

## **Tracing Urban (Long-Distance) Walking Paths: Investigating Prague and Aleppo as Walkable Cities**

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### **Abstract**

The “Walkable City” concept is used to foster pedestrian mobility, improve urban vitality, and fuel socioeconomic urban development. However, recent studies on walkability predominantly focus on short-distance pedestrian accessibility, with little-to-no emphasis on broader socio-cultural and experiential dimensions of urban environments. This Thesis traces the role and impact of urban walking and trails in historical city development and reconciles urban theories and narrative research methods to investigate the walking experience in the city of Prague.

### **Overview of the PhD research**

“The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language.”

- (de Certeau, 1988, p.97).

The concept of the Walkable Cities has developed in recent years as an aspiration for cities to prioritize pedestrian mobility, improve urban vitality and fuel socioeconomic urban development. Urban agendas and sustainability goals have been drawn with grave focus on making cities walkable to achieve greener mobility and attain healthy urban lifestyles. The International Charter for Walking, drawn in 2020 and adopted by cities worldwide, compiled significant data that highlights the health relevance of walking and the necessary principles and actions to aid cities transitioning into environments that provide walking opportunities (Walk 21, 2020).

This awakening for making cities walkable is not new but has been gradually increasing since Jane Jacobs' early criticism of modernist planning and call to consider walkable urban space through advocacy of three pivotal aspects: density, mixed-use areas, and small blocks (Dovey & Pafka, 2020). Jacob's prominent concepts, along with the influential contributions of Kevin Lynch (1965) and Jan Gehl (2010), have served as wellsprings of inspiration and direction, catalyzing a significant upsurge in urban studies and research dedicated to investigating and analyzing their aspects to achieve walkable urban spaces in recent decades (Mezoued et al., 2020).

Terms such as walkability, walkable space, pedestrian mobility, pedestrian accessibility have become popularly used to investigate and develop urban strategies to improving and designing urban environments. The concept of ‘walkability’ grew to consolidate numerous variables across studies, acting as a rhetorical link between urban walking research and policy formulation (Shields et al., 2021). As a term ‘walkability’ evolved, through a plethora of research, to quantify and score walkable characteristics of streets, urban neighborhoods, and cities, in hope to find appropriate formulas and rating systems for planning and urban governance. However, attempts to detail its technical meaning overlook the essence of walking as a practice and experience; nevertheless, its interpretations continue to evolve in response to shifting perceptions of mobility, primarily driven by the pursuit of sustainability, well-being, and economic advantages for

pedestrian-friendly business streets (Shields et al., 2021). Moreover, the constrained viewpoint that primarily regards walking as a means of transportation, leading to spatial planning focused on pedestrian accessibility for short distances, neglects the profound cultural and psychological value of walking as a social, contemplative, and aesthetical practice. This thesis brings attention to viewing walking for its potential to, as the French philosopher Federeic Gros (2014) describes, freeing us from our burdens of continuous search for identity and becoming an antidote to the rush of our contemporary and digital lives.

Hence, planning and evaluating a city's walkability necessitates surpassing mere diversity and connectivity criteria and embracing an approach attentive to the city's multi-scalar essence, users' experiences, and to the "diversity of practices and imaginaries" (Mezoued et al., 2020, p.219). Scholars in the fields of cultural geography and social sciences have brought attention on the limitations of planning and transport policies and their abstract assumptions of what constitutes walkable spaces (Middleton, 2010, 2018, 2021). Middleton (2021) raises the issue of glamorizing walking in planning actions and illuminates how walking participates in shaping socially varied urban spaces. Middleton, furthermore, highlights that "while there is much attention given to the materialities of pedestrian infrastructures in planning and designing for urban walking, the lived experiences of these infrastructures are frequently overlooked." (2021, p.17). Her pursuit to render "the relationship between walking and the ways in which cities are imagined and designed" enlightens the need for urban design and planning studies to explore creative methods and propositions of walkable urban environments that considers "the differentiated nature of our spatio-temporal, embodied, and social experiences on foot." (Middleton, 2021, p.17).

In response to the limitations of current viewpoints on walkability in urban studies, this thesis, fueled by a deep interest in the act of walking, its poetic and psychological significance, and the sense of place and belonging it generates, proposes the exploration of alternative approaches and the integration of multi-disciplinary theories to analyze and envision potential walkable urban environments that embrace the meaningful social significance of urban spaces and capacity to amplify its atmospheric walking experience.

First, the thesis draws on theories in phenomenology to navigate the discussions to understanding and approaching the walking experiences in the city. Drawing on views of Perez Gomez, Stephen Holl, Dalibor Vesely and similar figures on the topics of phenomenology of architecture and atmospheres, this thesis aims to initiate the dialogue on the utilization of these concepts to found analogies for the urban design and planning of walkability.

For example, according to architect Alberto Perez-Gomez, architecture and urban design play a direct role in how we feel and therefore they impact our everyday emotions. "Our feelings are located, bound to a particular place with its specific temporality and qualitative character" (Perez-Gomez, 2016, p.1). Perez-Gomez continues to argue that emotions actually "enable our intellectual understanding, our rational faculties" and therefore it is extremely crucial to recognize the ability of the urban environment to stir specific emotions and everyday decisions. In that sense, he urges the search of the "atmospheres" of architecture and urban space to understand its implication on its users. In a philosophical sense, Perez-Gomez borrows from Gernot Böhme's thoughts, who follows the work of the German phenomenologist, Herman Schmitz, that emotions are not internally originated but "visit (haunt) the body which receives them". In Perez-Gomez's emphasis on designing with atmosphere and not only with designated spatial programs and

functions, he calls for the use of narratives and poetics in the architectural design process that was originally existent but replaced since the 18th c. Considering this thesis's topic, a phenomenological stance on walking would highlight the rhythmical and experiential characteristics of walking practices, as Filipa M. Wunderlich, an associate professor in urban design at University College of London, illustrated in her work. She emphasizes the lens of framing walking as 'a mode of experiencing' one's environment and establishes the value of walking as a means and an end to sensorial urban spaces that 'promote and enhance the sense of (and for) place' (Matos Wunderlich, 2008, p.138).

As the necessity for investigating the urban walking experience is illustrated above, the development of tools for architects and urban planners to analyze and comprehend such complex phenomenon has evolved substantially through the influential works of Klaske Havik, a professor in Methods of Analysis and Imagination at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, in Delft University of Technology. Havik advanced the development of analytical and design tools for interpreting and characterizing urban atmospheres through narrative methodologies. Havik (2012) posits that architects can harness literary techniques to cultivate an awareness that encompasses not only the visual facets of architecture and urban space but also the experiential dimensions. Therefore, this thesis's journey is the investigation of narrative methods to adapt and guide the analysis of the walking experience in the thesis's case studies.

Second, this thesis aims to highlight the relevance of exploring the evolution of urban walking in relation to the historical development of cities. Understanding this interplay helps urban planners to comprehend how walking (pedestrian) infrastructures were imagined, designed, and experienced in the past. Such knowledge guides the reflection on the role and impact of existing pedestrian infrastructure and how they are used and experienced in the city now.

Third, this thesis underscores the immense potential and intrinsic value of trails as a framework for shaping walking experience. This lens aids in understanding how walking in the city is influenced by the web of paths and connections (the urban structure) in the city. In their essence, trails are stories unfolded by walking. Trails provide motivation and guidance for travelers. Furthermore, trails have influenced human movement in cities throughout history by shaping trade, cultural practices, settlement patterns, urban design, recreation, transportation, and more. Trails formed the backbones of cities and leave enduring imprints on the development, structure, and character of urban environments. Therefore, the aim of this research is to read the city as a web of trails/paths that mold the urban walking experience. As such, the thesis will explore how some walking trails are currently marked in the city and inquire on strategies that are site-sensitive and amplify the atmospheric walking experience of different urban environments.

This thesis will be investigating these objectives on two case studies. The primary study will investigate Prague. Prague is viewed suitable for this thesis study due to its mosaic of historical and architectural urban environments that are walkable to certain limits. Historically, the city was majorly recognized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century for its picturesque strolling experiences. Lastly, it's directly accessible for the PhD candidate for analysis. As for Aleppo, the case study similarly poses a history of layered urban morphologies and architecture but have been severally destroyed in the recent conflict, therefore, applying a Walkable City analysis holds potential for its processes of revitalization and recovery. Having Aleppo as a case study also stands to test the explored methods from the first case and discuss the possibilities of adaptation of such tools for different cultural contexts and needs.

### **Research Questions** (*still-in-progress*)

How can the intersection of narrative methods and phenomenological approaches help analyze and envision walking experiences that guide the development of urban design strategies for enhancing walkability and walking paths in the city of Prague?

In which ways can the discovered urban design strategies contribute to the revitalization and recovery of post-conflict cities (i.e., Aleppo)?

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