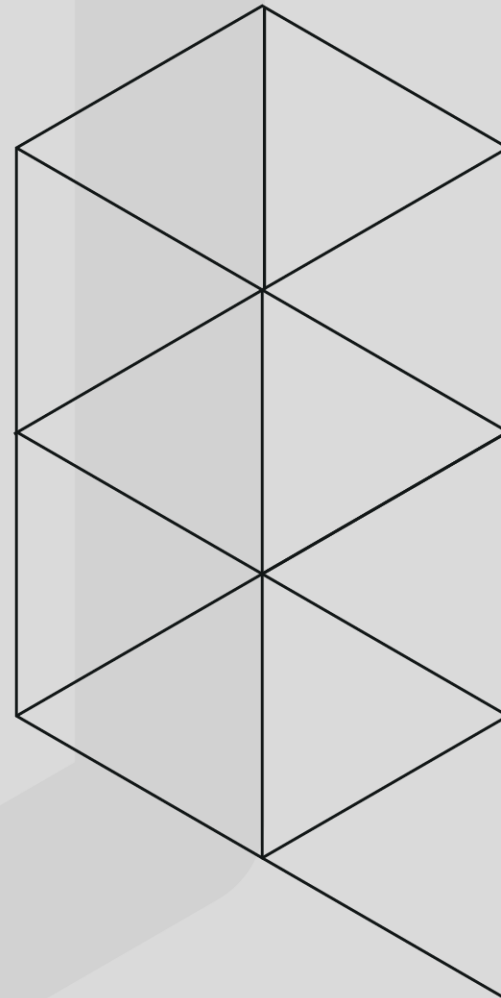


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Spatial Practices in
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Walking cities in lockdown

SPACEX Deliverable, Work Package 5 (D5.6, D18)



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Walking Cities in Lockdown

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Introduction

Jaspar Joseph-Lester (JJ-L): As the world went into lockdown due to COVID-19, Walkative continued with a series of international city walks in a virtual sphere. As part of this new series of urban walks, the group 'travelled' to Berlin, Cape Town, Stockholm, Toronto, the Marshall Islands, Hong Kong, Santiago, San Francisco and Los Angeles. In each city, we saw how the pandemic had changed the way artists engage with public space and how this new relationship with the city had impacted on their practice.

Simon King (SK): The differences in location and time zones between presenter-walkers, panellists and audience throughout these virtual group walks reinforced not only a sense of our temporal and spatial dislocation but also a shared commonality. Meeting online for this series allowed for a connection in the here and now and a mode of communication via the Zoom interface, that was conducive to a dialogic exchange of experiences, attitudes and preoccupations.

JJ-L: For this article, we invited participants to respond to a series of questions designed to draw out reflections on how the pandemic has forced us to consider urban walking in ways which extend into the digital sphere of online dialogue and screen sharing. As we moved from one global city to the next, we began to see how different approaches to the enforcing of restrictions embodied broader political, economic and cultural differences. There was, for example, a clear distinction between the severe lockdown measures that were introduced in Cape Town and the liberal appeal to good citizenship that northern hemisphere cities such as Stockholm chose to rely on. These measures of course impacted on the way we experienced the virtual walk and, in each case, led to deeper discussions about the heightened presence of ideological structures embedded within shared public space.

SK: In their responses to these questions, Robin Kirsten (Cape Town), Hannes Brunner responding on behalf of collaborative colleagues Viviana and Mark Uriona and Meitaka Kendall-Lekka (Majuro, Marshall Islands), Antonia Low (Berlin) and Anna Ådahl (Stockholm), share a number of complementary themes. Key to this is the question of how we walk in the post-pandemic city and how that might include transgressive, atomized and collective thoughts, affects and experiences. Here we see how navigating and

negotiating cities in lockdown requires us to develop new thinking around re-territorialization, improvisation, creativity and political awareness. Reflecting on what was learnt from this online activity and how it allows us to rethink practice, the respondents identify its possibility as a research tool through which a number of methods and perspectives are made possible including storytelling, shared knowledge and rhizomatic thinking. In combination, these approaches reveal something of the process through which practice is developed and thought. Moving on to consider how the conditions of lockdown have led to new ways of working as artists, our presenter-walkers posit technology and communication as vital factors, specifically, through the possibility of local, technologically unmediated networks and a rethinking of our relationship with this technology. The potential for new ways of walking is elaborated through empathy and participation, through the exchange of individual perspectives and the overcoming of western-informed traditions. What we have sought to capture here is an insight not only into practice but the changing conditions of practice within an urban context.

You can view the walks here.

Jaspar Joseph-Lester and Simon King (JJ-L and SK): How do we walk in a post-pandemic city?

Robin Kirsten (RK): In Cape Town most journeys are done by car, bus or collective taxi. The short distances that are walked, are to local neighbourhoods, to shop. However, as a consequence of the extreme lockdown experience, the desire to walk more has increased. Certainly in the first months, walking was viewed as an act of liberation, insurrection even, although there was nowhere to walk to, and done purely for the sake of walking itself. Those who I have spoken to reacquainted themselves with their local terrain and areas, discovering pockets and fragments which ordinarily had been overlooked, forgotten and ignored. This is politicized walking, as an expression of self-determination, and reclamation of the body as having its own agency and drives, particularly as the body and its social interactions were being so heavily governed by the ruling party and its absolute authority over our bodies. In this we all became Homo Sacer – in the sense that Giorgio Agamben uses it – as kings in our own homes, but stripped of autonomy through legal edicts based on a declaration of national disaster.

Hannes Brunner (HB): Considering the situation in Majuro the capital of the Marshall Islands,¹ our walk took a different approach to the other walks in the series. Here we saw how even in the South Pacific, our digitized globalized consciousness in a post-pandemic environment changes the way we move around public space. The immediate situation concerning ecological disaster is made more urgent given the fact that there may be little support from the world at large. As the Marshall Islands might already have reached the tipping point of climate catastrophe, we wanted to make our fellow walkers aware that a change in thinking is required and that this has important consequences for the world at large.



Figure 1: Walking Cities in Lockdown.

Antonia Low (AL): Walking in post-pandemic Berlin, I am cautious about my body's presence in public, my pace, my breath. With this

awareness, I try to keep a safe distance from elderly, fragile-looking people. I try to keep a safe distance from sweating joggers and large groups in the parks. I imagine clouds of sweat and saliva drops surrounding such hyperactive individuals as aerosols unfold from their bodies and unmasked mouths. This makes me want to step far away from all and walk in pure solitude. The smell and feel of clean, fresh air has become a tangible pleasure.

Anna Ådahl (AA): Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, Stockholm has not had a lockdown but restrictions, severe 'recommendations' so to say. With and during this time, we have learned to navigate the city and public space according to the recommendations of keeping distance and avoiding clusters of people, crowds or rush-hour/collective traffic. This new collective choreography has been practised for so long now that it has inscribed itself into our daily habits and gestures. Today we operate in urban space with the longing and seeking of space, trying to reach isolation or a 'space bubble' within the urban crowd.

As we are online, atomized, in bubbles, so are we in the public realm, a situation which puts us in a position balancing between fear and respect. Avoiding others is an act of disgust/distrust, yet now it has to be understood as respectful, creating contradictory feelings. Nevertheless, there is irritation with those who do not keep distance in the public realm, as it is regarded as a hostile act, an invasion of personal/private and safe space. Hence, we criss-cross, navigate others in the street as if we were on a ski slope at high speed, avoiding others so as not to cause an accident or maybe even a fatal crash.

JJ-L and SK: How does this change in the way we navigate and negotiate the urban help us to rethink cities?

RK: A process of decentralization is taking pace. Previously the centre was well defined, as a literal and geographic city centre, and with focused precincts. These were spaces we had gravitated towards, to be close to the pulse of commerce, culture, politics and the heart of contemporary life. Now, new spaces are being explored and developed, in part to maintain a distance from the centre, which is currently seen as a biohazard. This reflexive mood, and mode, is articulated through connections being made across peripheral spaces, such as off-site and highly personal spaces/places.

Concurrent with this is the tightening of social groups, who are building stronger connections as a form of security. By placing trust in the smaller group, it is felt that a degree of protection from biohazards is more likely to be maintained. The city, therefore, is less of a collection of immovable structures that dominate a range of social interactions. Instead, another dimension is forming, to create bridges, detours and shortcuts, which positions the city not as a three-dimensional reality, but as a context for the development of alternative social and cultural structures. This innovation has created micro-cities within the framework of the larger terrain, emulating the precincts that were previously dominant.

HB: In the near future, digital culture will probably intervene even more than it is now in the interactions that are socially necessary and shape life as such, while at the same time our physical appearances on site will be based more on intellectual improvisation and creativity. Communication with the world of things will at the same time shape the public sphere and set new standards and cultures for the acceptance of technological interactions that we include in daily algorithms without even being able to question them, but we will learn to accept their construction in the most arbitrary way.

AL: Public transport I avoid, even though I know that the system in Berlin is safe, efficient and better for the environment. However, I have started getting claustrophobic-like feelings in trams or on cramped buses. I feel I am trapped in an enclosed capsule with no air and only infectious aerosols for me to breathe. At the same time, it is a growing worry to stand next to a person who might refuse to wear a mask and who possibly wants to start an argument about it. Wearing a mask has become a statement about attitudes and beliefs. On some weekends, I purposely put on a mask to distinguish myself from demonstrating groups that gather on the streets of Berlin. A growing number of people from different backgrounds and beliefs regularly come to the city from across Germany to demonstrate against the rules and guidelines resulting from the pandemic, against vaccination and against Angela Merkel's supposed dictatorship – all along with alt-right, anti-democratic 'Reichsbürger'. Public places in Berlin have turned into sites for negotiation of all attitudes and beliefs triggered and generated online on social media.

AA: Multi-level walkways and pavements maybe? Where we can move in a one-way system, simultaneously on multiple levels in

linearity. During the pandemic, there is a need for atomized space to freely navigate so as to avoid bottlenecks and narrow tunnels. Suddenly the totalitarian architecture of broad avenues and vast squares seems oddly appealing. An architecture/urbanism which was meant to impress and suppress now becomes the freedom and safety of the urban dweller.

The development of more pedestrian streets/pedestrianism not only helps to combat climate change, but it also allows people to occupy a more comprehensive space expanding the mobility of the urban collective choreography – more terraces for outdoor drinking and eating. But also more outdoor markets. In general, more space for outdoor activities seems to be favourable, even in the cold Nordic countries where smart outdoor heating systems and airy glass structures can combat wind and freezing temperatures. Cars may be the ultimate atomizing and safe space, but we do not want more cars and separations/visual alienation from others which disables a sense of community. There seems to be a longing for a communal feeling, to be part of the common – a longing intensified by the lockdown isolations. What the urban has represented is the natural existence among others, not only interaction with people from our closest networks.

JJ-L and SK: What have we learned from walking cities online?

RK: In my case, it was illegal at the time of my walk, to actually walk. Other than taking the shortest distance to a shop for food, or to a pharmacy for essentials, being out in the city was a punishable act. The burst of images I took fell outside the legalities enshrined in the declaration of disaster. Where I could walk was via the internet, which became a deep and multi-layered city, far larger than is possible to walk in the physical terrain. Walking online became an effective research tool and method, to gather material that was in excess of the immediate surroundings, but which re-framed the local and particular within the landscape of the general, and all-encompassing historical narrative relevant to South Africa. What was previously omitted, glossed over, and indeed relegated to history, transformed into the lens for re-assessing the particular. There occurred a kind of consolidation of time frames, which condensed all the multiple and fractured realities lived across time and space of the city, into a singular crystalline form. In my case, the detail from a security feature on a homeless man's shelter suddenly revealed the

deep seams of countless categories of issues that have dogged South Africa for centuries. Issues that have risen to the surface, and now need to be dealt with again, and continuously.

HB: So far, we have learned to be aware that communication is split while walking. Body and mind are divided, and therefore the physical reaction that we normally experience during and after a walk in the city is still uncertain. I communicate with someone, sometimes in a philosophical way, sometimes just in some kind of story that emerges along the way. This is also the promenadology method of the Swiss sociologist and economist Lucius Burckhardt. A science of walking. It is this kind of mental state that helps to maintain a dialogue with the environment while walking. Walkative online is a crucial issue: it's not the virtual work itself that makes it stand out. It doesn't just move in a virtual setup like we are accustomed to, such as socially on Facebook. Walking in some kind of tunnel vision, looking for a real light to grasp, a communicative way of serving someone and being out there somewhere. And that's one important aspect of Walkative online. There is someone out there who is or is not aware of whether they are in a human urban sphere or in something else that feeds their curiosity and inquiry. And from this virtual perspective, the Walkative series shows the intention to conquer repressive and insidious atmospheres caused by the denial of a viable human exchange. But for whom? For humans at the same time with the observation of conditions and spaces that are around us, and the simultaneous telling of facts and stories? Storytelling has always been important to humans. In a direct way without the involvement of speech algorithms or other technological devices. But with an observational kind of consciousness. We'll probably learn that from the ongoing series Walking Cities in Lockdown.

AA: The way we choose to circumnavigate this crisis should be guided by respect and solidarity and not by polarizing politics. In many countries, the pandemic has revealed the flaws of the given political and economic systems. The sensibility shown by the artist in the walking cities webinar series has given an insight into the personal experiences of the lockdown/pandemic, creating a sense of togetherness and mutual understanding which defies the differing/contentious politics between (sometimes neighbouring) countries. During a moment of self-isolation, operating in a small geographical area, Walking Cities in Lockdown inspired me to go outside, to observe and share this experience with a crowd –

generating an analysis of my role and position within the crisis. Guided by other artists, I could travel and walk distant city streets via Zoom, a subjective walk through the camera, enabling a sense of evasion from the narrow screen and bubbled life. To navigate other localities via a host produced a new liberated agency defying the crowded cubicle of the chat forum.

JJ-L and SK: How does this group activity allow us to consider practice differently?

RK: I'm not sure that this group activity has an equal effect amongst all participants. And nor should it. There is not much 'we' in my practice, although a positive answer might be that I am more open to working collaboratively. Indeed, as highlighted above in relation to a reworked social contract between people who trust each other, and seek security in each other, new collective projects have sprung into shape. This is a form of security driven by the understanding that 'we' are all in this together. Even though, as the suspension of physical rights has shown, that our bodies are both our own individual responsibility, and one that is enforced by the government, a strong desire exists now to get connected. To create a self-sustaining herd, that can operate as one. In terms of practice, perhaps it's possible to claim that energies and solutions are not being directed outward, into the global – be that world, nation or city – but into the micro level of a tight grouping of people and resources. The latter outcome, of sharing resources, committing to 'love projects' (those without financial gain, but which expand a range of activities and develop profiles), has become a dominant feature of contemporary practice amongst the group I've settled into. A group not only of artists, but also failing businesses, the now unemployed and recently graduated who have no external opportunities to grab onto.

AL: My own walk was an experiment. A sort of 'lecture-performance', in which I was tempted to try out all the possibilities for communicating via the video-conference app Zoom. However, performing as a virtual walker, I felt seasick. It started with a shared desktop on which two filmed tours through Berlin were presented as a virtual background and on top of which another layer of moving images, documentation of an exhibition and texts, were superimposed. The text was read out by 'Tessa', a female computer voice on Speak Line. During the Q&A, comments popped up as an extra layer for me to read. It gave me a splitting headache having to

focus on the tiny moving letters, trying to comprehend the content and make sense with my answers. The actual communication turned into a growing physical pain as I felt increasingly nauseous. After the meeting, I had to lie down for an hour or two. After this, calling Jaspar, I found out that both he and Simon had had the same experience. To potentially make an entire online group feel nauseous from a virtual walk experiment was an unexpected outcome. Even though we might feel isolated in front of the screen, listening to monologues, there is something else to be sensed, and that is a group practice and experience. We should listen and observe intensely to what we have been experiencing together, it's something beyond an informative monologue.

AA: By sharing the practice through the walks, as well as the altered everyday life imposed by the politics associated with the pandemic, we revealed a new contextualized narrative of the processes of production. This new narrative reminds us of how closely connected our practice is to what we experience around us on a daily basis. Also, the research/practice becomes directly connected to an acute actuality, an urgency which then is articulated through the shared screen. Our online existence has been intensified during the pandemic through augmented surveillance and tracking. Social and communication platforms have enabled the flow of work/workflow to persist. To continue to perform and produce and consume – within the limits of the digital – art practice is increasingly shared via internet platforms, pixelated and filtered by the low frame rate of the web.

JJ-L and SK: If urban walking impacts on the way we think, research and make, how has lockdown led to new ways of working as artists?

RK: I thought that the global effect of the lockdown would create extra bridges across the globe, and that computer and internet technology would fashion a rebooting of international connections. However, the opposite seems to be developing, of hands-on, local, direct and technologically unmediated tracing out of projects and work options. This is not to say that the international has become irrelevant, not at all, and if anything the sense of being connected persists and insists, but from a practical viewpoint it is clear amongst my group that the only way out of the current and future realities of a world decimated by the lockdown is a craft-based, locally driven endeavour towards survival and upliftment.

HB: The lockdown definitely showed a tendency to include the urban environment as an undemocratic space in a Bladerunner ideology. A space that is not yet or no longer allowed to be entered in a communicatively active way. However, as artists we are becoming more unified, no longer connected to any other kind of system, but instead we make our choices independently. Some might consider this a danger for the future, but we might also reflect on this as another state of mind. That is to say, humanity will grow into it. Consequently, technology must not be conceived as merely a tool or as an enemy, but rather as a relation and companion.

AL: In post-pandemic Berlin, close artist friends have become very dear to me. I was longing to reconnect with them so I invited a few friends, to meet in person and to go on a half-day walk together through Berlin Lichtenberg, as a type of collaboration. We exchanged our personal experience of the past months while also reflecting on the redefinition of closeness and exchange as we walked down shabby streets and through small urban gardens. Pointing out details, referring to something else, seeing through each other's eyes, our dialogue emerged through sharing the experience of walking together. These very natural and old methods of being together, now seem so refreshing. In the end, these Berlin walks resulted in a series of collaborative works: drawings of gravestones for one another, a classified ad on eBay, a photo-collage, texts or simply the understanding to meet again.

AA: When the pandemic swept over us like a wave, isolating us in our houses and neighbourhoods, a moment of instantaneous stagnation occurred, a pause in established habits. Probably necessary, considering the accelerated society in which we operate but also for many who travel with work. However, this moment of immobility was (is) polluted by the stress of the virus, making it difficult to be productive or to concentrate. When the first fears subsided, this retreat made it possible to reflect on past works and how to address new ones. Travel restrictions meant that artworks were shown in exhibitions, without the presence of the artist (assistants) for install or openings. Hence the life of the artworks became more independent. However, the digital overload imposed by the pandemic, as well as restricting mobility, brought forward a renewed need for practical and crafted works which create instant and long-lasting physical results while having a therapeutic effect.

JJ-L and SK: What potential does online urban walking have for collaboration and dialogue with other practitioners?

RK: This is a space that can be its own genre, and taps into simulated world gaming, and VR experiential environments. Online walking does not look like fact, even though there is a documentary-like framing about it. In that mix, of projecting bits and pieces of cities, rests a striking potential for the imagined city to be born. And as with the image that eventually realizes itself, or has the potential to expand into more dimensions, as physical and actual, and one which can be used as a blueprint for a remodelled future, the online urban walk seems immensely viable. Not only as a strategy to sculpt a new form or genre of practice, but also a discursive method for building a way into a shared vision and viewing point, which can fashion itself on the critical evaluation that walking in general has shown us, certainly in my context, to awaken the autonomy of being as the leitmotif for a new post-political being. I say post-political to evoke the sense that politics is fragile and failing in many ways in its current format and delivery, so maybe walking and talking, connecting and grouping, has more potential to deliver another kind of city, another kind of world, another kind of being.

HB: There is certainly great creative potential in the act of urban walking. Through the series of online walks we now know how we can be involved globally. When walking online we can make sensitive inquiries without causing much harm when observing live events elsewhere in the world. We know this and we can practice empathy and participation, translate effects or instincts or whatever we want to call it. This is an advantage of digital urban walking and collaborating with other practitioners through the Walking Cities in Lockdown series. Online urban blogging is different, but it also involves a crucial differentiation of our ways of thinking. Therefore, I think that Walkative online has had an enormous impact, not only as regular information, but also as a sensory experience through transmission in various media. It is a way of actively telling stories about how we experience the world in a state of lockdown. This is about movement itself and its representation at the same time.

AL: Online urban walking is not about sharing each other's company. Instead, a virtual walk gives me a very good insight into other ways of seeing. The possibility of exchanging perspectives, zooming in and out and contextualizing a site is informative and compelling. Such

artistic strategies help appreciate under-represented views, help overcome western-informed traditions and open the canon for comprehending the world's complexity. A spectrum of views constructs our world with assumptions and attitudes coexisting and informing us humans, where we are and what we are. However, we all experience the walks individually. My own senses are essential for my inspiration and for making art. Or is this also an obsolete human centered tradition in art practice that has to be challenged?

AA: The online urban walks gave us insight not only to the practice but to the conditions in which the artist operates, the preconditions of work produced during the pandemic, creating an intimacy with the artworks. The sharing of our immediate surroundings and reflections on how we experience and work during the pandemic creates a closeness, even if geographically distant. A crisis can bring people together and hopefully, this sense of solidarity can persist and mutate into grassroots mobilizations.

Note

1. With no recorded cases of COVID-19 at the time of the walk.

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For further interest:

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walking cities in lockdown

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