

Walking



Performance Walks – Backyard Conversations at SOWA 2008

Walking, simply placing one foot in front of the other can be a powerful act. Traveling on foot is multifaceted – practices of transportation, exercise, economics, ecology, meditation, and community building can all center on ambulation. Walking is also an element of art, dance, and urban planning. So, as we begin this investigation of art and place, it seems appropriate to consider this key unifying gesture. No matter the intention there are always three aspects of pedestrian movement - repetition, pace and connection.

To walk is to touch the earth and feel the body again and again. Each step repeats the other and establishes a pace that connects to our internal rhythms. Every stride begins with the touch under our feet and moves into the river of our being. It is a pathway to the body and a connection to place allowing us to explore our internal tempo and measure it in relation to the pulsing world.

Connection in the city is a different experience than a hike in the wilderness. The streets are public spaces, and they are in the words of the philosopher, Walter Benjamin, the dwelling of the collective. Between the buildings one experiences a kaleidoscope of lights, sounds, signs, people and the ever changing flow of traffic. Getting to know the neighborhood allows us to move outside of our familiar routine, making daily errands an intoxicating and energizing experience. Greeting a dog walker, smiling at a parent

pushing a stroller or saluting a jogger expands our world and builds community. While solitary observations or a momentary stop to read a poster tacked up on a telephone pole connect us to place in another way. To slow down and touch the ground opens the door for connection and contemplation as well as, the more practical advantages of health and even happiness.

Through a slight shift in tempo walking can be either an energizing cardio work out or a thoughtful ramble. Each plays an important role in our wellbeing. Aerobic exercise is necessary for our physical health while slowing down is key to mental and spiritual vigor. In a park, neighborhood or shopping district, taking time to stop and observe can result in new discoveries and many small joys. An unhurried amble allows for thoughtful contemplation, the release of tension, and valuable opportunities to greet a neighbor.

Like walking, bicycles and skateboards encourage contact and community. Each has its own rhythm, but all are human centered and green, gliding through the city while feeling the ground. In this world of fast cars, closed spaces, and screens, the possibility of understanding through texture and feel is rare and powerful. Like walking, Art is personal, direct, physical and key to a livable community.

(This short essay was written for the *Tacoma Mall Subarea Art & Placemaking* but can hopefully, stand on its own.)

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