

Mobilities, Public Space, and Commuter Culture at York University's Keele Campus

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Abstract

Walking is acknowledged as a powerful mechanism for understanding and valuing space, however, places can be devalued by constant mobility, like that of habitual commuting, and become 'placeless' (Cresswell 2006). Through an urban intervention, students were enabled and empowered to alter and engage with the York University Campus. The intervention challenged the intended use of Campus Walk, interjected into mundane rhythms of commuter life, drew individuals out of personal technospace into the broader social landscape, and ultimately, allowed the space to be more than that of "passive mobilities"



Physical Design

The intervention drew attention to power of the built environment. Pedestrians are retained at the fringes and devalued as players in the urban landscape. The built environment at Campus Walk creates a human highway; heavy foot traffic flows through the corridor push those who stop to the periphery. This steady current works to govern direct and indirect interactions between people (Coyné, 2010), where pedestrians socially and physically 'go with the flow'. People were drawn to cease their movement and challenge the indirectly designated use of the Walk. Since time spent has a positive impact of belonging in space (Lewicka, 2010) and many student commuters feel detachment from campus, this project allowed the space to have greater purpose than as a channel between peoples' start points and intended destinations.

Rhythms

Rhythm connects aspects of space, time, and daily life. Using Lefebvre's analysis, time is essential to the experience of place. Lines of mobility are not continuous, broken into experiential instances or 'beats' that constitute rhythm. However, those instances are eliminated when the experience is unbroken. If the individual travels through space without moments of pause, glance, wandering, or other beats, the experience of mobility becomes a solid line and lack of beats creates dull spatial rhythm. The movements of commuters on campus are a synchronization of many rhythms (Cresswell and Merriman 2011); individuals habitually take the same bus, arrive at campus at a regular hour, walk the same path to class, and so on. By allowing people to pause, engage, and take part in a ludic, childlike act, the intervention offered alternative beats in the daily commuter rhythm, as well as broader life rhythms.

Technospace

The advent of personal electronic devices (PEDs) produces a new hybrid space (de Freitas 2010), where the use of technologies in public places meshes with the rapidly expanding digital public. However, as was observed, when users are engrossed in the digital realm and do not give significance to physical surroundings, Campus Walk becomes less of a hybrid space and more of a digital space. Pedestrians are isolated from their surroundings, causing broader cultural homogenization (Lewicka 2010), where spaces lack the character of the potential actors present. PED's allow the aloof traveler to detach, diminishing the influential and experiential potential of walking (Cresswell 2006). So, this in-between is void space when not interacted with through peoples' movement. Breaking into the digital and reclaiming pedestrian attention to the physical promotes spatial significance and strengthens physical-digital hybridity.

Background & Research Question

Mobility is the act of moving between locations and accompanying understandings of the associated place (Cresswell 2006). As such, the significance of space is deeply rooted in movement (Cresswell and Merriman 2001). An intervention is a small-scale urban exercise that aims to reshape the area in some way (Iveson 2013). These practices engage the public with critical questions surrounding the space while representing the site in an alternative fashion. Using this framework, this study sought to better understand and subsequently challenge "passive mobilities" that are enabled and enforced along Campus Walk, using the site as a microcosm for commuter mobilities on campus.

Methodology

From 8:30 to 10:30am on Campus Walk, a pedestrian corridor running east to west through the heart of Keele Campus, "Why not stay a little longer?" was written on the pavement and chalk left with the words "Take a piece + tell us." Observations consisted of recording the frequency of passersby noticing the writing versus those walking past, individuals stopping, and documenting written responses, as well as notes on participant conversations.

Unfulfilled Potential and "Passive Mobilities"

My intervention was based on the idea that York University's Campus Walk as a site of constant missed opportunities for social and transformative practices. Though not a campus hub, thresholds create the opportunity for transformation (Franck and Stevens 2007), yet because it is also space of mobility, this is not achieved on Campus Walk as people do not linger at the threshold as they would do at others. This creates a negative feedback loop, where the space is not distinct because people do not stay, and people do not stay because the space does not offer anything distinct. The combination of physical design, firm mobile rhythms, and personal technospace in mobile space facilitate the underuse of prospective liminal and truly meaningful public space through what I have called "passive mobilities." While walking permits the assertion of presence in space (Coyné 2010), the matters previously discussed indirectly sanction walkers to be submissive to and detached from their surroundings, as their mobile act is curtail, effectively held back from reaching its potential and stripped down to thoughtless movement.