Performing Openness
Episodes of Walking Urban Narratives

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Introduction

This paper examines the pedagogical role of narrative in a series of urban workshops held by the international network 'Urban Emptiness' in Edinburgh and Athens between February 2016 and May 2016[1]. The aim of the workshops was to investigate new interdisciplinary and participatory ways of reading diverse urban environments by exploring silence and emptiness in contemporary cities. To fulfil this aim performativity and narrative were combined into a series of walking actions that critically revisited the different stages of the organization and execution of experiential teaching approaches: from the briefing to the performance of different actions and the mapping/documentation of their results.

In particular, a symposium of five workshops entitled 'Silence, Narrative and the Intimacy of the City' was held in Edinburgh, during 'Innovative Learn-

ing Week' (University of Edinburgh).[2] In them, students and scholars from various disciplines – architecture, art, digital media, anthropology – worked together, seeking to grasp the vagueness of urban atmospheres[3] by deploying tools of site reading in a way that would meaningfully interweave the different workshops through embodied narratives. Testing the incorporation of this relational and synthetic process, another workshop entitled 'Real and Imaginary Embodied Landscapes/Sensing Silences' was later held in Athens (National Technical University of Athens) and was open only to postgraduate students of architecture.[4]

From the personal to the collective and from the mnemonic and fictional to the present, narrative and walking were combined in both of the events to unfold hidden and imaginary qualities of the urban landscape in a performative way. The diverse synthetic potentials of narrative offered a pedagogical tool for walking actions to be performed in the urban context seeking to answer questions such as: What is a studio brief?[5] What is site reading and analysis? What is an architectural project's output?

Performing Walking Narratives

Performativity was examined through the agency of the walking body-subjects as expressed during their interaction with the city. Following a phenomenological point of view the project appreciates bodily perception and understands reality as the *liminal zone* where body and mind, the *physical* and the *psychical*, merge. This phenomenal spatiality can be fully perceived and 'mapped' only through our bodies and can thus be narrated in different ways depending on the context in which it is performed.[6] The examined actions created playful environments, contributing to the current discourse on performative education; they opened fields of interaction that were different from what is considered as 'ordinary life', changing the lens through which we usually interact through our body with our surroundings. The process unveiled how Elyse Pineau's argument about performative pedagogy can be applied in architectural education:

As a pedagogical method, performative play privileges full body involvement – literally, learning from the inside – combined with keen self-reflection on the nature and implications of one's actions. . . . The concept of play, with its attendant implications of experimentation, innovation, critique and subversion, breaks open conventionalized classroom practices.[7]

The actions and their outputs have made clear that mapping the city deals with the expression of different kinds of embodied experience, something that clashes with the way cartography and architectural representation have been traditionally perceived as data-based, mathematical and abstract construct.[8] The agency of performativity opened the field for narrative and walking to be combined as the key research methods for both of these clusters of events.

Narrative led different stages of the explored educational processes to welcome a multiplicity of points of views, encourage a flux in leadership/facilitation and experiment with different ways of expression. The two clusters of actions explored narrative in *the briefing process* (using performative, deconstructing and montage methodologies), *the performance* (walking itineraries, oral history, site/process-specific designed sketchbooks), *the documentation and the communication*.

Narrative has the ability to (re)open an experience through the synthesis of a number of different events into an intelligible whole. According to Paul Ricoeur, through narrative a number of events are connected into a meaningful whole due to the dynamics of plot. Plot refers to the *configurational arrangement* of heterogeneous events that is based on their causal relation.[9] Further to this, Urban Emptiness questions the 'closed' character that plot traditionally suggests by exploring a sense of openness in the different ways in which narrative was deployed.

In the examined events this narrative understanding of spatiality was combined with walking. The walking motif has a strong presence in artistic practices, with projects that suggest, among other things, experiential forms of

engaging and mapping the surrounding environment as well as new forms of relating to the other co-walkers. Karen O'Rourke refers to two common methods used by artists to structure their walks: i) 'a map, with no directions' – a predetermined itinerary that shapes the walk but does not tell us how to walk it, ii) 'directions, but no map' – a set of instructions, scores or notations that frame a walk, leaving chance encounters and guidelines to direct our path.[10] Both methods leave room for interpretation, where, in some cases, planning and decisions have been made before hand, or where they are still being developed during the execution and management of the walking event. The meaningful synthesis of experiences through walking and narrative was explored in the Urban Emptiness actions, responding to what Christopher Tilley suggests as the narrative agency of a place:

> *Narrative is a means of understanding and describing the world in relation to agency. It is a means of linking locales, landscapes, actions, events and experiences together providing a synthesis of heterogeneous phenomena. . . . In its mimetic or phenomenological form narrative seeks to capture action not just through description but as a form of re-description.[11]*

Hence, the briefing of the actions ranged from more traditional ones giving instructions and prefiguring possible results, to briefs that developed gradually depending on the evolution of the workshops. In this sense, 'The Impossible Inaudible Soundwalk' workshop was briefed according to a series of clear instructions, carefully written and presented on the first day of the symposium, offering to the participants a 'safe'/pre-structured environment to interact with each other and the theme. With a different approach, the 'Urban Body' workshop followed a more organic briefing that was gradually unfolded, reflecting the course of the process. Every next part of the brief was based on the results of the actions of the previous one and without having a clear idea of how the body of work was going to evolve. In the case of the workshops held in Athens, the brief was rewritten in a more abstract

1. Be_ _ aware_ __ walking _ _ _ _

    silence. _ _ _ _ (Un)keep _ _ _ Shared _ _
    attention _ _ _ pause; _ _ _immersion_ _ _ _ sense.
    Stop _ _ _unstop _ Fulfilled.
    incomplete_ _ gap _ _ _ _create_

2. _Write_ _
    _ walkingplace_ _ _action,_ collective _ _ _ self.
    _ _ _ Pace._ _interaction _ _ _ touchingsmellinghearing _ _ _ pause.
    _ _ _ _ here_ _ _ record. _ _remember _ _ _ you
    _ _ _ place_ _ _ body.

Action for the second workshop..

TASK #1:
Slow Walk on the side walk

..... here.... walk....   slow... slow...
          feel....
                feet... hands... heart.... blood....   listen.... wind... door...steps...breath...pulse...

smell.... hole.... food... dead... corner...

....see....   scan.... horizon.... sky.... floor.... water...
                              become..archive... become...trace

                              no time.... your time....

you are here... this moment is you.... and you are all around you....

...who are you here...

...let your walk take you somewhere else....

Instruction: Stand on the sidewalk, determine a starting point... looking to the horizon walk as slow as you can until a predetermined ending point.

TASK #2
Door/Window Portraits:

stay.... stand.... still...
stay... sit... comfortably... watch....

window... doors... neighbors... balconies... roofs.. dust... ...nature
                      ... manmade... sides.. angles...
...wander   differences... shapes... textures...
              .....interconnection
         see yourself...   document... one become all...

...one window.. many windows.
    ....one door..many doors.. one roof... many roofs.
         ...one you... many yous... US on the window, doors, roofs.

Instructions: #1 Sit down at a door step (entrance) scan what you see/feel/sense/hear. Document its textures and colors. #2 Stand Still in the place of your preference: look up scan the landscape and documented document...

Task #3
The neighbors:

permission.... ask...
....history.... place.. location.. time... action...
 where... going... staying... who... here... somewhere...
  ..attention... eyes... hands... life... movement.. story..
passing... passing... by... staying...
engaging... .... space... place.. personal... social...
     language... communication.. verbal... movement... verbal... expressions.. non.verbal...
...encounter... elusive... ephemeral...
community... family... change...

Instructions: Talk to a by passer... ask for the hour, ask about the place... ask them who they are... introduce yourself... Be inviting, not intrusive. If they do not speak greek, or any language you know, is there a way to communicate?

3.   Iam_ _ _ site_ _ _ story_ _ _ _ _i
    pause_ _ _ revisit _ _ _journey_ _ _
    transition. _ _ _change_ _ _
    gap _ _ _
    Life_ _ _ project _ _ _ _dream.
              interrupt _ _ _ _ memory _ _ future
         _ I am_ _ _ location.

Fig. 1. Deconstructed brief of the workshop in Athens.

way, focusing on bodily actions, and was distributed to the students during the walking activities.

Acknowledging the values of walking practices in educational environments as well as their experimental potential in research, we wanted to invest in a process that stays open and continually changes as events unfold over time. Through walking and reflecting upon these walks, diverse urban spatialities emerged, revealing the importance of *openness* in an education process that is based on a discursive understanding of its different actions. Narrative and walking were mainly combined in a deliberate way as the workshops took place, as different episodes of one educational and research narrative gradually developing in different cities. In order to question the role of a 'plot' in performative educational processes, thread workshops were introduced. Working towards the idea of shaping openness in educational environments, the suggested threads questioned the traditional perception of plot as a closed form in education: the plot of a studio brief, the prefigured plot of a site diagram, the plot according to which a 'completed' and 'final' design output is expressed. By challenging the relationship between the facilitator and the participant, plots became 'narrative threads' by introducing a multiplicity of point of views while playing with the idea of 'having and losing control' of the process.
One of the thread workshops, 'Performing Silence: What happens when you shift the focus?', invited the facilitators to become its participants, opening a field for performative interactions that also influenced the happening of the parallel workshops. The leader was also a participant and the actions were organized around ideas of discursive walking exercises that were triggered by a number of indoor games, such as role-playing exercises, dialogues based on allocated words inspired by the themes explored. The thematic walks were developed as dialogues in pairs or groups of three, giving us the opportunity to explore different rhythms and conditions of movement as playful and subversive settings to bring together personal narratives and research approaches.
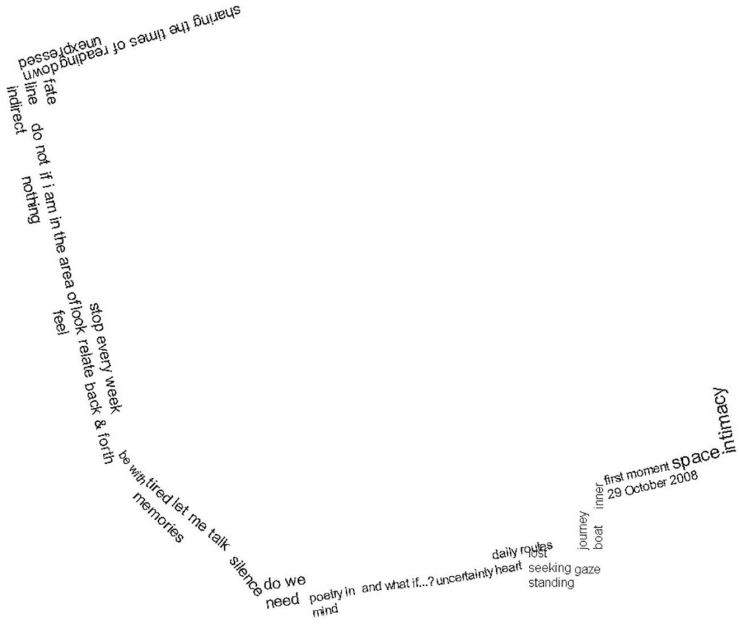
Fig. 2. 'Loving Landscapes': map produced by the two participants.

The free-association word games brought forward ideas, questions and memories unfiltered by expectations that shaped later forms of walking. For example, during a game of selected keywords, where the participants as pairs were asked to select two cards without knowing their content in advance and respond to them in a dialogical form, one of the resulting matches was 'intimacy and space'. The initial dialogue of these two participants came to structure their walk later in a pre-selected route, which developed poetically as a contemplation of personal stories responding to the urban context.

The workshop created a setting that would shift the state of mind of the leaders and redirected interests and ideas in new creative meetings. By constantly investing on generating new narratives as alternative perspectives on the themes explored, we managed to sustain a reflective mode of thinking towards each other's practices and to revisit the methodologies of each workshop while the process was still ongoing. Interestingly, this was manifested in the development of the second thread workshop 'Re/Reading Urban Emptiness and Silence' that was further transformed when moved to Athens, as we will see further on.

Narrative tools were deployed in the execution of the workshops in many different ways. The 'Urban Body' workshop, for example, focused on personal and collective stories created during open-ended walks that followed techniques of body awareness. The role of the silent walking body as a carrier of both collective stories was illuminated. Diverse narratives were generated while participants were engaging in individual, pair, or group tasks. A process of changing the walking rhythms and deconstructing everyday habits and rituals brought forward an immediate encounter with the surrounding environment. The experiences of the silent walks –when the silent body becomes a stylus that connects different places – were narrated in texts written as dialogues between participants before their execution as well as texts and mappings created after the walks as reflective narratives. These narratives touched upon ideas and notions of 'home', while engag-
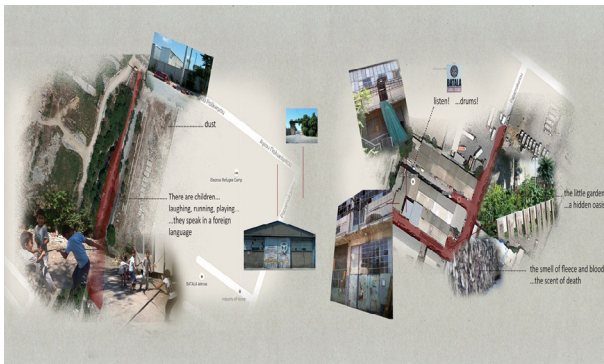
Fig. 3. Collage of St. B. documenting the area of Elaionas.
Bringing together disparate elements of a place is evident by
both the use of collage and audio archives to record the aural
context of her encounters. Her closing reference to the Camus
quote is even more intriguing as it attributes to Elaionas a
quality she remembered from the description of an imaginary
literary landscape.

ing on a multi-layered process of recording conditions of closeness and distancing between cities, places in the same city and people.

These different interrelations of narrative and walking unveiled the educational meaning of Michel de Certeau's description of walking as a 'tactic' experience during which the individual has the opportunity to interact with the natural landscape. For Certeau, walking thus becomes a kind of 'travelling' during which the individual is simultaneously reading and writing an embodied story. This story is organized into a sequence of encounters between the different characters involved in the process, things, humans, animals and elements of the natural landscape.[12]
The dynamic interrelation of performativity, narrative and walking was characteristically manifested in the work of V. S., who participated in the 'Urban Body' workshop, producing as a final output an interactive map. A Google image of the area of Edinburgh, where the walks of the workshop took place, was divided into a grid of 20 equal parts under which different stories were depicted through the combination of text and images. Memories, dreams, thoughts and representations of actions and other places were synthesized into a narrative following a 'montage' or 'creative writing' technique, seeking to express the idea that 'we [always] carry places with us', being unravelled in her case while walking through Edinburgh. The reader of the map is invited to unfold these different parts, but it is not possible to unfold all of them simultaneously because of the way in which the hidden montage is crafted. The map remains therefore open to new stories created by the people opening the enveloped episodes.

One of the students in the Athens actions went so far as to write a mystery story set in Elaionas about a man who wakes up and realizes he does not know where he is. In addition to texts, some of the participants of the actions used photo montages, video and sound design software as means of merging in-situ experience with the thoughts and memories they related to it.

Fig. 4. Views of V. S. 's map.

Fig. 5. The sketchbook/envelope of T.V.

A different thread workshop, 'Re/Reading Urban Emptiness and Silence', addressed both the participants and the facilitators of the different workshops by distributing a number of sketchbooks to be used during the events. The sketchbook was designed as a site-specific piece, taking into consideration the ideas of pause and interruption, and translating them through the combination of different kinds of paper, different extracts of texts, and suggestions of short actions/tasks to its user. In most of the cases the sketchbooks were used as reflective devices in which the individuals either wrote or sketched spontaneous thoughts while walking or used them as an a posteriori diary.

Challenging the more closed and site-specific narrative of the sketchbook used in Edinburgh and reacting to the openness suggested by 'Performing Silence: What happens when you shift the focus?', another *envelope/sketchbook* was handed to the students in Athens. This time, the envelope followed a process-specific method of design, informed by the briefing of actions taking place during the workshop, and was handed to the students at a key moment, in the break between two silent walks in the area of Elaionas. The envelope included different kinds of papers; the participants could use it as a drawing board, a notebook or even a container of elements of the landscape. Questioning traditional sketchbooks proved to be a very useful pedagogical exercise: providing a narrative device to read the city that invited an embodied interaction (open, kneel, sketch, collect, write, exhibit its material and so forth). By comparing a site-specific to a process-specific documentation tool it was realized that the latter was more effectively used as directly linked to the shaping of openness as expressed through performativity and walking. This reminds us of the distinction between the 'map/no directions' and 'directions but no map' logics discussed before. In the case of T.V., therefore, the envelope became a 'vessel' of found objects, sketches, rubbings, thoughts and photographs resulting from the walking workshop that were afterwards curated into his narrative of the place: the student re-arranged the material seeking to 'tell the story' of Elaionas by using the same things and ideas that were collected from the area as well

as the materials provided by the envelope itself, transforming the latter almost into a kind of a narrative 'cabinet of curiosity'.

Emerging Threads

The examined workshops suggest an educational methodology that combines performativity, narrative and walking into conditions of openness in which participants work on a kind of 'creative writing' exercise, inspired by the interaction with the site as well as their personal memories, thoughts and imagination. Alternative ways of writing a brief, reading and documenting urban places and landscapes suggest the dynamic role that narrative can play in architectural education as a tool that remains flexible, adjustable and open depending on the embodied character of phenomenal spatiality. The narrative threads of these processes are based on the participants resituating themselves in the city according to diverse actions that keep changing the given parameters of the brief through their interaction with the context. By deploying narrative and performativity through walking in the city the actions suggest a learning environment that, while structured, remains open, in terms of a particular aim. A design teaching method based on a narrative (episodes or stories *shared* between the participants/students and the facilitators, the city and its people) that emerges and evolves during the workshops. This challenges the 'problem-solving' preoccupation we often see in architectural education, where the final result is seen as the most effective answer to a 'problem' or 'question' set from the beginning in a brief. Through a process of redirecting, shifting focus and bodily realization of intimacy, risk and discovery, the process is about the unsettling continuity of an emerging plot that greatly benefits the architectural education seen as a process of organically interrelating different components into a whole.

Through the lens of this openness, architectural and urban research is framed not as closed and strategically oriented processes, but as more organic, flexible and relational. The diverse characters of the player, the collector, the observer and the narrator, deployed in the examined events,

questioned the abstract, diagrammatic and information-based approaches to site reading.

The realization of the pedagogical dynamics of these open structures, fields and processes that do not have a definite end but are based on a constant negotiation offers a dynamic field that can be complex enough – interweaving open threads – to suggest ever-shifting palimpsests of narratives as modes of creative learning environments.

1   For more information about the network please visit: https://urbanemptiness.org/
2   This five-day event involved the following five workshops, all running in parallel: 'Urban Body' led by Marielys Burgos Meléndez, 'The Impossible Inaudible Soundwalk' led by Katerina Taliani and Akoo-o Collective, 'The Parthenon(s): A "beautiful ruin" and an unfinished monument' led by Sofia Grigoriadou and Elli Vassalou, 'Performing Silence: What Happens when you shift the focus?' led by Stella Mygdali and 'Re/Reading Urban Emptiness and Silence' led by Christos Kakalis.
    For detailed descriptions of the briefs see https://issuu.com/urbanemptiness/docs/programme_workshop_symposium.
3   See Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).
4   The workshop was held in combination with lectures and studio tutorials and was integrated in the agenda of the course 'Methodological Tools of Analysis for Creating Strategies of Integral Urban Interventions' of the MSc 'Design-Space-Culture' of the National Technical University of Athens.
5   Further on this see Ella Chmielewska, 'Writing with the photograph: espacement, description and an architectural text in action', in A. Dahlgren, N. Lager Vestberg and D. Patersson (eds.), *Representational Machines: Photography and the Production of Space* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2013), 83-105.
6   Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Towards a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 48.
7   Elyse Lamm Pineau, 'Teaching is Performance: Reconceptualizing a Problematic Metaphor', *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 31 (1994) no. 1, 14-15.
8   Edward S. Casey, *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps*

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 144.

On the current architectural discourse on this see Mark Dorrian, 'Architecture's Cartographic Turn', in F. Pousin (ed.), *Figures de la ville et construction des savoirs* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2005), 61-72.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Angeliki Sioli, 2013. 'Drawing With/In and Drawing Out: A Redefinition of Architectural Drawing through Edward S. Casey's Meditations on Mapping', in Azucena Cruz-Pierre and Donald A. Landes (eds.), *Exploring the Work of Edward S. Casey: Giving Voice to Place, Memory and Imagination* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 153-161.

Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), especially Chapter 7: 'Representation and the Linguistic Imagination', 197-214. Neil Spiller (ed.), 'Drawing Architecture', *Architectural Design*, no. 225 (September/October 2013).

The seminal piece on this theme is Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, AA Documents 2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

The work of philosophers such as Edward S. Casey and Tim Ingold, as well as human geographers such as Edward Relph and Yi Fu Tuan, has also influenced the challenging of architectural representation.

9   Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 64-70.

10 Karen O'Rourke, *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 47-98

11 Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths and Monuments* (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), 32.

12 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 107-126.

13 On this as especially unfolded during the workshops in Athens, see also Nelly Marda, Christos Kakalis, Olga Ioannou, 'Pedagogical approaches to embodied topography: a workshop that unravels the hidden and imaginary landscapes of Elaionas', *ZARCH Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Architecture and Urbanism*, no. 8 (2017), 288-299.