, we encounter alternative maps that diverge from urban efficiency and instead employ a psycho-geographic analysis of the territory. Guy Debord, as well as other members of the Situationist International

in the late 1950s, accurately retraces the steps of the *flâneur*,[1] creating new maps – new traces – and thus providing us with an innovative, and more up-to-date, playful-constructive vision of the city of Paris. In the same years Constant Nieuwenhuys, drawing the *New Babylon*, suggests a different map – an anti-capitalist city – whose planimetric representation is reassembled by considering an analysis of social structure and not the functionality of urban grids. Hence, New Babylon becomes the city where *Homo-Ludens* wanders from one leisure environment to another, in search of new vibrations; it becomes the new urban reality where the canonical, bourgeois ideas of work, family life and civic responsibility can and must be abandoned. Constant would be overwhelmed, yet not surprised, by knowing how relevant it still is nowadays. Debord and Constant are two of the major exponents in the field, but it is perhaps even more interesting to mention the many artists in the second half of the 20th century, who "played" with challenging the intricate urban grids. Those performers have allowed themselves to be guided by unusual *stimuli* or seemingly inappropriate or negligible details, succeeding in drawing new maps or in overwriting the existing ones. We are not surprised to see how, with the group *Fluxus*, Yoko Ono incites us to *draw a map to get lost* (1964);[2] or how Richard Long traces his paths by inscribing them in predetermined geometric shapes on the land, *Cerne Abbas Walk* (1975).[3] Not long afterwards, these maps begin to be translated into directions, so to be given to those, other than the artists, who want to attempt to navigate cities differently. Therefore,

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1 The terms of flânerie date to the 16th or 17th century, denoting strolling, idling, often with the connotation of wasting time. With Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd," the flâneur entered the literary scene.

2 Y. Ono, *Grapefruit: A Book of Instructions and Drawings by Yoko Ono* (1964) (New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

3 Long uses walking as an artistic medium. This work is the result of a six-day walk around an ancient figure cut into a chalky hillside in Dorset. The map shows his route, retracing and recrossing many roads to stay within a predetermined circle. *Cerne Abbas Walk* is an artwork by Richard Long, in the collection of the Tate Modern in London.

Janet Cardiff's *Video Walks*[4] guides us around Edinburgh through a new *video-3dimesional experience* of the city, and also through the past and present of the places we cross by following her instructions. These exercises are innumerable and they vary in form and declination, to the point of becoming actual algorithms that mathematically directs our moves inside our cities, such as the *Psycho-geographic Walks* by Wilfred Hou Je Bek.[5]

These various experiments and performances, offer a new understanding of cities and of the city as a map, whether two-dimensional, three-dimensional, video, etc. However, in most cases, they remain episodic. While they are diligently catalogued and graphically displayed, the primary focus is on the performance itself and what the artist learns through its execution.

The city however, regardless the way it is navigated and crossed by its users every day, and especially regardless its own graphic implementation, constitutes itself a *significant stage of events*. When Antonin Artaud, in the late 1920s, begins his invective against the conventional idea of theatre, he immediately brings the city to the core of his dissertation and our attention. By announcing that we have come to an age where we can dispense with the theatre, envisioned as a physical place, a stage, the playwright can "afford" such a bold statement only because he trusts in the possibility that a performance – *a true and complete spectacle*[6] – is already taking place somewhere else, outside the theatres: in the city.

Starting from Artaud teasing manifesto, and reflecting on different themes: urban planning, performance

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4 Wilfried Hou Je Bek uses algorithms to design *psycho-geographic* walks through cities and other areas. The geographic and psychological output is visualized with the help of simple software. Wilfried is a "culture hacker" who develops generative psychogeography.
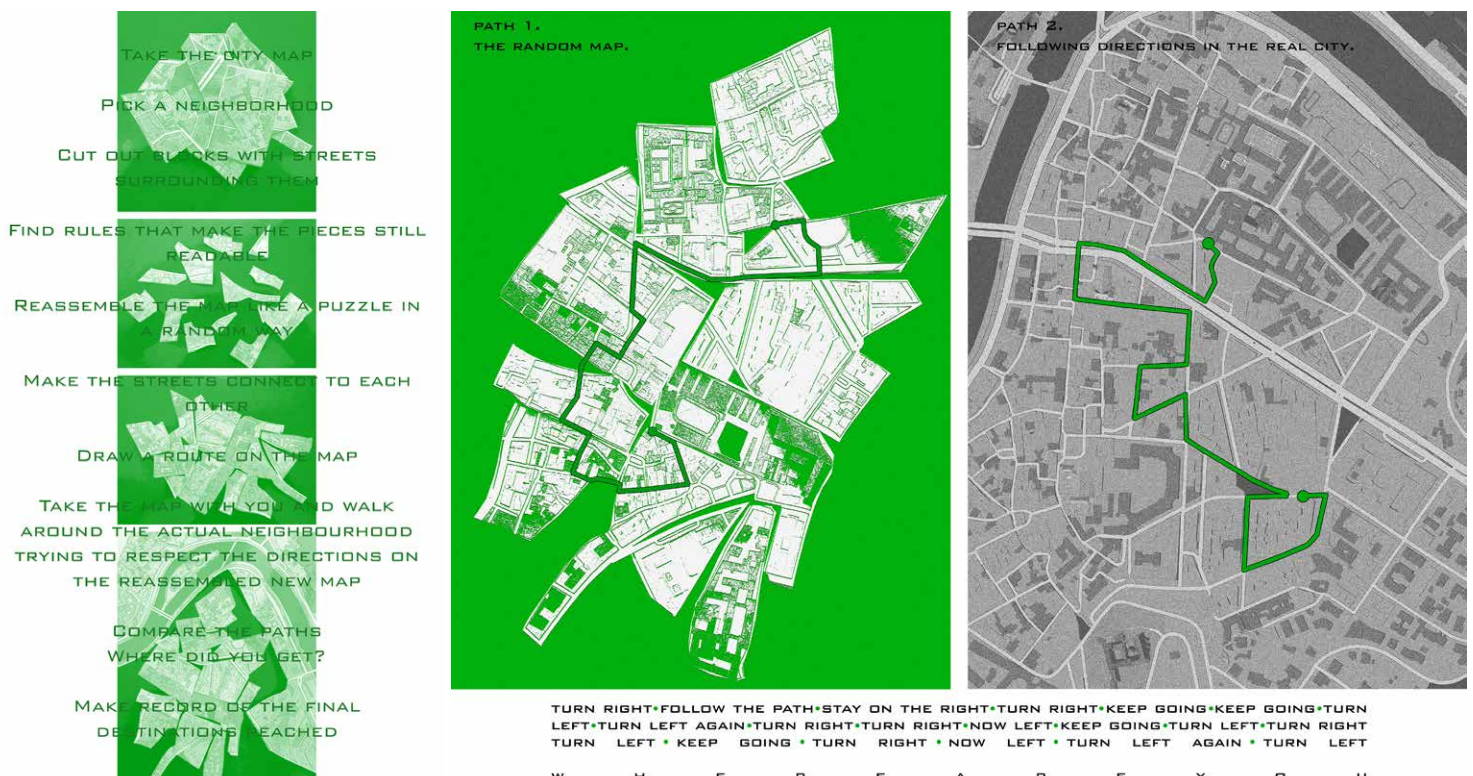5 Wilfried Hou Je Bek uses algorithms to design *psycho-geographic* walks through cities and other areas. The geographic and psychological output is visualized with the help of simple software. Wilfried is a "culture hacker" who develops generative psychogeography.
6 A. Artaud, S. Sontag, *Antonin Artaud: Selected writings* (Berkeley-Los Angeles CA: University of California Press, 1988).

in the city, and the *transurbanza,*[7] it could be interesting to codify a new substructure, a new set of rules and directions that can be provided to the architect in the first place, but then to the universal user to answer a single question: *how to transform the city into a theatre?*

As an architect, I ask myself how it is possible to analyse the space of the city through tools other than those provided by urban planning studies, being – *the city* – the reality in which 54% of the world's population (4 billion people) necessarily gets implicated – *immersed* – every day. Thus seeking to obtain, not a resolute nor repeatable episode, but setting up a handbook for navigating the city *dramatically*, where the theatrical performance becomes an instrument of urban design, and will dictate, obviously with a dash of impertinence, new rules for the drafting of new *master plans* for our cities.

If we are looking for a complete spectacle, the following question might be:

TAKE THE CITY MAP

PICK A NEIGHBORHOOD

CUT OUT BLOCKS WITH STREETS SURROUNDING THEM

FIND RULES THAT MAKE THE PIECES STILL READABLE

REASSEMBLE THE MAP LIKE A PUZZLE IN A RANDOM WAY

MAKE THE STREETS CONNECT TO EACH OTHER

DRAW A ROUTE ON THE MAP

TAKE THE MAP WITH YOU AND WALK AROUND THE ACTUAL NEIGHBOURHOOD TRYING TO RESPECT THE DIRECTIONS ON THE REASSEMBLED NEW MAP

COMPARE THE PATHS WHERE DID YOU GET?

MAKE RECORD OF THE FINAL DESTINATIONS REACHED

PATH 1.
THE RANDOM MAP.

PATH 2.
FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS IN THE REAL CITY.

TURN RIGHT•FOLLOW THE PATH•STAY ON THE RIGHT•TURN RIGHT•KEEP GOING•KEEP GOING•TURN LEFT•TURN LEFT AGAIN•TURN RIGHT•TURN RIGHT•NOW LEFT•KEEP GOING•TURN LEFT•TURN RIGHT TURN LEFT • KEEP GOING • TURN RIGHT • NOW LEFT • TURN LEFT AGAIN • TURN LEFT

W   H   E   R   E   A   R   E   Y   O   U

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7 *Transurbanza* is a term used by Francesco Careri in *Walkscapes: Camminare come pratica estetica* (Turin: Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 2006). With this concept the author invites us to go in search of empty spaces to be traversed as in a labyrinth, to identify urban natural-ground pathway, tracks where it is still possible to experience the difference between nomadism and sedentariness, basic categories for being able to understand the presence of our species on earth.

Can we walk (in) the city "dramatically" and thus subverting the concept of urban functionality by introducing new variables that belong to theatre's world?

Not only by cataloguing recurring daily actions – as Artaud suggested by wondering which choreographies belonged to the places we inhabit, considering the *inevitable show* – but by understanding how can we turn these performances into urbanistic tools, and thus from being the ultimate goal to have them becoming the *design means*.

To answer these questions, the initial step is to start navigating the city; immersing oneself in the urban fabric through some experimental tentative; trying to follow the advice of these artists; attempting to get lost in familiar places. To *walk dramatically* we definitely need a few tips, a method. How to follow the footsteps of strangers, how to make them taking us where I wanted to go but through paths we did not intentionally choose. How to follow random geometric shapes in the cluttered building grid; how to draw new ones, disregarding the obstacles. Can we do this, however, trying to avoid becoming performers ourselves, but persisting as designers? The idea is to "shift the logic" preserving the artist's creative ownership of the original experiment, while simultaneously adapting their perspectives into a fresh framework for a different design approach.

The following two experiments are an early attempt to set the methodology for this urban wandering; with the intent to continue in the extrapolation and setting up of instructions taken from the performative exercises. The goal is to achieve a graphically translatable practice that can be likened to real design rules, with an attempt to show that urbanism can meet functionality requirements even if it responds to a different structure, the *drama*.

Experiment 01.
The Dadaist map.
Moving into the city through randomness.

Inspired from Tristan Tzara proposed *recipe* for a poem.[8] Tzara suggested to cut out a piece of a newspaper the length of the poem we want to write. Then divide and cut singular word. Mix them in a bag. Then take it out one by one randomly and built the poem respecting the random order of the words. Can this be done with a map, with the city?

Recipe for a new map:
Take a map of the city; choose a neighbourhood; cut out the blocks with the streets around them. Find rules that make the pieces still readable; put the map back together like a puzzle, randomly; try to make the streets connect to each other; draw a route on the new map. Take the map with you and walk around that neighbourhood trying to respect the directions on the newly reassembled map.

The purpose of this experiment is to navigate and immerse oneself within a familiar neighbourhood, while trying not to be overcome, or be affected, by what one recognizes as familiar. After all, how many times have we gone to the same theatre, to see completely different plays; or indeed very often even the same drama, staged in the same theatre, but the different sets, choreography, directing allowed us to transcend the venue to enjoy the new play. How can we apply these rules to the city?
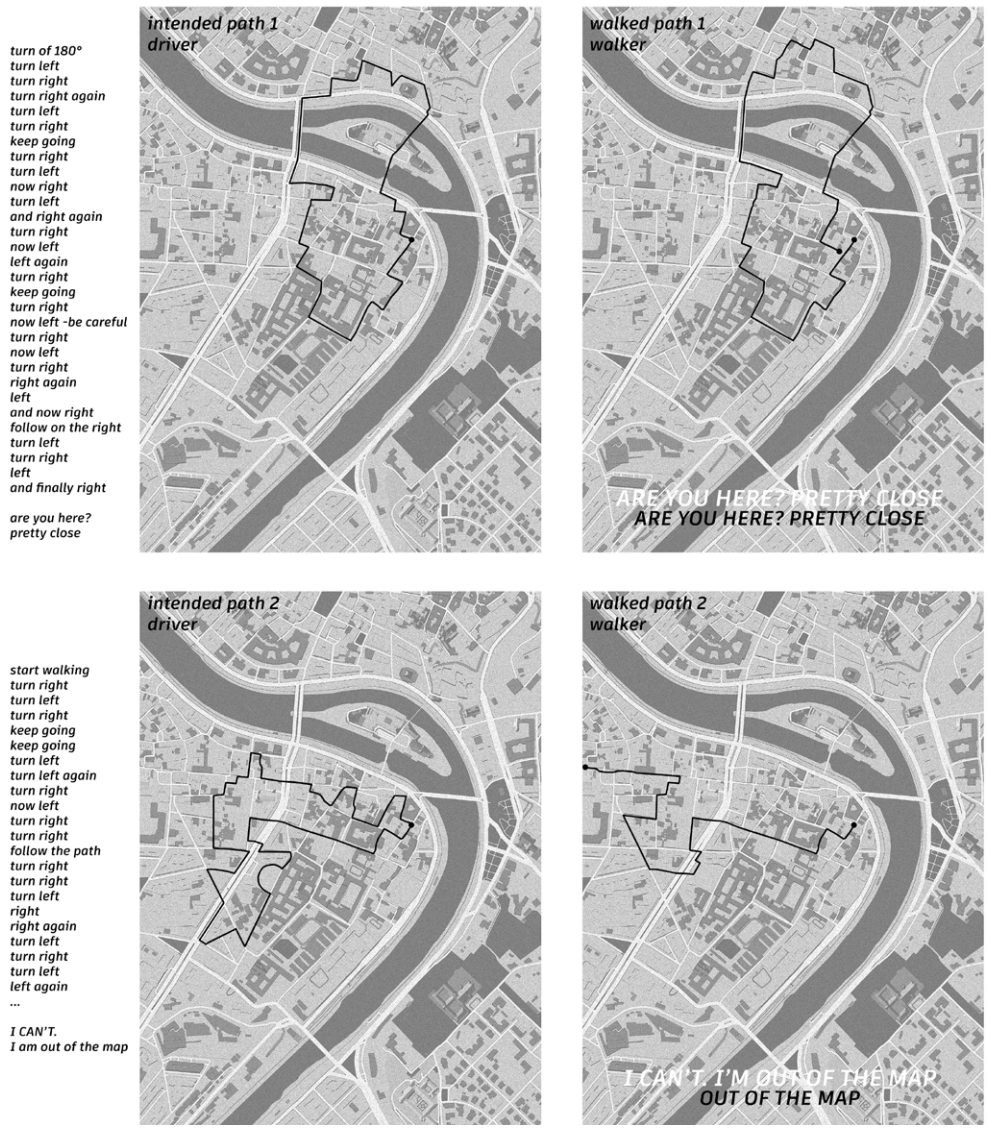
Experiment 02.
Moving within the city, driven by others.

Speaking of guidance, the purpose of this second experiment is to introduce the element of a *direction*. Very early on I felt the need to be guided by the stage directions of someone else, precisely the director

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8 T. Tzara, *"Pour faire un poème dadaiste" Littérature*, no. 15 (July-August, 1920): 18.

or choreographer of the *urban drama* I am looking for. By introducing a director, thus including *the other*, we also get the chance of inevitably familiarising, with the possibility of unpredictability and mistakes. The risk that the performance, the dramatic act, will not come to fruition as planned or at all – which is an issue that even the architect often wonders about, the failure of the project.

intended path 1
driver

turn of 180°
turn left
turn right
turn right again
turn left
turn right
keep going
turn right
turn left
now right
turn left
and right again
turn right
now left
left again
turn right
keep going
turn right
now left -be careful
turn right
now left
turn right
right again
left
and now right
follow on the right
turn left
turn right
left
and finally right

are you here?
pretty close

walked path 1
walker

ARE YOU HERE? PRETTY CLOSE

intended path 2
driver

start walking
turn right
turn left
turn right
keep going
keep going
turn left
turn left again
turn right
now left
turn right
turn right
follow the path
turn right
turn right
turn left
right
right again
turn left
turn right
turn left
left again
...

I CAN'T.
I am out of the map

walked path 2
walker

I CAN'T. I'M OUT OF THE MAP
OUT OF THE MAP

Take two identical maps of a portion of a city. Ask someone to draw a path on one of them without paying too much attention to it. Do not look at the route and leave the first map with your friend. Take a second, identical but clean, map with you. Ask your friend to tell you where to start based on the route he or she has drawn – identify a place. Then, by phone, be guided by his directions that respect the route he has drawn.

intended path 1
driver

walk left
keep going
turn left
turn left again
turn right
turn left
turn right
follow the street
turn right
again
go up on the left
keep going
turn right
turn left
turn left again
keep going
turn left
turn right
immediately left
turn left
turn right
turn right
turn left
turn right
turn left
keep going

are you here?
NOT FAR

walked path 1
walker

ARE YOU HERE? NOT FAR
ARE YOU HERE? NOT FAR

intended path 2
driver
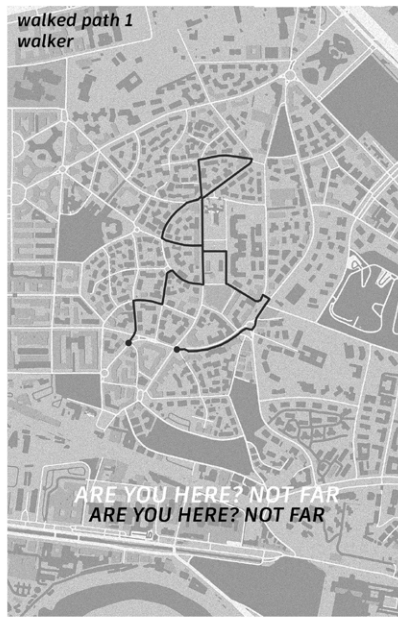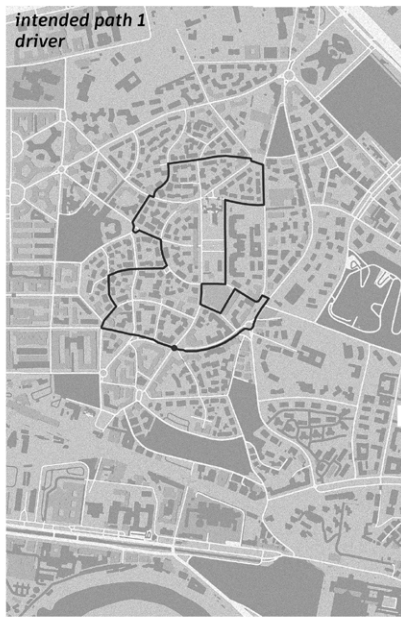
walk left
keep going
go up
turn right
turn left
keep going
turn right
turn left
left again
turn right
turn left
now right
right again
turn left
follow the street
turn right
turn left
keep going
turn right
turn left
left again
again
turn right
keep going
turn left
keep going
turn right
left
right
right
now left

are you here?
NOT AT ALL

walked path 2
walker

ARE YOU HERE? NOT AT ALL
ARE YOU HERE? NOT AT ALL

Before starting establish rules and lexicon to be used:w

■ The walkers must be silent.

■ The walkers can only pace their steps. If not wearing shoes that make noise, use another object against the microphone to pace the steps.

■ The director must not use street names.

■ The director must not use landmark references.

■ Do not use monuments as landmarks.

■ Use only simple direction verbs: turn, cross, continue, stop, turn back.

■ Use only simple direction indicators: left or right.

■ The driver should not suggest how long to walk in a specific direction.

■ The driver must not use numbers to indicate the distance be-tween points on the map.

■ Prohibited phrases: take the first (or second, etc.) on the left.

■ The same applies to the right.

■ The driver: must sense the length by hearing your footsteps and suggest when to turn and change direction by feeling that you have walked far enough.

While walking take track on the second map of where you are and of the path. When your friend has finished directing you, mark where you are. If you are not where you were supposed to be, go back to your friend at the starting point. Confront the two maps, and the two paths. Do it again, switch roles.

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