

POINT DE VUE

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In the post-Covid world, have we forgotten about walking again?

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Jean-Marc Offner

Between lockdowns at home, limited travel perimeters and social distancing, the health crisis has made us think about the different ways we move around. As mainstays of urban proximity, cyclists and pedestrians were once the kings of the road. Year after year, bicycles have become the symbol of ecological aspirations in terms of mobility, benefitting from increasing political support, as seen with the recent "corona lanes" (dedicated bike lanes established in Paris during the Covid-19 pandemic). But walking... no!

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Granted, pedestrian projects have been pulled back off the shelves, in Bordeaux and elsewhere. Pre-existing pedestrian plans have reinforced their objectives, as in Strasbourg. The elected officials of the Cities of France association (Villes de France) are calling for a major national pedestrian mobility plan, and associations ² are joining forces.

But is this not all pointing to another missed opportunity? After the first oil crisis in 1974, there was unprecedented support for pedestrians, as evidenced by some conferences and publications ³ from the 1980s. The goal was to curb the invasion of cars, support the development of public transport, reduce energy consumption, and defend urbanity. A quarter of a century later, around the turn of the millennium, the idea of promoting walking emerged ⁴ once again, with updated arguments: walking for pleasure, for health, as part of a general appreciation of 'slowness'.

The fact that walking keeps being rediscussed reveals the failure of these momentary impulses. To break the cycle, we have to take a closer look at what's not working, and understand where the political project is failing. Is it because of words without action? Actions without relevance? A lack of ambition, doctrine, vision? Let's take a look.

Steps to follow

Whether exhibited in a humorous or a technical fashion ⁵, the benefits of walking in the city are innumerable. If analysed as a means of transport, it's the simplest of all, the most readily available, the most flexible, the most reliable; but also the most economical, in terms of energy, money and road space. It is also the most essential, finally, because it connects all the other modes of transport. We should think of it as the "stem cell of

mobility ⁶”, to paraphrase Georges Amar’s clever analogy. But walking is more than a mode of transportation. Because it is so automatic, it allows a permeability to the environment, making it the best vector of a sensory and sensitive approach to space, prior to the appropriation of places. Through its ability to accommodate **sedentariness** and **movement**, it activates the public space through the diversity of its uses. It thus becomes the favoured, if not exclusive, vector of urbanity: the ability to create social connections, ephemeral but essential, to manage one’s relationship to others - because the density of social interactions in the city requires civility - whether it’s at the entrance of a primary school or on the sidewalk of a large boulevard.

And let’s not forget the obvious argument for the health benefits of walking. As a form of physical exercise, walking in the city is similar to open-air walking, thus further increasing its versatility. The existence of long-distance walkers ⁷, who spend more than an hour a day walking, illustrates this evolution of practices.

So many recognised benefits! Perhaps these honest virtues create a widespread feeling that pedestrians don’t need anyone to exist. All the more so since they can function without the major projects favoured by city councillors for their ostentatious efficiency. Who would bother to promote a mode that you can't see? Thus, in the banality of their daily life as in the fullness of their anthropological dimension, pedestrians are left to their fate. They also must contend with a few false friends.

Lost footsteps

“What cannot be measured cannot be managed.” This managerial mantra applies quite well to pedestrian affairs. Statistical invisibility makes it hard to see and speak of the subject. We have an abundance of figures to discuss cars, public transport, two-wheelers; but not much to quantify pedestrian presence, despite almost everyone walking at some point in the day. Modal sharing doesn’t account for the condition of pedestrians, ignoring the so-called access trips (towards a bus station or a parked car) and a large part of short trips. Pedestrian flows, except for specific concerns (commercial activities, safety issues) and adapted infrastructures (bridges), have no dedicated measuring instruments ⁸.

Associations for the defence of pedestrians, which are far too underexposed, recognize this sorry state of affairs. One of their managers claimed that “there is a lack of a pedestrian culture in France ⁹”, while another delivered this remark: “There is no class consciousness among pedestrians.” ¹⁰ The situation happens to be quite different with cyclists: there’s intense activism, influential associations, mediatised arguments. Beneath

the syncretism of terms like “soft” or “active” modes, the bicycle tree is hiding the forest of pedestrians. This is true in local debates, also true in current national policies ¹¹, in the sharing of public space ¹². But it is to the detriment of pedestrians that this deceptive alliance between cycling and walking is concluded. For now, anyway. In this regard, it will be interesting to analyse how cities such as Amsterdam or Strasbourg try to renegotiate priorities, in their budgets, in their partnerships and in the streets.

There is another, even more paradoxical situation that pedestrians must endure: the pedestrian zone. Pedestrianization measures, which reserve certain specific spaces for walking, consider pedestrians as users of a piece of equipment. The pedestrian zone is circumscribed: a shopping street where one goes shopping, quays to go for a stroll, squares and alleys to visit a historic quarter. The pedestrian zone becomes a destination in itself, which can be reached by car or by public transport. As successful as they may be, the facilities aren't designed to make daily pedestrian mobility easier, but to offer extraordinary public spaces. Such policies wouldn't be problematic if they weren't used as a convenient excuse to mask the complete lack of any other measures in favour of pedestrians.

Meanwhile, so-called appeasement policies, which have re-emerged since the last municipal elections in 2020, appear to be full of empathy for walkers. After all, they aim to reduce the volumes and speeds of car traffic to make the life of pedestrians more pleasant. But first and foremost, pedestrians need a good reason to go walking, which presupposes having a place to go and an urban intensity worth appreciating (local activities, meeting places). And, for their comfort, they may prefer a wide sidewalk in a busy street to a “meeting area” ¹³ where they coexist with bicycles and cars traveling at 20 km/h.

The pedestrian zone encloses the walker in its hyper-centre reserve. The appeasement of neighbourhoods risks assigning walking to local trips, around houses and schools. While this remains a step forward, it doesn't do justice to the versatility of walking, to its ability to articulate various geographical scales, or to the thousand different ways of walking.

Paths to explore

Let's take a look at city pedestrians. They're not afraid of taking long strides, so long as there are places to rest. They traverse the major pedestrian network. ¹⁴ They like the multiplicity of routes offered to their curiosity. They feel at ease in a tram – which is a pace accelerator. They like to be reassured by a GPS or wander at random through different settings. They know how to switch and adapt, between high-tech shoes and public benches, between brisk walking and strolling.

Can these versatile pedestrians take advantage, then, of the enthusiasm for other types of walking? There are abundant proposals. Romantic-walking, which philosophers see as "an authentic spiritual exercise ¹⁵", magnifies the act of strolling to "reconquer the city step by step ¹⁶" and rediscovers the Baudelairian figures of the voyeuristic artist or the situationist psychogeographies of urban *dérive*. ¹⁷ Pleasure-walking transforms the inhabitant into a tourist in his own city and the jogger into a discoverer of landscapes. Investigation-walking, to explore peri-urban territories ¹⁸ or make a collective diagnosis ¹⁹ in a neighbourhood through urban walks.

Should we re-enchant the act of putting one foot in front of the other or trivialize it? Marry leisure-walking ²⁰ and travel-walking? Engineer a convergence of the struggles of daily walkers and of athletes with topo-guides? And of those "augmented" pedestrians and of hedonic walkers?

For urban walking to be taken seriously, should we collaborate with sidewalk management operators, like Google's Sidewalk Labs, whenever the sidewalk becomes a "new strategic asset"? ²¹ Should we technologise the subject, to create - almost ex nihilo - an industrial sector with an economical interest in promoting walking, made up of developers creating geolocated applications and automatic measuring instruments, of urban furniture providers and of equipment manufacturers to design mutable pedestrian roads (modular paving stones, for instance) that are suitable for chrono-planning?

But it is also where there are no sidewalks that people have to learn and relearn how to walk, as in the urban countrysides, where departmental roads, roundabouts, suburban housing estates and large commercial areas show little regard for pedestrians, even though peri-urban aspirations tend to promote physical activity and contact with the environment.

The avenue of a low-tech promotion of pedestrian mobility retains all its advantages, between artistic approaches ²², cultural identities (East Berlin and its traffic lights with a little man in a hat, Bogota and its pedestrian crossings decorated by schoolchildren), but also consideration for children, women and the elderly in public spaces. In this regard, the medical world, teaching communities, as well as business and craft corporations represent potentially powerful allies.

The conception of a walkable city undoubtedly mobilizes several invariants, from surface ergonomics to the freshness provided by vegetation, as well as access to water points and the possibility of sitting, free of charge of course (basic hospitality). But it can also be a

question of the inventiveness of places, ambiances and routes. What fuels the desire to go walking or constitutes the proper conditions to step outside isn't the same thing in the centre of Paris, in the green spaces of a city from the sixties, in a residential area of the Bordeaux suburbs, or in peri-urban areas in dire need of inventive projects. If they are engaged to do so, researchers²³ but also users will know how to contextualize and specify.

At human height

To progress towards this ideal of a walkable city, of a friendly pedestrian ambiance at all times, there isn't one obvious, necessary or exclusive urban trajectory. It is up to local public action to build its own room to manoeuvre, otherwise history will repeat itself. All the strategies briefly outlined here, intended to give a legitimate place to pedestrian concerns in mobility policies and urban projects, carry their share of efficiency and relevance, in small or large measures. But nothing convincing or decisive will happen if walking doesn't become the conceptual vector and ideological totem of a paradigm shift.

At a time when every city, from Libourne to San Francisco, wants to be designed and experienced on a human scale, let us suggest here that calibrating cities is not a matter of size but rather of the ability to articulate different scales²⁴ and metrics. Therefore, if we are to promote a human-scaled city, we should really promote one that is at human height, one that considers its inhabitants and pedestrians as men and women standing, irreducibly on their own two feet. One that stops to question, before any planning, development or management intervention, what will happen to those who walk through its territory.

If the pedestrian can hope for anything following the upheavals caused by the pandemic, it ultimately has less to do with reinventing public spaces for the benefit of soft modes than with conferring on walkers this cardinal status of being the master of scales.

Notes

① Espaces publics et distanciation physique. Propositions pour le réaménagement des espaces publics en temps de confinement... et bien après [Public spaces and social distancing. Proposals for the redevelopment of public spaces in times of **lockdown** ... and well after], a'urba (Urban planning agency of Bordeaux Aquitaine), April 2020.

Déconfinement et mobilité : Le guide des aménagements provisoires pour les piétons [Post-lockdown and mobility: The guide to temporary arrangements for pedestrians], Cerema, May 2020. L'autre Demain ? Mobilité. Déployer une culture piétonne [The other

Tomorrow? Mobility. Deploying a pedestrian culture], AUAT (Planning and development agency of the Toulouse metropolitan area), September 2020.

② The collective Place aux piétons (Make space for pedestrians) brings together several associations, including 60 million de piétons (60 million pedestrians, the historic association Les droits du piéton, renamed in 2017) and Rue de l'avenir (The street of the Future), as well as the French Hiking Federation. In early 2021 it launched a barometer of walkable towns and villages.

③ The French General accounting office (Cour des comptes) had thus seen fit to criticize, in the 1970s, a research report on "Walking as a means of transport," considering it a waste of taxpayer's money to assert the obvious. Some references: Jean-Marc Offner, Les déplacements piétonniers, analyse bibliographique [Pedestrian journeys, bibliographical analysis], Institut de recherche des transports, 1981, 112 p. "Le piéton enchaîné ? Plaidoyer pour le vagabondage" [The pedestrian in chains? An argument in favour of vagrancy], Recherche - Transports - Sécurité, July 1984, p. 23-25. "Les piétons, nouveaux enjeux, nouveaux savoir-faire" [Pedestrians, new challenges, new skills], report of the study workshop AFME-Certu-Inrets, Métropolis 75, 3rd Quarter 1986.

④ See for example the dossier "Marcher" [Walking], Urbanisme n ° 359, March-April 2008. See also Sabine Chardonnet-Darmaillacq (dir.), Le génie de la marche [The genius of walking], Hermann editions, 2016.

⑤ See the advertising campaign of Bruxelles Mobilité in 2021: With "Les Pieds ©" [With the feet], intended to raise awareness in an offbeat way about pedestrian mobility: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAKm773d7RQ> . See, in the same vein, the presentation of the MAP, the Personalized Autonomous Mobile, a high-tech mode of transport, during the Bordeaux 2050 campaign in 2019.

⑥ Georges Amar, Mobilités urbaines. Eloge de la diversité et devoir d'invention [Urban mobility. In praise of diversity and duty of invention], éditions de l'Aube, 2004.

⑦ See the work of Derek Christie at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne on long-distance walkers, who see regular and intensive walking as a source of well-being.

⑧ This methodological shortcoming becomes all the more paradoxical as everyone can now track how many steps they've taken daily using their mobile phone. Having thus consented, sensor-bearing, pedestrians could constitute a valuable source of information. A few years ago, the Grenoble metropolitan area installed a dozen pedestrian counters operating by infrared detection of human heat.

- ⑨ Christian Machu, La loi d'orientation sur les mobilités rate le coche de la mobilité piétonne [The Mobility Orientation Law misses its opportunity in terms of pedestrian mobility], LinkedIn, January 20, 2020. https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/la-loi-dorientation-sur-les-mobilités-rate-the-coche-de-machu?trk=public_profile_article_view
- ⑩ Jean-Paul Lechevalier, quoted by Alexis Magnavel, "Le piéton perd-il la bataille de l'espace urbain ?" [Is the pedestrian losing the battle for urban space?], Slate.fr, August 10, 2017.
- ⑪ Established by the Mobility Orientation Law (LOM) of December 2019, the sustainable mobility package for home-work trips completely ignored walking. While we understand that offering compensation to cover travel costs doesn't legally constitute an incentive, the legislator could have been more inventive...
- ⑫ This priority given to cyclists over pedestrians is particularly surprising in a city like Paris, where the scarcity of road surfaces should lead to favouring a combination of public transport and walking, which takes up the least amount of space, without putting it in competition with bikes.
- ⑬ It's worth noting that urban courtyards, designed by the Dutch nearly fifty years ago under the name of woonerf, allow various modes of transport to coexist by requiring cars to drive at 5 km/h in residential areas. The critique of the separation of flows - viewed as the symbol of an exacerbated functionalism - now creates situations of untenable cohabitation, between bicycles and cars, between pedestrians and public transport in designated lanes, between bicycles and pedestrians...
- ⑭ Magistrale piétonne: the major pedestrian network links the territory of Strasbourg with continuous pedestrian connections of over one kilometre.
- ⑮ Frédéric Gros, Le Monde, 24 juin 2011.
- ⑯ "Reconquérir la ville pas à pas" [Reclaiming the city step by step] is the subtitle of Lauren Elkin's book, Flâneuse, Hoëbeke editions, 2019.
- ⑰ Francesco Careri, Walkskapes, la marche comme pratique esthétique [Walkskapes: walking as an aesthetic practice], Actes sud, 2020.
- ⑱ Yvan Detraz, Zone Sweet Zone, La marche comme projet urbain [Zone Sweet Zone, Walking as an urban project], Wildproject editions, 2020.

⑲ Walks that bring together residents, local elected officials and technicians, allowing the collective development of diagnoses on the functioning of a particular neighbourhood or area. This method is used for local urban management in social housing neighbourhoods, but also to address security issues specific to women. See Diagnostic-territoire.org

⑳ Jérôme Monnet, "Marche-loisir et marche-déplacement : une dichotomie persistante, du romantisme au fonctionnalisme " [Leisure-walking and travel-walking: a persistent dichotomy, from romanticism to functionalism], *Sciences de la société* n ° 97, 2016, p. 75-89.

㉑ Isabelle Baraud-Serfaty, "Le trottoir, nouvel actif stratégique" [The sidewalk, new strategic asset], *Futuribles* no. 436, May-June 2020, p. 87-104.

㉒ *Les figures de la marche* [The figures of walking], Réunion des musées nationaux, 2000.

㉓ "Marche en ville : enjeux sociaux et politiques" [Walking in the city: social and political issues], *Espaces et Sociétés*, no. 179, December 2020.

㉔ Considerable development would be necessary to formalize this idea, which places me in opposition to the vision carried for instance by Jan Gehl, author of the book *Pour des villes à échelle humaine* [For human-scaled cities] (Ecosociété editions, 2013), translation of *Cities for People*. Gehl, a Danish architect, considers that human height must almost geometrically format the size of buildings, the design of roads, etc. My vision is different, by accepting the multiplicity of operating scales of the contemporary urban setting and by emphasizing the necessary role of city planners in how the scales are articulated. Which is what we know how to do, precisely by putting the pedestrian at the heart of this ambition. Two examples. In Manhattan, the way in which the ground floors of skyscrapers are designed offers pedestrians comfortable streets and sidewalks, on their scale. A well-thought-out place of exchange turns the pedestrian into something of a clutch lever, operating changes in scale (from local to metropolitan) and speed (from the pace of walking to that of rapid public transport).

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and

by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

[More](#)

Sedentariness

To be sedentary is to opt for stability and to put down roots, both social and spatial, whether by choice or not.

[More](#)

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people's freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people's lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

[More](#)

¹ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/directory/people/2013/03/21/jean-marc-offner-urbaniste-669>

² <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450>

³ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/sedentariness-459>

⁴ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/movement-460>

⁵ <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/lockdown-13664>