

Abstract

Introduction

The walking tour is an enduring feature of cities. Fuelled by a desire to learn more about the hidden and unknown spaces of the city, the walking tour has moved beyond its historical role as tourist attraction to play a key role in the transformation of urban space through gentrification. Conversely, the walking tour has a counter-history as part of a critical urban praxis.

This article reflects on historical examples, as well as our own experience of conducting Field Trip, a critical geographical walking tour through an industrial precinct in Marrickville, a suburb of Sydney that is set to undergo rapid change as a result of high-rise residential apartment construction (Gibson et al.). This precinct, known as Carrington Road, is located on the unceded land of the Cadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation who call the area Bulanaming.

Drawing on a long history of philosophical walking, many contemporary writers (Solnit; Gros; Bendiner-Viani) have described walking as a practice that can open different ways of thinking, observing and being in the world. Some have focused on the value of walking to the study of place (Hall; Philips; Heddon), and have underscored its relationship to established research methods, such as sensory ethnography (Springgay and Truman). The work of Michel de Certeau pays particular attention to the relationship between walking and the city. In particular, the concepts of tactics and strategy have been applied in a variety of ways across cultural studies, cultural geography, and urban studies (Morris). In line with de Certeau's thinking, we view walking as an example of a tactic – a routine and often unconscious practice that can become a form of creative resistance.

In this sense, walking can be a way to engage in and design the city by opposing its structures, or strategies. For example, walking in a city such as Sydney that is designed for cars requires choosing alternative paths, redirecting flows of people and traffic, and creating custom shortcuts. Choosing pedestrianism in Sydney can certainly feel like a form of resistance, and we make the argument that Field Trip – and walking tours more generally – can be a way of doing this collectively, firstly by moving in opposite directions, and secondly, in incongruent speeds to those for whom the scale and style of strategic urban development is inevitable.

How such tactical walking relates to the design of cities, however, is less clear. Walking is a generally described in the literature as an individual act, while the design of cities is, at its best participatory, and always involving multiple stakeholders. This reveals a tension between the practice of walking as a *détournement* or appropriation of urban space, and its relationship to existing built form. Field Trip, as an example of collective walking, is one such appropriation of urban space – one designed to lead to more democratic decision making around the planning and design of cities. Given the anti-democratic, "post-political" nature of contemporary "consultation" processes, this is a seemingly huge task (Legacy et al.; Ruming). We make the argument that Field Trip – and walking tours more generally – can be a form of collective resistance to top-down urban planning.

By using an open-source [wiki](#) in combination with the Internet Archive, Field Trip also seeks to collectively document and make public the local knowledge generated by walking at the frontier of gentrification. We discuss these digital choices as oppositional practice, and consider the idea of tactical media (Lovink and Garcia; Raley) in order to connect knowledge sharing with the practice of walking.

This article is structured in four parts. Firstly, we provide a historical introduction to the relationship between walking tours and gentrification of global cities. Secondly, we examine the significance of walking tours in Sydney and then specifically within Marrickville. Thirdly, we discuss the Field Trip project as a citizen-led walking tour and, finally, elaborate on its role as tactical media project and offer some conclusions.

The Walking Tour and Gentrification

From the outset, people have been walking the city in their own ways and creating their own systems of navigation, often in spite of the plans of officialdom. The rapid expansion of cities following the Industrial Revolution led to the emergence of "imaginative geographies", where mediated representations of different urban conditions became a stand-in for lived experience (Steinbrink 219). The urban walking tour as mediated political tactic was utilised as far back as Victorian England, for reasons including the celebration of public works like the sewer system (Garrett), and the "othering" of the working class through upper- and middle-class "slum tourism" in London's East End (Steinbrink 220).

The influence of the Situationist theory of [dérive](#) has been immense upon those interested in walking the city, and we borrow from the *dérive* a desire to report on the under-reported spaces of the city, and to articulate alternative voices within the city in this project. It should be noted, however, that as Field Trip was developed for general public participation, and was organised with institutional support, some aspects of the *dérive* – particularly its disregard for formal structure – were unable to be incorporated into the project. Our responsibility to the participants of Field Trip, moreover, required the imposition of structure and timetable upon the walk. However, our individual and collective preparation for Field Trip, as well as our collective understanding of the area to be examined, has been heavily informed by psychogeographic methods that focus on quotidian and informal urban practices (Crosby and Searle; Iveson et al.).

In post-war American cities, walking tours were utilised in the service of gentrification. Many tours were organised by real estate agents with the express purpose of selling devalourised inner-city real estate to urban "pioneers" for renovation, including in Boston's South End (Tissot) and Brooklyn's Park Slope, among others (Lees et al 25). These tours focused on a symbolic revalorisation of "slum neighbourhoods" through a focus on "high culture", with architectural and design heritage featuring prominently. At the same time, urban socio-economic and cultural issues – poverty, homelessness, income disparity, displacement – were downplayed or overlooked. These tours contributed to a climate in which property speculation and displacement through gentrification practices were normalised. To this day, "[ghetto tours](#)" operate in minority neighbourhoods in Brooklyn, serving as a beachhead for gentrification.

Elsewhere in the world, walking tours are often voyeuristic, featuring "locals" guiding well-meaning tourists through the neighbourhoods of some of the world's most impoverished communities. Examples include the long running Klong Toei Private Tour, through "Bangkok's oldest and largest slum", or the now-ceased [Jakarta Hidden Tours](#), which took tourists to the riverbanks of Jakarta to see the city's poorest before they were displaced by gentrification.

More recently, all over the world activists have engaged in walking tours to provide their own perspective on urban change, attempting to direct the gentrifier's gaze inward. Whilst the most confrontational of these might be the [Yuppie Gazing Tour](#) of Vancouver's historically marginalised Downtown Eastside, other tours have highlighted the deleterious effects of gentrification in [Williamsburg](#), [San Francisco](#), [Oakland](#), and [Surabaya](#), among others. In smaller towns, walking tours have been utilised to highlight the erasure of marginalised scenes and subcultures, including underground creative spaces, migrant enclaves, alternative and [queer spaces](#).

Walking Sydney, Walking Marrickville

In many cities, there are now both walking tours that intend to scaffold urban renewal, and those that resist gentrification with alternative narratives. There are also some that unwittingly do both simultaneously. Marrickville is a historically working-class and migrant suburb with sizeable populations of Greek and Vietnamese migrants (Graham and Connell), as well as a strong history of manufacturing (Castles et al.), which has been undergoing gentrification for some time, with the arts playing an often contradictory role in its transformation (Gibson and Homan). More recently, as the suburb experiences rampant, financialised property development driven by global flows of capital, property developers have organised their own self-guided walking tours, deployed to facilitate the familiarisation of potential purchasers of dwellings with local amenities and "character" in precincts where redevelopment is set to occur. Mirvac, Marrickville's most active developer, has designed its own self-guided walking tour [Hit the Marrickville Pavement](#) to "explore what's on offer" and "chat to locals":

just 7km from the CBD, Marrickville is fast becoming one of Sydney's most iconic suburbs – a melting pot of cuisines, creative arts and characters founded on a rich multicultural heritage.

The perfect introduction, this self-guided walking tour explores Marrickville's historical architecture at a leisurely pace, finishing up at the pub.

So, strap on your walking shoes; you're in for a treat.

Other walking tours in the area seek to highlight political, ecological, and architectural dimension of Marrickville. For example, Marrickville Maps: Tropical Imaginaries of Abundance provides a series of plant-led walks in the suburb; The Warren Walk is a tour organised by local Australian Labor Party MP Anthony Albanese highlighting "the influence of early settlers such as the Schwebel family on the area's history" whilst presenting a "political snapshot" of ALP history in the area. The Australian Ugliness, in contrast, was a walking tour organised by Thomas Lee in 2016 that offered an insight into the relationships between the visual amenity of the streetscape, aesthetic judgments of an ambiguous nature, and the discursive and archival potentialities afforded by camera-equipped smartphones and photo-sharing services like Instagram.



Figure 1: Thomas Lee points out canals under the street of Marrickville during *The Australian Ugliness*, 2016.

Sydney is a city adept at erasing its past through poorly designed mega-projects like freeways and office towers, and memorialisation of lost landscapes has tended towards the literary (Berry; Mudie). Resistance to redevelopment, however, has often taken the form of spectacular public intervention, in which public knowledge sharing was a key goal. The Green Bans of the 1970s were partially spurred by redevelopment plans for places like the Rocks and Woolloomooloo (Cook; Iveson), while the remaking of Sydney around the 2000 Olympics led to anti-gentrification actions such as SquatSpace and the [Tour of Beauty](#), an “aesthetic activist” tour of sites in the suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo threatened with “revitalisation.”



Figure 2: “[Tour of Beauty](#)”, Redfern-Waterloo 2016.

What marks the *Tour of Beauty* as significant in this context is the participatory nature of knowledge production: participants in the tours were addressed by representatives of the local community – the Aboriginal Housing Company, the local Indigenous Women’s Centre, REDWatch activist group, architects, designers and more. Each speaker presented their perspective on the rapidly gentrifying suburb, demonstrating how urban space is made and remade through processes of contestation.

This differentiation is particularly relevant when considering the basis for Sydney-centric walking tours. Mirvac’s self-guided tour focuses on the easy-to-see historical “high culture” of Marrickville, and encourages participants to “chat to locals” at the pub. It is a highly filtered approach that does not consider broader relations of class, race and gender that constitute Marrickville. A more intense exploration of the social fabric of the city – providing a glimpse of the hidden or unknown spaces – uncovers the layers of social, cultural, and economic history that produce urban space, and fosters a deeper engagement with questions of urban socio-spatial justice.

Solnit argues that walking can allow us to encounter “new thoughts and possibilities.” To walk, she writes, is to take a “subversive detour... the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences” (13). In this way, tactical activist walking tours aim to make visible what cannot be seen, in a way that considers the polysemic nature of place, and in doing so, they make visible the hidden relations of power that produce the contemporary city.

In contrast, developer-led walking tours are singularly focussed, seeking to attract inflows of capital to neighbourhoods undergoing “renewal.” These tours encourage participants to adopt the position of urban voyeur, whilst activist-led walking tours encourage collaboration and participation in urban struggles to protect and preserve the contested spaces of the city. It is in this context that we sought to devise our own walking tour – *Field Trip* – to encourage active participation in issues of urban renewal.

In organising this walking tour, however, we acknowledge our own entanglements within processes of gentrification. As designers, musicians, writers, academics, researchers, venue managers, artists, and activists, in organising *Field Trip*, we could easily be identified as “creatives”, implicated in Marrickville’s ongoing transformation. All of us have ongoing and deep-rooted connections to various Sydney subcultures – the same subcultures so routinely splashed across developer advertising material. This project was borne out of *Frontyard* – a community not-just-art space, and has been supported by the local Inner West Council. As such, *Field Trip* cannot be divorced from the highly contentious processes of redevelopment and gentrification that are always simmering in the background of discussions about Marrickville. We hope, however, that in this project we have started to highlight alternative voices in those redevelopment processes – and that this may contribute towards a “method of equality” for an ongoing democratisation of those processes (Davidson and Iveson).

Field Trip: Urban Geographical Enquiry as Activism

Given this context, *Field Trip* was designed as a public knowledge project that would connect local residents, workers, researchers, and decision-makers to share their experiences living and working in various parts of Sydney that are undergoing rapid change. The site of our project – Carrington Road, Marrickville in Sydney’s inner-west – has been earmarked for major redevelopment in coming years and is quickly becoming a flashpoint for the debates that permeate throughout the whole of Sydney: housing affordability, employment accessibility, gentrification and displacement.

To date, public engagement and consultation regarding proposed development at Carrington Road has been limited. A major landholder in the area has engaged a consultancy firm to establish a community reference group (CRG) to help guide the project. The CRG arose after public outcry at an original \$1.3 billion proposal to build 2,616 units in twenty towers of up to 105m in height (up to thirty-five storeys) in a predominantly low-rise residential suburb. [Save Marrickville](#), a community group created in response to the proposal, has representatives on this reference group, and has endeavoured to make this process public. Ruming (181) has described these forms of consultation as “post-political,” stating that

in a universe of consensual decision-making among diverse interests, spaces for democratic contest and antagonistic politics are downplayed and technocratic policy development is deployed to support market and development outcomes.

Given the notable deficit of spaces for democratic contest, Field Trip was devised as a way to reframe the debate outside of State- and developer-led consultation regimes that guide participants towards accepting the supposed inevitability of redevelopment. We invited a number of people affected by the proposed plans to speak during the walking tour at a location of their choosing, to discuss the work they do, the effect that redevelopment would have on their work, and their hopes and plans for the future. The walking tour was advertised publicly and the talks were recorded, edited and released as freely available [podcasts](#).

The proposed redevelopment of Carrington Road provided us with a unique opportunity to develop and operate our own walking tour. The linear street created an obvious “circuit” to the tour – up one side of the road, and down the other. We selected speakers based on pre-existing relationships, some formed during prior rounds of research (Gibson et al.). Speakers included a local Aboriginal elder, a representative from the Marrickville Historical Society, two workers (who also gave tours of their workplaces), the Lead Heritage Adviser at Sydney Water, who gave us a tour of the Carrington Road pumping station, and a representative from the Save Marrickville residents’ group. Whilst this provided a number of perspectives on the day, regrettably some groups were unrepresented, most notably the perspective of migrant groups who have a long-standing association with industrial precincts in Marrickville. It is hoped that further community input and collaboration in future iterations of Field Trip will address these issues of representation in community-led walking tours.

A number of new understandings became apparent during the walking tour. For instance, the heritage-listed [Carrington Road](#) sewage pumping station, which is of “historic and aesthetic significance”, is unable to cope with the proposed level of residential development. According to Philip Bennett, Lead Heritage Adviser at Sydney Water, the best way to maintain this piece of heritage infrastructure is to keep it running. While this issue had been discussed in private meetings between Sydney Water and the developer, there is no formal mechanism to make this expert knowledge public or accessible.

Similarly, through the Acknowledgement of Country for Field Trip, undertaken by Donna Ingram, Cultural Representative and a member of the [Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council](#), it became clear that the local Indigenous community had not been consulted in the development proposals for Carrington Road. This information, while not necessary secret, had also not been made public.

Finally, the inclusion of knowledgeable local workers whose businesses are located on Carrington Road provided an insight into the “everyday.” They talked of community and collaboration, of site-specificity, the importance of clustering within their niche industries, and their fears for displacement should redevelopment proceed.

Via a community-led, participatory walking tour like Field Trip, threads of knowledge and new information are uncovered. These help create new spatial stories and readings of the landscape, broadening the scope of possibility for democratic participation in cities.



Figure 3: Donna Ingram at Field Trip 2018.

Tactical Walking, Tactical Media

Stories connected to walking provide an opportunity for people to read the landscape differently (Mitchell). One of the goals of Field Trip was to begin a public knowledge exchange about Carrington Road so that spatial stories could be shared, and new readings of urban development could spread beyond the confines of the self-contained tour. Once shared, this knowledge becomes a story, and once remixed into existing stories and integrated into the way we understand the neighbourhood, a collective spatial practice is generated. “Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice”, says de Certeau in “Spatial Stories”. “In reality, they organise walks” (72).

As well as taking a tactical approach to walking, we took a tactical approach to the mediation of the knowledge, by recording and broadcasting the voices on the walk and feeding information to a publicly accessible [wiki](#).

The term “tactical media” is an extension of de Certeau’s concept of tactics. David Garcia and Geert Lovink applied de Certeau’s concept of tactics to the field of media activism in their manifesto of tactical media, identifying a class of producers who amplify temporary reversals in the flow of power by exploiting the spaces, channels and platforms necessary for their practices.

Tactical media has been used since the late nineties to help explain a range of open-source practices that appropriate technological tools for political purposes. While pointing out the many material distinctions between different types of tactical media projects within the arts, Rita Raley describes them as “forms of critical intervention, dissent and resistance” (6). The term has also been adopted by media activists engaged in a range of practices all over the world, including the [Tactical Technology Collective](#). For Field Trip, tactical media is a way of creating representations that help navigate neighbourhoods as well as alternative political processes that shape them. In this sense, tactical representations do not “offer the omniscient point of view we associate with Cartesian cartographic practice” (Raley 2). Rather these representations are politically subjective systems of navigation that make visible hidden information and connect people to the decisions affecting their lives.

Conclusion

We have shown that the walking tour can be a tourist attraction, a catalyst to the transformation of urban space through gentrification, and an activist intervention into processes of urban renewal that exclude people and alternative ways of being in the city. This article presents practice-led research through the design of Field Trip. By walking collectively, we have focused on tactical ways of opening up participation in the future of neighbourhoods, and more broadly in designing the city. By sharing knowledge publicly, through this article and other means such as an online wiki, we advocate for a city that is open to multimodal readings, makes space for sharing, and is owned by those who live in it.

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