

Book Review: O'Rourke, Karen. *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers.* Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2013

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“The heel attacks the ground, the sole of the foot is pressed down flat, the heel takes off and is followed by the toes, the lower limbs move forward and then totally extend. (...) The pelvis rotates vertically, shifting its weight to the free side, the knee flexes, the pelvis turns to the side, the lower limb rotates one way, the waist in the opposite direction.” (27-28) A complex and sophisticated combination of muscular actions and skeleton movements hides behind what we usually perceive as a simple routine everyday practice—the practice of walking. And the fact that the above-described body mechanism only refers to the movement of a Western subject wearing city shoes and walking on level ground, further reveals the unnoticed bodily complexity of putting one step in front of the other. (28) Walking literally embodies the process by which “the live being recurrently loses and reestablishes equilibrium with its surroundings.” (28)

It is thus not a surprise that walking has been so extensively, imaginatively, and passionately engaged in understanding, measuring and recording personal surroundings—in short, in mapping them. The exquisite study *Walking and Mapping: Artists as Cartographers* (2013) by Karen O'Rourke, focuses on the topic and walks us through a highly fascinating path of older and contemporary artistic projects that have brought together walking and mapping, they thereby engaging the body and subverting a more conventional scientific understanding of cartography. The book itself is a map drawn by the author, who not only manages to capture “traces of many ephemeral works,” (246) “charting ultimately the cartographic jungle and mapping the mappers,” (xvii) as she herself states, but also suggests fascinating connections

between the different projects, drawing connecting paths among them and towards the political, philosophical and social parameters evoked by the various artists cited. It follows upon publications with similar concerns like philosopher Edward Casey's *Earth-Mapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* (2006) but the perspective is clearly from an artist's point of view. An artist herself, O'Rourke has not only engaged in a comprehensive reading of the artists' statements and intentions regarding their works but has even participated in quite a number of the performances and events she discusses in the book. This actually accounts for her lyrical narrative depictions which manage to transmit the atmosphere of the events and capture the embodied experiences shared by the participants, her accountings offering the reader a genuine insightful perspective on them.

The range of projects the study explores is notably wide. The classic references to the Surrealists, psychogeography and the Situationists are all well presented, but the book stands out for its meticulous focus on an outstanding number of contemporary works which experiment with many different kinds of media. "Nowadays the convergence of global networks, online databases, and new tools for location-based mapping coincides with a renewed interest in walking as an art form," (xvii) the author notes. Like walking, mapping is an embodied experience carried out from a particular point of view that "makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception." (xviii)

And it is this point of departure that defines many of the author's readings on the artists' works and why the book bears a special merit for architects and urban planners, one that relates beyond the obvious connections between architecture and art. Perception, understanding and appropriation of urban space are recurrent themes of interest, each becoming a question asked in various ways through consideration of the many different projects detailed. A few selected examples can demonstrate in detail the architecture-related topics explored in the artists's works.

In the chapter "A Form of Perception or a Form of Art," the analysis of the *Here While We Walk* (2006) performance describes, for instance, a group of people moving within the limits of an elastic band in Paris. The group walked through small side streets, a park, an expanse of open ground near a building project, and an industrial loading dock on the banks of Seine. As O'Rourke—who participated—explains, the moving group of people, without speaking, formed a mobile architecture in which the individual parts worked together to create an overall shape, a fluid configuration that was arrived at by subtle negotiation. "Both the walkers, who were busy concentrating on being 'here' while walking, and the passers-by, whose remarks were met by silence, perceived the urban landscape differently." (45) Crossing through it required a conscious understanding and embodied perception of other people's movements, an interaction among all the bodies, which also had to take under consideration the body of the city and its constantly shifting urban settings. The performance clearly hints at the need for the cultivation of a heightened perceptivity regarding the subtle urban nuances that we tend to ignore in our everyday routine use of space, but which give a city its unique character.

Of particular interest from an architectural perspective are also references to artists and artists' groups challenging or questioning architectural qualities and preconceived urban norms in their walking-mapping projects. The Grenoble-based group Ici-Même [Gr], e.g., in 2009 organized the *Workshop "En marche"* in Paris, a transect walk through the 15th arrondissement of the city. The artists drew a straight line on a city map and asked the participants to follow it as closely as possible. As the path did not correspond to any existing street, this required that the participants enter buildings in search of a path leading to the next blocks or tramp through tiny courtyards. (88) They were thus forced to explore in an active embodied way the physical boundaries and the porosity of the city in search of channels for passage, and to question and test the limits between public and private spaces.

The Italian group Stalker has been inspired by similar urban quests. Since 1995, when most of its members were architectural students, they have taken people on walks through "urban voids," crossing Rennes, Milan, Miami, and Berlin to propose "a reverse reading" of the architectural network. Rather than building urban blocks, they document the marginal, nonfunctional zones that separate them. They have expanded their architectural urban research even further, organizing urban walks in which they spent four days walking around the periphery of Rome, taking photographs and keeping a diary, firmly believing that this what architects should be doing. (234)

Upon our looking further into real-time artists' projects, the ephemeral nature of the city's ever-shifting sensory landscape emerges. Developed conjointly by designers and engineers in Göteborg, Sweden, *Sonic City* (2002-2004) encouraged people to explore city sounds through improvised movements. The project used real-time interactions between the users who were wearing headphones and their surroundings, to create music. Paths through the city became musical compositions as the listeners wandered through the shifting urban environment. The system retrieved information about their actions and their whereabouts and mapped them to real-time processing of urban sounds. The result was music heard through headphones. When wearing this system, urban atmospheres, random encounters, and everyday activities all participated in creating music for walking. The most interesting of outcomes, though, was that when the prototype was tested, users "felt that the city was more in control of the music than they were and tried to regain this control by actively seeking appropriate urban contexts or by modulating city input with their body posture." (132) In this way what seemed at first to be frustrating led "to new kinds of improvised behaviors and creative use of physical space." (132)

The feeling that the city is more in control over our behavior was also the focus of *The Choreography of Everyday Life*; a comment on how our everyday movement is highly choreographed whether we realize it or not. Artist Teri Rueb began with the conviction that our behavior in the city reflects the cultural, social, and political forces embodied therein and that it reveals an increasing awareness of the ubiquity of video surveillance. Collaborating with choreographers and dancers allowed her "to juxtapose the notions of formal choreography and dance with the highly scripted nature of our everyday movement in the built environment." (134)

Whether hinting towards an alternative understanding of the subtle urban interactions among a city's various inhabitants with the city's physical appearance and sensorial presence or questioning the ambivalent nature of different cities' spaces, the selective examples and many more projects studied by the author reinforce the need for an appreciation and 'measuring' of place through the body, an understanding that valorizes a user's appropriation of space and carefully examines receptivity towards artists', architects', and urban planners' designs. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur's famous warning towards all planners on "just how great an abyss can separate the rules governing the rationality of a project from the rules governing the receivability of its outcome,"¹ rightly comes in mind. From an architectural perspective the lessons to be learned from the artists' intentions and their respective experimentations are potentially invaluable.

Notes

- 1 Paul Ricoeur, "Architecture and Narrative," in *Identity and difference: integration and plurality in today's forms, cultures between the ephemeral and the lasting*, tr. Huw Evans (Milano: Electra, 1996), 71-72.

About the Author

Angeliki Sioli obtained her professional Diploma in Architecture from the University of Thessaly, Greece in 2005 and was granted a post-professional Master's degree in Architectural Theory by the National Technical University of Athens in 2008. She is currently completing her Ph.D. in the History and Theory Program of McGill University's School of Architecture. Her theoretical research seeks out connections between architecture and literature in the public realm of the early 20th century European city, focusing on aspects of embodied perception of urban environment through walking. Her work has been presented in professional and interdisciplinary conferences as well as in architectural publications.