Making time to walk again

(Re)introducing walking as an inclusive research method in spatial planning

Hemel, Zef; den Hartog, Harry; Saygi, Gamze

DOI
10.1080/23748834.2025.2523711

Publication date
2025

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Cities and Health

Cities & Health

ISSN: 2374-8834 (Print) 2374-8842 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcah20

Making time to walk again: (re)introducing walking as an inclusive research method in spatial planning

Zef Hemel, Harry den Hartog & Gamze Saygi

To cite this article: Zef Hemel, Harry den Hartog & Gamze Saygi (31 Jul 2025): Making time to walk again: (re)introducing walking as an inclusive research method in spatial planning, Cities & Health, DOI: 10.1080/23748834.2025.2523711

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2025.2523711

Published online: 31 Jul 2025.

CITIES & HEALTH
https://doi.org/10.1080/23748834.2025.2523711

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ORIGINAL SCHOLARSHIP

Making time to walk again: (re)introducing walking as an inclusive research method in spatial planning

Zef Hemel [a,b], Harry den Hartog [a,c] and Gamze Saygi [b]

[a]Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft, Delft, the Netherlands; [b]Institute for History of Art, Architecture and Landscapes, University of Groningen, Groningen, the Netherlands; [c]College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, Shanghai, China

ABSTRACT

This article explores how walking can be reintroduced as an interactive and inclusive planner's activity and how it could be reestablished as an effective method for spatial research and planning intervention. This study is, first and foremost, meant as a provocation for planners to 'start walking again' and understand sites, places and context by observing and listening. Walking creates time for immersive exploration within the place of practice. It is a way to collect diverse stakeholders' insights and expands a vision. At the same time, walking is a cry for sustainability; in fact, walking paves the way to sustainability. It offers reflection in the context of postgrowth and degrowth thinking. Our assumption is that by deliberately slowing down, we can find sustainable alternatives instead of technocratic solutions because it opposes overconsumption, big projects and depletion of our planet. Moreover, by walking, we can discover existing, hidden values and find alternative visions for a sustainable future. In our research, we test this especially for peripheral rural areas on medium distance of metropolitan conurbations, which continuously slip under the planners' radar. Based on experiments with walking as a radical and social activity, in this article we explain how walking can be an innovative practice, something poetic becoming political.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 30 October 2024
Accepted 16 June 2025

KEYWORDS
Historic long-distance walking routes; research methodology; spatial planning; urban-rural divide; walking

Research by walking

This study is, first and foremost, meant as a provocation for planners. They should 'start walking again' and understand sites, places and context by closely observing and carefully listening. Spatial planners, we pose, have simply forgotten to walk. Like most scientists, they sit and work in office environments, perhaps sometimes remotely from home. While sitting, planners read academic books and papers, write on laptops, draw maps in artificial environments specially designed for study and deliberation, or they make and discuss plans in board rooms, planning departments or design studios. Sometimes, brief encounters take place in conference rooms; now and then airplanes and taxis bring planners from all over the world to luxury hotels and air-conditioned venues. There, short field trips with colleagues are undertaken. Quick excursions, the scanning of neighborhoods or landscapes are brief moments of contact with reality: with physical space and people. Planners think speed and efficiency are positive, and even necessary. Interviews with people in the streets or participatory meetings with those who should be informed or listened to, is what makes planner's work feel practical, realistic, and relevant. Sometimes a site visit is undertaken by car and perhaps partly on foot, but it takes a lot of time to seriously perform such outdoor activities. The evaluation and processing of data bring planners back to their cubicles. In the end, planning is office work.

In this article, we explore how walking can be reintroduced as a planner's core activity and how it could be reestablished as a true academic approach and effective method for spatial research and planning intervention. Over the last 3 years, we experimented with walking as a radical and social activity, in two rural regions, respectively, in the Netherlands and in China. Following historic long-distance paths and adjoining rural revitalization projects, we experienced how walking can be an experimental and innovative practice, something poetic becoming political. We believe planning interventions will be less bold, more

CONTACT Harry den Hartog A.W.denHartog@tudelft.nl Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, TU Delft, Julianalaan 134, Delft 2628 BL, the Netherlands

sustainable and inclusive if walking is being reintroduced as core (research) practice.

In the past, walking was somehow part of the regular spatial planner's approach in the Netherlands. For instance, the Dutch planner Pieter Verhagen (1882–-1950) was renowned for his knowledge of Dutch landscapes – knowledge he based on his many long walks all over the countryside. When Verhagen became State Commissioner for the rebuilding of the Netherlands after 1945, we know he made extensive use of all his walking experience (Steenhuis 2007). Another prominent example is related to the making of the famous General Extension Plan of Amsterdam 1935, Modernist planners like Cornelis van Eesteren and Theo van Lohuizen not only made use of extensive surveys but also analyzed the surrounding polder landscape by walking together. In weekly walks in the Amsterdam region, these two chief-planners steadily developed and shared their thoughts on the wider environment, finding inspiration and delight in trees, plants, and landscape elements and in the presence of each other (Van Rossem 1993). It helped them to draw the future urban edges of an extended Amsterdam, and to persuade engineers and politicians to appreciate important details of the existing polder landscape (Hellinga 1985). For them, planning was not only cerebral, based on statistical research, but especially also a social, a bodily and experiential activity.

In China, this tradition seems lacking. In the Chinese context, walking research has only very recently been introduced – particularly since the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 – in an experimental way in urban development, in collaboration with local universities, in the context of the 'people-oriented approach' credo within the beforementioned ecological civilization policy, where participation seems to be becoming increasingly important – particularly in a limited number of more luxurious urban neighborhoods in Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen, and certainly not yet rural. The principle, known as the 15-minute city principle, plays a key role in this.

How we forgot to walk

After the 1960s, planners seemed to walk less and less. Driving cars became customary and was seen as far more efficient and comfortable. The range of activities became larger and implementing projects further from home became more common. Cars and new technologies helped speeding up the planner's work, while the work itself was getting more complex and abstract: the mapping, statistical analysis, with ever more stakeholders producing documents and asking for gatherings and negotiations. At the same time, in their plans modernist planners promoted car use, almost taking for granted that pedestrian movement would be reduced or even disappear. The need for efficiency resulted in landscapes where people spend most of their time indoors, driving between work and home.

The introduction of computers changed work habits in even more revolutionary ways. Planning became deskwork. Nowadays some planners even claim walking is not scientific (Kowalewski and Bartlomiejski 2020). They almost secretly skipped most of their fieldwork without being aware of it, substituting rich sensory observations on site for quantitative data. Technical qualities of the place are being emphasized – lot size, zoning designation, market value –, places described as sites for intervention (Beauregard 2016). Abstract planning concepts became the result of a complex process of decision-making and/or based on statistical analysis, economics and politics, worked around with models, drawings, aerial pictures, and digital mapping (Faasse 2017). Concepts, although vague but easy to reproduce on printers and screens, were seen as adequate means for being discussed in decision rooms. Such schemes might be fit for administrative, office-bound environments, but are poor in detail and sensory observations. Despite their influence on planning decisions, these 'places of practice' – were physical and social professional activities occur, especially decision-making – are less often a subject of argument in planning theory (Beauregard 2016).

While planners more and more adopted a sitting habit, artists discovered walking in the open air to express their feelings and notions that were getting lost in a fast-modernizing post-war society (Careri 2017). With changes in production systems and automation, working time would be reduced in favor of free time. In the 1950s the French Situationists, for instance, introduced their playful, spontaneous city (Careri 2017). By making use of time and space, they believed it would be possible to escape the rules of the system and to achieve and self-construct new spaces of liberty. What society needed was the construction of adventures. In Constant's New Babylon – initially known as *Dériville*, an art project that ran from 1956 to 1974, inspired by the book *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga 1938) –, this acquired a historical basis and a three-dimensional architectural form. After Constant visited a camp of nomads in Alba, he started refuting the sedentary bases of functionalist architecture and planning (Careri 2017). The series of models he built until the mid-1970s represent a vision of a world which,

after the revolution, would be inhabited by creative nomads ('Homo Ludens') who, freed of the slavery of hard labor, could explore and transform the landscape. Inhabitants would rediscover the primordial aptitude for self-determination of one's environment, the instinct for the construction of one's own home and life. Planners, like the artists, would have to change jobs: no longer as builders of complete environments but as servers of wandering individuals. Spatial planning would become a unified activity that sees the urban environment as a relational ground for a game of participation.

At the same time in the United States, Jane Jacobs wrote her critic on modernist urban planning practice: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). She devoted the first chapters to walking: safety of sidewalks, contact and assimilating children on the sidewalk. Jacobs, then a young mother of three children living in the Village, Manhattan, biked (Sparberg Alexiou 2006) daily to and from her office at Architectural Forum in Rockefeller Center. Her bodily approach to walking the city streets was unusual at that time:

> Its essence is intricacy of sidewalk use, bringing with it a constant succession of eyes. This order is all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to dance – not to a simple-minded precision dance with everyone kicking up at the same time, twirling in unison and bowing off an masse, but to an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole. (Jacobs 1961)

It was more than a mother's concern; urban renewal projects wiped out the streets and introduced bleak high-rise projects. Lewis Mumford, however, wrote about 'Mother Jacob's Home Remedies'. In his eyes, her book was replete with 'schoolgirl howlers' (Sparberg Alexiou 2006). Although he agreed on her articulate criticism on urban renewal practices, he found her research 'sloppy'. But a few years later, Mumford visited *De Lijnbaan* – in 1953 designed as Europe's first pedestrians-only shopping street – in Rotterdam and wrote critically about the way engineers solved traffic stagnation and asked: 'What's transportation for?' (Mumford 1964). All he saw was a vast increase in the number of cars, enabling motorists to go longer distances to more places at higher speeds. He thought there was no ideal model: 'human purpose should govern the choice of the means of transportation' (Mumford 1964). Walking, he thought, should be exciting and visually stimulating: 'The legs will come into their own again, as the ideal means of neighborhood transportation, once some provision is made for their exercise' (Mumford 1964). Also, the monotonous uniformities of the planner's zoning practice should be scrapped. Reinstating the pedestrians would give life back to cities and villages. However, after the publication of *The Highway and the City* (Mumford 1964), car use exploded. Almost every form of transportation was sacrificed to the private motorcar, with the airplane and railroad as only long-distance alternatives.

Rediscovering walking as research method

Planners recently started to learn from this again. Not speed and efficiency but slowing down and more time to reflect should guide them (Helmreich 2013). In essence, the act of walking can be seen as the most 'basic cognitive method' through which the environment around us is 'readable and experiential' (Wang 2023). These readable and experiential aspects have been recognized by landscape architects, especially since the 1980s. For instance, the works of sociologist Lucius Burckhardt (1925–2003) and his student Henrik Schultz (2014) have been crucial in this. They use walking as a metaphor for slowing down, a social critique against the consumer society. Burckhardt introduced the term 'spaziergangswissenschaft' – also named promenadologie or strollology. Burckhardt's research on walking mainly had 'profound impact on landscape architecture in German-speaking regions' (Wang 2023). His thinking has also reached academic circles in neighboring countries but is not yet common.

Walking makes part of the so-called 'mobility turn' (Sheller and Urry 2006) within social sciences. This thinking arises from increased mobility and new forms of mobility. Traditionally, social sciences were static, and movement was not seen as relevant (Sheller and Urry 2006). Nevertheless, walking has been increasingly used by anthropologists, ethnographers, social geographers, and other disciplines, as a scientific research method (Ingold 2010, Pierce and Lawhon 2015, King and Woodroffe 2017, Duedahl and Stilling Blichfeldt 2020, Dasgupta 2022) but also disputed (Kowalewski and Bartlomiejski 2020). According to O'Neill *et al.* (2018), 'there is a tradition of walking in ethnographic and anthropological research and in sociological research with communities'. The 6.000 miles sociologist William Helmreich walked in New York brought him 'into sharp focus of reality that I always knew was there

but had never felt a need to express it'. This exploration of reality on foot informed him about 'its full potential' (Helmreich 2013). However, according to Vergunst and Ingold (2008), research by walking as a 'technique of the body' is still largely ignored, even in ethnography.

Walking with others also means caring (Dibazar 2023). For example, the 'go-along' qualitative interview technique is found as a novel method for studying the implications of neighborhoods and local-area contexts for health issues other than census-based or other 'off-the-shelf' measures (Kusenbach 2003). Some use it as an inclusive method focusing on vulnerable groups, based on walking past places that can be confrontational for participants (for example, participants with Down syndrome). These techniques proved to help researchers understand that their perceptions are not universal (Bartlett *et al.* 2023). Duedahl and Stilling Blichfeldt (2020) recently used this go-along approach in a nature-inclusive manner focused on 'unknown terrains of being-along' in the Dutch Wadden Sea region.

Recently, there is a growing body of 'walking interview' methodologies (Lee and Ingold 2006, Pink 2008, Edensor 2010, Clark and Emmel 2010, Evans and Jones 2011, O'Neill and Roberts 2020). Dasgupta (2022) argues that 'walking as a research method allows the researcher and the research participant to be present and form intimate connections in a foreign landscape'. Of course, this experience is influenced by the people you walk with. In slow conversation while walking you will learn to look at the environment, the history, current state and possible future of the region in different ways. As indicated in existing literature, walking enriches the spatial and mental experience in multiple ways (Gandy 2024). Springgay and Truman (2017) distinguish four themes in walking research: place, sensory inquiry, embodiment, and rhythm. In addition, land and geology are important factors that influence a walking experience (Dasgupta 2022), as well as cultural practices and symbolic histories (Macpherson 2016). These multi-layered experiences enrich our walking research with perspectives that would otherwise remain hidden.

A first planner who rediscovered walking as an experimental innovative way of doing research was Michael Sorkin. In *Twenty Minutes in Manhattan*, Sorkin (2009) writes about his daily walks from his apartment in Greenwich Village to his studio, a stroll of 20 minutes. At micro-level, beginning with analyzing the steps and then elaborating on the stoop, the street, the corner, the buildings, and so forth, he starts associating. 'This long march has allowed the insinuation of great events into what was to have been a low-keyed memoir of the everyday' (Sorkin 2009). By taking different roads, he discusses the peculiarities of sp zatial planning and design. His way of walking makes him aware of the many choices people can make: speed and efficiency, variety, points of interest, sunny side versus shady side. 'Inescapably, the walk takes on a narrative quality' (Sorkin 2009). But why walking? According to Sorkin, 'Walking is a natural armature for thinking sequentially. It also has a historical relationship to mental organization that ranges from the Peripatetics to the philosophers of Kyoto, to the clockwork circuit of Immanuel Kant, to the sublimities of the English Romantics and their passages through nature' (Sorkin 2009).

By writing about his daily walks, Sorkin paid tribute to Jane Jacobs, who lived in the same neighborhood. Like in her book, he bases his thoughts on close observations of the life in his own neighborhood. 'Walking is not simply an occasion for observation but an analytical instrument', he writes (Sorkin 2009). He introduces Walter Benjamin and Charles Baudelaire, and the French Situationists whose particular urban-analytical walking style, the *derive* – was a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances, trying to draw on the resources of the unconscious by freeing it from its repression (Sorkin 2009). This brings him to Michel de Certeau, who included a chapter on walking in the city in his 1984 book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which reminded him of Benjamin's flaneur as 'a botanist of the pavement' (Sorkin 2009). Already after the first mile, his readers learn about artists and philosophers who walked and reflected on walking as a scientific or artistic method. Sorkin criticizes the awful lot of public space reserved for parking in the Village. He calls it 'a fundamental affront to the real needs and habits of New York's citizens, the majority of whom do not own automobiles'.

While Sorkin walked the streets in the Village, reflecting on philosophers and artists who also practiced walking, the British scientist Robert Macfarlane left the city and started walking in the British countryside. In *The Old Ways* (Macfarlane 2013), he delves into the relationship between paths, walking and imagination. 'Humans are animals and like all animals we leave tracks as we walk'. He applies walking as a method on a larger spatial scale. Macfarlane (2013) pointed at the fact that our landscapes are still webbed with paths and footways, connecting place to place. 'Walking is only a step away from a story, and every path tells stories. Walking even connects the walker with the past, walking as séance, of voices heard along

the way' (Macfarlane 2013). Paths, Macfarlane explains, run through people as surely as they run through places. Steiner (2021) pointed out that this is what defines Europe: 'Europe is and is being walked'. Its cartography has evolved from the many possibilities, the many horizons built on a history of human steps.

Due to the increased importance of travel, speed and range, the attachment to place is changing due to new technologies such as the Internet, with influences on work and leisure (Castells 1996). In spatial planning and design, there is an increasing interest in walking as a research method, but most existing studies still have a strong focus on urban terrains (Baudelaire 1964, Benjamin 1999, Careri 2017), with trending topics in the impact of the built environment and mobility behavior (Beenackers *et al.* 2013), walkability (Wang and Yang 2019), and relationship between walking and the city (Middleton 2018), and concepts, such as the 15-minute city (Moreno 2024) are on the rise. Pierce and Lawhon (2015) reported qualitative urban geographical research should explicitly acknowledge insights gained from walking. Moreover, the body of studies yet focus primarily on placemaking on a neighborhood scale, they are all short distance in range, limited to walking groups or for (mental) health purposes (Shields *et al.* 2021). There are only a few exceptions, such as some of the later works by Burckhardt, that make a connection in between rural and urban landscapes, and a study by Grimshaw (2012) on the 'Rural Flaneur' that differently focus on the landscape and rural regions in New Zealand. Both mainly deal with the bodily experience and what the landscape does with you, about the interaction between people and the environment. Although those studies are promising, they are notable exceptions, besides, it has not yet explored how the planning discipline may use walking as a research method and act as drivers for sustainable development and the quality of life in peripheral and rural areas spanning longer distances. Building on this thinking, we emphasize that a reappraisal of walking is not only an interactive experiential method to 'focus the interconnection of people and place, of activities and territories' as Healey (2005) reminds, but also a powerful call for slowing down and reflection in the context of seemingly unlimited urbanization, increasing speeds combined with climate challenges, an energy transition, and an increasing lack of resources.

Learning from experiences in the Netherlands and in China

We, like many people, rediscovered walking during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is now being encouraged by numerous apps. Neurologists and physicians stress the benefits of walking by pointing at the physical and mental effects of walking. Walking brings joy and increases creativity. Because of these benefits but also because of its inclusivity and sustainability, we then reintroduced walking as a research method for spatial planning, thus combining various practices and making use of elements from landscape architecture, anthropology, as well as ethnographic research.

Drawing on the interdisciplinary explorations, we decided to use walking in two distinct regions with multiple spatial planning challenges: (i) the North of the Netherlands, in particular the provinces of Groningen and Friesland, and (ii) Zhejiang province in China. These geographically distant two regions have a very different political and geographical context, but they are both characterized as peripheral and rural and face multiple problems such as lack of attractivity and ecological loss, fostering a feeling of being neglected and being victim in a growing urban-rural divide. Moreover, in both cases there are historical long-distance walking trails that are used for rural and regional revitalization purposes. Both regions face particular challenges. For example, in Groningen gas-exploitation caused socio-economic tensions, and severe damage to rural buildings because of multiple small earthquakes due to subsidence. Friesland is increasingly an exurban region where farmers struggle and exurbanites from the Randstad settle down for retirement or weekend retreats. Both provinces are at about two to 3 hours' travel from the Randstad conurbation, the economic powerhouse of the Netherlands. The scale and context of the Chinese province of Zhejiang is different, but experimental policies have made this province into a national frontrunner with international recognition for its innovative 'green rural revival' practice (United Nations Environment Programme 2018). We assume that inspiring examples can be found here, as targeted rural revitalization policies have been implemented here for a long time: Two Mountains Theory (Huang *et al.* 2024), Beautiful Countryside (Su and Cheng 2023), Common Prosperity (Xu and Qin 2024), Ecological Civilization (Pan 2016), and others. We explore these examples while walking, especially in the coastal strip. The routes are based as much as possible along supposedly inspiring examples, and the reach of the high-speed train network this provides

an extended area, around the conurbation of the Yangtze River Delta around Shanghai. The average travel time is also 3 hours from the main metropolitan area.

So far, we have done more than a hundred unique walks in each region, which means we each walked approximately 500 km and had more than a hundred in-depth walk-along conversations, plus multiple dozens of unplanned additional short interactions with people we met on our way. These numbers will be multiplied in the coming years. In the Dutch case we make use of some eight existing long-distance trails, the so-called Lange-Afstands-Wandelpaden (LAW), at each trail covering 150 kilometers, configuring almost a system of a checkerboard on the map. In the Chinese case, we found centuries-old postal roads, mostly dating from the Tang Dynasty that were formerly also intensively used by painters, poets, pilgrims, and philosophers for inspiration and contemplation. Participants can also come up with their own route if it fits in the framework. Each time, we walk a significant part of the day, at least 4 to 4 hours, with one or (maximum) two unique conversation partners related to the research region – for example, their hometown, place of work or living. This usually means some 15 kilometers (depending on personal condition, time, weather influences, terrain conditions, or unexpected events), our guests are a broad range of people such as residents, entrepreneurs, farmers, engineers, officials, environmentalists. In fact, anyone can participate. We use open, unstructured, in-depth conversations. Doing this, we not only collect valuable information and a broad range of views on local and regional issues but get invited by communities and organizations to present our views on the future of the region to a wider audience. Our research regions are mostly flat, though with some hills in the Chinese case. We walk mainly in daily life clothing, not in special hikers' outfits, and walk through accessible terrain without the need for special gear.

Our 'walking as planning method' contains three fundamental layers: (i) bodily experience in the space, (ii) talking and listening, and (iii) storytelling approach via publicity and lectures. First, by walking in the landscape, our bodies move, orientation gets activated, all the senses get stimulated, and human scale becomes the measure of all things. We focus not only on aesthetic and natural aspects but also on accessibility, social facilities, and any spatial element determining the quality of life and vitality, such as small-scale local retail in villages. Second, while walking, we listen carefully, ask questions, suspend judgment, start 'seeing together' (Scharmer 2009). In other words, we mobilize people's best energy and commitment, trying to probe deeply into people's actual experience and voices. We make our notes afterwards. Last, we collect as many unique stories and visions as possible through all the walks with so many individual guests. Guests also invite us to come and give lectures. The latter does not only create a platform for discussion but also organically build the recruitment participants through dissemination. Walking one-on-one creates relationships of trust – together through the mud, experiencing a lack of comfort, unlike in the city – in which people can speak freely about their experiences and ideas on landscape, environmental qualities, or future spatial perspectives. An open conversation, not structured as an interview, evolves during our walking. We let the conversation be guided by the guest's inspirations and the surroundings and events on our way. Only where necessary, we ask specific questions. Thanks to the slow movement, it is easy to stand still now and then, to discuss, reflect and take photographs, the walking being unobstructed by barriers. This is an added value over faster forms of transport, even cycling. Above all, walking feels as a liberating experience, recovering our bonds with the natural world. Contemplation and reflection are essential elements of our approach. Walking makes us humble. Our proposed planning interventions are, as a result, minimal, harmless, modest.

The intention is emphatically and intentionally not to structure too much, so not to record anything nor decide and stipulate routes in advance. We take uncertainty into account as our guiding principle. As we noticed, unplanned encounters with situations and passers-by often lead to the most valuable reactions and spontaneous insights. Unplanned encounters and events inform us in a way that cannot be experienced from behind a desk in an office capsule. We think planners, dealing with uncertainty, must learn to face unplanned events and think and act outside existing systems and structures. A walking route is like a learning journey through which first-hand knowledge and experience is gathered, step by step, in a complex and uncertain world. It is an odyssey.

As we experienced in multiple walks with guests, it turns out that walking is an 'innocent' method built on trust, it inspires and gives confidence on the one hand, while it makes planners humble on the other hand. Moreover, it is experienced as attractive by many, not only because of the healthy outdoor air and the scenic beauties one enjoys but also because of the long time spent together and the supposed working on personal physical (and mental) health. All these inputs make the planner understand the spatial, socio-cultural, and economic complexities in a comprehensive manner.

We discovered journalists showed great interest in our scientific walking method. In their eyes, walking is concrete, easy to understand, and highly valued by their readers. Their articles and reports on our walks were of great importance for the recruitment of new walking guests to register spontaneously. To our surprise, thanks to these articles and TV-items, which were strongly disseminated via (social) media, we found the right respondents with a wide range of personal backgrounds. In the Chinese case, foremost among young people, and in the Dutch case, among older people, in age ranging from 40 to 70. Also, remarkable are the spontaneous bottom-up networks that are thus emerging. Generation of media attention from the start has therefore become a methodical means of finding walking guests for our research, which cover in both cases vast regions.

Our method obviously has limitations because not everyone is physically able to walk – although we have included people in wheelchairs and other disabilities. As Springgay and Truman (2017) noted, not everyone walks the same way or pace due to local physical factors, race, gender, disability, etcetera. Other limitations include time and age – we limit ourselves to adults, although some of them were accompanied by kids. Weather conditions and other unplanned events or a roadblock influence our journeys but can also provide additional insights. Another limitation is that we mainly discuss situations where walking has been forgotten or ignored due to influences of modernism, urbanization and (extreme) prosperity as in the Global North[1] and in China as a new economy.

Learning to walk again

For centuries, there was no alternative to walking. As explained in previous footnote there is still no alternative in certain regions for certain groups. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, walking speed increased, probably related to economic reasons like the cost of living. Economizing on time became even more urgent. Extreme growth of wealth in the Global North, and especially in new urban parts of China (Den Hartog 2010, Hsing 2010), has led people to increasingly withdraw themselves into the capsules of their vehicles, office cocoons, and built enclaves (De Cauter 2009).

Dynamization and acceleration mean a fundamental transformation of our relationship to space and time. We all are moving at increasingly higher speed and are less location-bound due to the Internet, but increasingly dependent on new modes of informational flow (Castells 1996). Spatial planners are not merely participants in the process; they are pivotal figures guiding the places of interventions. Planners have retreated behind computer screens, driving society forward at an accelerating pace relying on modern and distant technologies, such as smart cameras, satellite maps, and drones.

This resulted in planning expertise that lacks concrete, personal, experiential knowledge, while complexity and uncertainty in planning processes are increasing, resulting in, for example, destruction of natural resources, lack of coherence in spatial planning, and reduction of democratic decision-making.

Preparatory field research and discussions with future users and neighboring residents are generally missing, usually replaced by top-down satellite views or downloaded project reports by others. So, we use personal narratives collected during time-consuming walks. We advocate making much more time available for this in practice. Without these manyfold personal conversations, planners can't learn about real local issues, from different points of view. We state that they forgot about anomalous lifestyles, local appreciation, and views that are (often) diametrically different from planning visions devised from above.

With this article, we argue that slowing down by walking is essential for spatial planning both in theory and in practice. Lessons learned by listening and observing while walking will benefit not only the mindset of researchers and planners but also the quality of our physical environment and inherently contribute to a sustainable future. For planners and officials as decision makers of spatial interventions, 'making time to walk' is an essential requirement: listening to end-users, while observing the environment and contemplating (Abram 1997), are keys to a sustainable future.

Summarizing, based on our first findings, we are convinced 'walking' is the essential starting point for developing a sustainable vision for the future of both urban and rural areas. To be able to truly understand our physical environment, we need to intentionally slow down. Walking, although a temporary and light intervention in the landscape, is a radical activity that breaks with thinking in terms of the capitalist idiom of unlimited growth and exploitation. While artists and landscape architects focus on inspiring and visual qualities, and anthropologists and ethnographers focus on inner experiences, the task for planners is to combine these qualities and benefit from walking while observing and listening. By combining the beforementioned approaches, we not only address

a research gap in the discourse of spatial planning and design but also reestablish walking as a legitimate academic approach and an effective method for spatial research and planning interventions. Moreover, we advocate to make time for walking as both a means of communication and an enriching experience for planners – by setting aside at least several days before, during and after spatial planning and design decisions and interventions to explore the locations and their wider surroundings on foot, together various stakeholders, and to observe and evaluate while walking. Walking engagement needs to be embedded into practice as a core activity. This might sound surprising, but unfortunately it is no longer a standard practice in today's hectic digital age.

To set *Homo Ludens* free – in line with Beauregard and De Cauter – planners need to expand their horizons by leaving their 'places' and 'capsules'. Walking is not only a metaphor for slowing down, but also a critique against our consumer society: an equivalence to sustainability. As a basis for sustainable spatial planning, walking should and can explicitly become (again) part of planning, practice and research. For all the aforementioned reasons we are convinced that planners have to learn to use walking in their practice again: a bodily approach as a light spatial intervention through which we can truly pursue inclusive, sustainable futures.[2]

Notes

1. On the African continent for example, walking is still the most important way to travel, especially in informal settlements within urban areas but also in rural areas Benton *et al.* 2023. The amount of research into this is still limited. But there too, walking is undervalued by policymakers and planners, the walking infrastructure is inadequate, even unsafe. Walking is not a choice here but an expression of inequality and marginalization of population groups.
2. To further improve the inclusivity of the method, additional practical experiments are needed.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was made possible with financial support from the Abe Bonnema Foundation.

Notes on contributors

Zef Hemel is Professor Spatial redevelopment and revitalization of rural and urban regions, especially in the provinces of Groningen and Friesland, at TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, and at University of Groningen, Institute for History of Art, Architecture and Landscapes. (also see https://zefhemel.nl/).

Harry den Hartog is Postdoctoral researcher at TU Delft, Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment; he also is Lecturer at the College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University (also see https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1033-5739. and https://ruralfootprints.blog/).

Gamze Saygi is Postdoctoral researcher at University of Groningen, Institute for History of Art, Architecture and Landscapes (also see https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6893-5214).

ORCID

Zef Hemel http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2496-4096
Harry den Hartog http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1033-5739
Gamze Saygi http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6893-5214

References

Abram, D., 1997. *The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world*. New York: Vintage books.

Bartlett, R., *et al.*, 2023. Using walking/go along interviews with people in vulnerable situations: a synthesized review of the research literature. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 22, 160940692311646. doi:10.1177/16094069231164606.

Baudelaire, C., 1964. *The painter of modern life, and other essays*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon.

Beauregard, R., 2016. The neglected places of practice. *In*: S. Fainstein and J. DeFilippis, eds. *Readings in planning theory*. 4th ed. UK: John Wiley & Sons Inc, 277.

Beenackers, M.A., *et al.*, 2013. Why some walk and others don't: exploring interactions of perceived safety and social neighborhood factors with psychosocial cognitions. *Health Education research*, 28 (2), 220–233. doi:10.1093/her/cyt002.

Benjamin, W., 1999. *The arcades project*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap.

Benton, J.S., *et al.*, 2023. Walking is our asset: how to retain walking as a valued mode of transport in African cities. *Cities*, 137, 104297. doi:10.1016/j.cities.2023.104297.

Careri, F., 2017. *Walkscapes: walking as an aesthetic practice*. Barcelona: Editorial GG.

Castells, M., 1996. *The rise of the network society*. New York: Blackwell.

Clark, A. and Emmel, N., 2010. *Using walking interviews* [online]. Available from: https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/1323/. [Accessed 15 Oct 2024].

Dasgupta, S., 2022. *Understanding walking as a research method* [online]. Available from: https://aif.org/understanding-walking-as-a-research-method/ [Accessed 20 Feb 2025].

De Cauter, L., 2009. *The capsular civilization. On the city in the age of fear*. Rotterdam: NAi Publishers.

Den Hartog, H., 2010. *Shanghai new towns: searching for community and identity in a sprawling metropolis*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers.

Dibazar, P., 2023. Walking with and caring for: attending to the self and the other in the Pedestrian city. *Mediapolis: A journal of cities and culture*, 8 (2). Available from: https://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2023/06/walking-with-and-caring-for/ [Accessed 20 Feb 2025].

Duedahl, E. and Stilling Blichfeldt, B., 2020. To walk the talk of go-along methods: navigating the unknown terrains of being-along. *Scandinavian journal of hospitality and tourism*, 20 (5), 438–458. doi:10.1080/15022250.2020.1766560.

Edensor, T., 2010. Walking in rhythms: place, regulation, style and the flow of experience. *Visual studies*, 25 (1), 69–79. doi:10.1080/14725861003606902.

Evans, J. and Jones, P., 2011. The walking interview: methodology, mobility and place. *Applied geography*, 31 (2), 849–858. doi:10.1016/j.apgeog.2010.09.005.

Faasse, K., 2017. *Is a site visit really necessary?* Available from: https://www.elementsstudio.net/site-visit/ [Accessed 20 Feb 2025].

Gandy, M., 2024. Attentive observation: walking, listening, staying put. *Annals of the American association of geographers*, 114 (7), 1386–1404. doi:10.1080/24694452.2024.2353841.

Grimshaw, M., 2012. The antimodern manifesto of the rural flaneur: when D'Arcy and John Go for a wander. *Journal of New Zealand studies*, 13, 144–153. doi:10.26686/jnzs.v0i13.1198.

Healey, P., 2005. Editorial. *Planning theory & practice*, 6 (1), 5–8. doi:10.1080/1464935042000334930.

Hellinga, H., 1985. De eerste jaren van de afdeling Stadsontwikkeling [The first years of the Urban Development Department]. *In*: H. Hellinga, P. De Ruijter, and G. Andela, eds. *Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan Amsterdam 50 jaar: 1935/1985* [General Extension Plan Amsterdam 50 years: 1935/1985]. Amsterdam: Amsterdamse Raad voor de Stedenbouw, 1–250.

Helmreich, W.B., 2013. *The New York nobody knows. Walking 6.000 miles in the city*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Hsing, Y., 2010. *The great urban transformation: politics of land and property in China*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Huang, Z., *et al*., 2024. "Two mountains concept" leading the green transformation of China's economic society. *Journal of environment management*, 359, Article 120960. doi:10.1016/j.jenvman.2024.120960.

Huizinga, J., 1938. *Homo Ludens: een algemeen cultuurwetenschappelijk werk* [Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element of Culture]. Haarlem: D. Tjeenk Willink & Zoon N. V.

Ingold, T., 2010. Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16 (s1), 121–139. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9655.2010.01613.x.

Jacobs, J., 1961. *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.

King, A. and Woodroffe, J., 2017. Walking interviews. *In*: P. Liamputtong, ed. *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences*. Singapore: Springer, 1–22. doi:10.1007/978-981-10-2779-6_28-1.

Kowalewski, M. and Bartlomiejski, R., 2020. Is it research or just walking? Framing walking research methods as 'non-scientific'. *Geoforum*, 114, 59–65. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2020.06.002.

Kusenbach, M., 2003. Street phenomenology: the go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography*, 4 (3), 455–485. doi:10.1177/146613810343007.

Lee, J. and Ingold, T., 2006. Fieldwork on foot: perceiving, routing, socializing. *In*: S. Coleman and P. Collins, eds. *Locating the field: space, place and context in anthropology*. London: Routledge, 19. doi:10.4324/9781003085904.

Macfarlane, R., 2013. *The old ways. A journey on foot*. London: Penguin Books.

Macpherson, H., 2016. Walking methods in landscape research: moving bodies, spaces of disclosure and rapport. *Landscape research*, 41 (4), 425–432. doi:10.1080/01426397.2016.1156065.

Middleton, J., 2018. The socialites of everyday urban walking and the 'right to the city'. *Urban studies*, 55 (2), 296–315. doi:10.1177/0042098016649325.

Moreno, C., 2024. *The 15-minute city. A solution to saving our time and our planet*. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Mumford, L., 1964. *The highway and the city*. New York: New American Library.

O'Neill, M., *et al*. 2018. *Participatory theatre and walking as social research methods - a toolkit* [online]. Available from: https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/4120/ [Accessed 20 Feb 2025].

O'Neill, M. and Roberts, B., 2020. *Walking methods: research on the move*. London: Routledge.

Pan, J., 2016. *China's environmental governing and ecological civilization*. Heidelberg: Springer Berlin. doi:10.1007/978-3-662-47429-7.

Pierce, J. and Lawhon, M., 2015. Walking as method: toward methodological forthrightness and comparability in urban geographical research. *The professional geographer*, 67 (4), 655–662. doi:10.1080/00330124.2015.1059401.

Pink, S., 2008. An urban tour: the sensory sociality of ethnographic place-making. *Ethnography*, 9 (2), 175–196. doi:10.1177/1466138108089467.

Scharmer, C.O., 2009. Business. Theory U: learning from the future as it emerges. *World futures review*, 1 (2), 81–89. doi:10.1177/194675670900100213.

Schultz, H., 2014. Designing large scale landscapes through walking. *Journal of landscape architecture*, 9 (2), 6–15. doi:10.1080/18626033.2014.931694.

Sheller, M. and Urry, J., 2006. The new mobilities paradigm. *Environment and planning A: Economy and space*, 38 (2), 207–226. doi:10.1068/a37268.

Shields, R., *et al*., 2021. Walkability: a review of trends. *Journal of urbanism: International research on placemaking and urban sustainability*, 16 (1), 19–41. doi:10.1080/17549175.2021.1936601.

Sorkin, M., 2009. *Twenty minutes in Manhattan*. London: Reaktion Books.

Sparberg Alexiou, A., 2006. *Jane Jacobs: urban visionary*. New Brunswick/London: Rutgers University Press.

Springgay, S. and Truman, S.E., 2017. *Walking methodologies in a more-than-human world: WalkingLab*. 1st ed. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315231914.

Steenhuis, M., 2007. *Stedenbouw In Het Landschap*. Rotterdam: nai010 publishers.

Steiner, G., 2021. *De idee Europa* [The idea of Europe]. Amsterdam: Nexus Institute.

Su, M. and Cheng, D., 2023. The practice path of social work in supporting the construction of harmonious and beautiful countryside. *Journal of social science humanities and literature*, 6 (6), 37–40. doi:10.53469/jsshl.2023.06(06).07.

United Nations Environment Programme, 2018. *Green is gold: China's remarkable revival project*. Available from: https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/green-gold-chinas-remarkable-revival-project [Accessed 20 Feb 2025].

Van Rossem, V., 1993. Het Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan van Amsterdam. geschiedenis en ontwerp [The general extension plan of Amsterdam. History and design]. Rotterdam, Den Haag: NAi Uitgevers, EFL Stichting.

Vergunst, J.L. and Ingold, T., 2008. *Ways of walking: ethnography and practice on foot*. London, New York: Taylor & Francis.

Wang, H. and Yang, Y., 2019. Neighbourhood walkability: a review and bibliometric analysis. *Cities*, 93, 43–61. doi:10.1016/j.cities.2019.04.015.

Wang, X., 2023. Xingzoude Yiyi [The meaning of walking]. *Zhongguo Yuanlin* [Journal of Chinese landscape architecture], 4, 329.39.

Xu, L. and Qin, Z., 2024. Digital Finance, Private economy, and common prosperity: an empirical analysis from Zhejiang, a demonstration province for common prosperity. *Frontiers in humanities and social sciences*, 4 (3), 108–120. doi:10.54691/37r0a229.