

'Space is a Practiced Place'¹

Sophia Emmanouil and Aggeliki Aggeli

This paper seeks to explore a recent collaborative research-by-practice project conducted in the Hyde Park area of Leeds. Building on the Situationists' theories, and particularly that of the *dérive* and that of groups of psychogeographers such as the Milwaukee Association of Psychogeographers (MAP), and various other urban exploration groups, Sophia Emmanouil and Aggeliki Aggeli set off on a journey of urban exploration and experimentation in order to test the above theories and develop alternative ways of engaging with the environment.

Dérive: An unplanned journey through an urban landscape. According to Guy Debord, the aim of a *dérive* is to provoke sharp emotional reactions to the urban environment and transform the perception of the city as formed by current society.²

The authors composed a series of urban bio-mapping experiments asking individuals and groups to draw mental maps and translate abstract concepts into physical paths in the city. The aim was to put into practice such theories and develop alternative ways of engaging with their surroundings. By studying patterns of use, occupation, abandonment, interaction and public engagement through playful, instruction based games, the authors have come to realise the importance of individuality in the urban uniformity, and the opposing threat of anonymity to the contemporary city.

The Hyde Park Board Game

In the summer of 2006, we devised an alternative board game that could be played during Unity Day which aims to celebrate diversity and highlight the positive effects of living, working and studying in the area of Hyde Park, Leeds, by making use of local community participation. The Hyde Park Unity Day is a multicultural annual celebration of diversity and harmonious cohabitation; a creative fusion of art, gastronomy and community action organised by a collective of volunteers in Hyde Park. The Festival began by a group of locals as a peaceful and positive gesture after riots that occurred in a local pub, Newlands, in 1995.



A mix of people, events and nature during different years of celebrating Unity Day. Collage, Aggeliki Aggeli & Sophia Emmanouil, 2006.

Aims and Objectives

It was our intention that this experiment would encourage people to acknowledge their surroundings and the landmarks they pass every day. As recognisable forms and patterns, these landmarks have an effect on people's movements and their perceptions of a space. We were interested to hear participants' comments about how and why they visited each site, and their experience on that particular day. By seeking feedback we created a more participatory and engaging environment. We also wished to investigate whether people would use maps (or other spatial data), in addition to their previous experience of a space, in order to engage with their surroundings.

Methodology

A set of instructions was handed out to the participants. On one side there were local recognisable places suggested as sites for investigating, and on the other, a set of alternative proposals, as follows:

-
- Start heading in any direction shown on the board. Act only on instinct
 - Observe the sites around you as if you have never seen them before
 - Keep notes and sketches, collect things you find in order to tell a story about sites you visit
 - Notice patterns
 - Copy
 - Trace
 - Record what you are drawn to
 - Document the experiences encountered on the way
 - Do the opposite of what you think you should
 - If you start to think you are wasting your time then you are doing it correctly
 - Feel free to alter the route or destination
 - Lose all sense of time and place

We explained the above 'rules' of the game and proposed that we meet up two hours later at the starting point in order to discuss progress and collect people's notes.

At the end of this procedure it was hoped that we would be able to map the area according to participants' experiences. Moreover, we would be able to compare people's experiences and discover whether their idea of landmarks in the area matched our own perception, as well as our anticipations of the result. The following board of recognisable landmarks was handed to the players, who were encouraged to participate through posters at the festival site. As organisers we observed and coordinated the activity.

Inspiration and Background

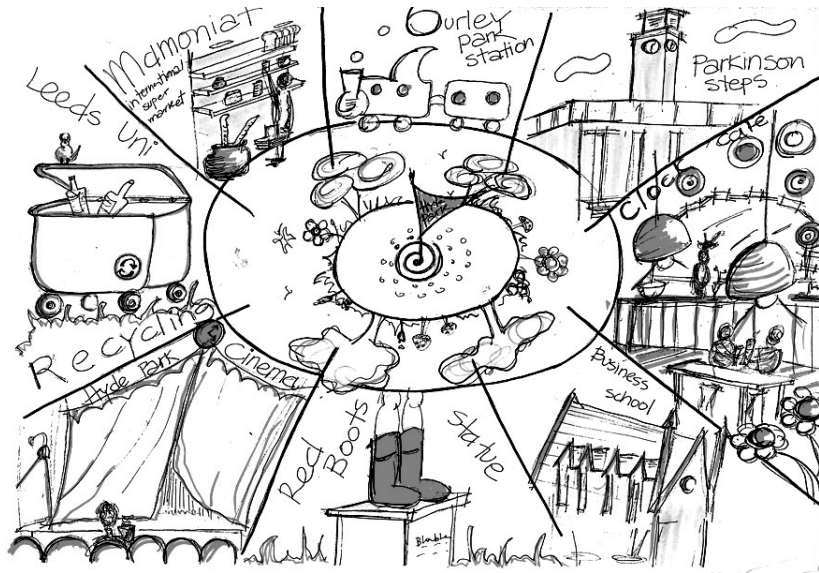
The activity was inspired by current trends for urban games which utilise new technologies such as GPS (Global Positioning Systems). According to the game, people's participation can be active or more passive, they can move as they please, they are not forced to complete the routes given and they can have either a more imaginary approach or a more pragmatic one, depending their mood at the time. These games are examples of the emotional mapping of an area.

Participants

Liv Garvey (learning coordinator), Paula McGregor (nurse), Bob Schiffi (musician), Vassilis Theodorakopoulos (engineer), Asteris Charitaras (CAD technician), Tim McGinley (architect).

Feedback and Findings

There was a general excitement and anticipation at the start of the game and we were pleased with the number of people interested in taking part. A characteristic sample of their recorded experiences is presented below. Some people followed our suggestions and visited all of the sites, but most participants preferred to go to a limited selection and imagine the rest of the route. This imaginary approach was the main subject of our talk at the end of the day.



The board of locally recognisable 'landmarks' suggested as visiting places for the participants. All locations have the park as their central feature.

① I found out the red cafe so I started to try for this

② It was my 1st time in unity day so I decided to well struggle the part to what is happening and I ended in business school. My programme was works here so I had a nice look at new work place

③ After I went to the red boots statue which is opposite the business school. The feeling and who were in unity day is fantastic so I used to make the time as short as possible to stay around the park.

④ I wanted to see what super worked that I discovered. The area here is well and is related to the wide park system which is my next job.

⑤ This cinema is the best of Hyde park and not very early so we it here, but am getting far from the unity day so I had to go back more.

⑥ I finished the walk here; I cannot be bothered any anymore else.

An anonymous participant who did not complete the route.

① The red boots statue hung above my red eyes? Did John Red where red boots?

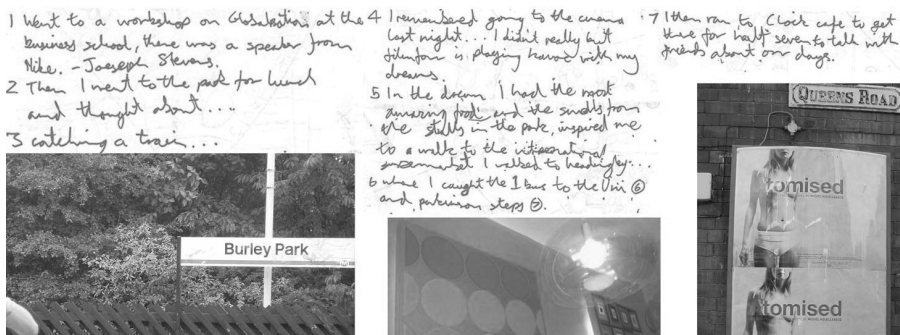
② The Clock cafe loomed in my mind. Cafe a pain au chocolat

③ But then the chocolate bags came into view and I realised I need to reuse

④ I passed Hyde Park Cinema passing Red Boots, Recycling a pain au chocolat merged. Then I had my idea for my latest zombie movie, pain au chocolat & cat's red boots and recycled into dumplings! Adults only

This record is the most characteristic of the imaginary approaches. The participant describes a neighbourhood according to emotions and ideas provoked by certain places and previous

experiences. He mentions the places as impulses or desires connected with people and situations and in that way creates a descriptive narrative. Collage, Paula McGregor, 2006.



Another example of the subjective description of space; in this case even dreams are introduced to describe a location. We recognise strong sentimental links between some of the sites and the participant. Collage, Bob Schiffin, 2006.



Another collage of experiences as captured by a participant. Collage, Liv Garrey, 2006.



The meeting at the end of the game. Collage, Aggeliki Aggeli and Sophia Emmanouil, 2006.

Conclusion... or Beginnings?

Through this real-life game, we aimed to give people a reason to visit places they already knew well, asking them to reconsider their emotional responses to each location. The results were interesting. Almost all the participants came up with visual and textual narrations of a walk that became their story.

Some of the landmarks around the Hyde Park area, have survived the ruthless teeth of demolition, regeneration and urban expansion. Plans by the local council to use part of Hyde Park in order to construct a multi-story car park, raised a series of reactions and united the local residents in defending their valuable green haven. Space affects our behaviour and is the canvas upon which we draw our itineraries and unfold the string of our lives.

Notes

1. Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien, Arts de Faire* (Vol.1). University of California Press, 1974. In this article entitled (in English) *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau examines the ways in which people individualise mass culture, altering things, from utilitarian objects to street plans to rituals, laws and language, in order to make them their own.

2. According to Guy Debord the term 'psycho geography' was coined in 1953 by an 'illiterate Kabyle', see *Les Levres Nues*, No. 6 (1955). In 'Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation', an article published in *Internationale Situationiste*, No.1 (June 1958), 'psycho geography' is defined as 'the study of specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.'

3. Alain de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*. London: Penguin, 2006.

Happy encounters and instinctive explorations can unleash the power of imagination and allow people to leave their mark, enabling them to engage with a more satisfactory, more sustainable, more diverse urban environment. The construction or reconstruction of urban identity as individuality and originality has now become a vital need in the urban environment and a call to all architects and urban planners. According to Alain de Botton, belief in the significance of architecture is premised on the notion that we are, for better or for worse, different people in different places, and on the conviction that it is architecture's task to render vivid to us who we might ideally be.³