

Walking Within the Design Process

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When engaging with communities, designers become intimately familiar with the people and places in which they work. In both academia and professional practice, a variety of methods and tools are needed for the ‘get to know you’ process, as designers gather information and build relationships. The ability to select the most appropriate methods and customize them to local conditions, cultures, history, clients, etc is an important skill. In this paper, the innovative use of walking as a method of local data collection and engagement will be explored through the review of two case studies: Artist Walk and Workshop (Austin, Texas); and Walk Audits for Beebe and DeQueen (Arkansas).

Across the case studies, community engagement is a focus, exploring how walking can draw designers and the community together to share knowledge, look at spaces and conditions, and build a shared understanding of the physical, social, and cultural environment.¹ The case studies highlight opportunities and applications within academic and professional practice, including community / stakeholder meetings, community-focused academic studios, and designers’ individual engagement with context in relationship to a specific design and/or planning project.

BACKGROUND

Part of our everyday lives and incredibly human, walking is a simple and accessible method of context exploration providing on-the-ground, real time experiences, while fostering hyper-local responses. The slow pace of navigation yields unexpected discoveries and chance encounters to deepen knowledge of place. A tool for the design process, walking is a unique mechanism for deep listening and looking alongside the community, especially helpful to designers coming from outside of the communities in which they work.²

In this context, the term ‘walk’ is intended as an inclusive, active mode to move the human body through space. ‘Walking’ draws on the denotative implications of “mov[ing] at a regular pace by lifting and setting down each foot . . .”³, while including the pushing of a stroller, rolling of a wheelchair, and other similar forms of

movement. The term excludes the use of vehicles, like bicycles, scooters, and skateboards, which allow for increased speeds.

CASE STUDIES

The case studies presented are examples of walks designed or customized by architectural or planning professionals as part of a specific design or planning project within the public realm. Both engaging underserved communities, the selected examples bridge: customized events and the use of an adaptable tool; urban and rural communities; and more natural and highly constructed environments. The projects exemplify how walking can be successfully integrated in contemporary practice in pursuit of equity and inclusion.

ARTIST WALK AND WORKSHOP

Lynn Osgood and Sarah Gamble, as GO collaborative, were commissioned by the City of Austin’s Art in Public Places to author a *public art action plan for Holly Shores*, an area of Townlake Metro Park at the heart of downtown Austin. The plan was designed to guide future public art commissions within the park and feed into a larger design and planning project led by Michael Van Valkenburgh & Associates (MVVA). Set along the northern shoreline of the Colorado River on Austin’s Eastside, Holly Shores is a highly trafficked and treasured by the surrounding Hispanic community, which has experienced marginalization and discrimination over many generations. The urban park is home to many annual events that draw the broader public, like Cinco de Mayo, Dia de Los Muertos Music Festival, SXSW Festival, and the Ice Cream Festival.⁴

To create the action plan, Osgood and Gamble met with residents and artists in one-on-one interviews, platicas (small group meetings), a large public meeting, and an Artist Walk and Workshop. The discussions explored public art and its potential within the park, in keeping with its current and past use by the local community. Held on a Saturday morning, the Artist Walk and Workshop gathered artists who were from, or had worked in and around, the East Cesar Chavez and Holly neighborhoods (adjacent to the Park), to talk about how the visual arts currently serve the community. The local artists, together with Osgood and Gamble, explored the park site and gathered input and ideas through writing, sketching, and conversation.⁵



Figure 1. Throughout the Artist Walk and Workshop, neighborhood elder and historian Danny Camacho (left) shared his thoughts and long-term perspective on the park and local community. Photo: Sarah Gamble.

Osgood and Gamble designed the stakeholder meeting, centered on a walk, to foster direct observation, spur conversation, and gather input from participants. The route was designed with a series of stops to highlight information about the area's history, topography, culture, and more. Ahead of the meeting, Osgood and Gamble worked with neighborhood elder and historian Danny Camacho to design the route and identify key topics for discussion during the event. At the start, each participant was provided with a map of the park with the designed route to guide their movement and provide a space for notes and sketches. As the group walked together along the circular route, Camacho shared his long-term perspective and knowledge of the area with attendees at each stop. Well-known muralist Fidencio Duran also shared his experience working in the neighborhood over many decades. Throughout, Osgood and Gamble posed questions to the group about the role of the visual arts within the community, potential themes for future public art commissions, and opportunities for public art to be physically integrated into

the park. The ten attendees shared verbally and notated directly onto their map, which was turned over to Osgood and Gamble at the conclusion of the event.

To inform the creation of the *Public Art Action Plan*, walking served as an accessible mode to explore and dialogue about the project, and at the same time, foster reflection about the public space. The slow pace allowed for a range of ability levels to participate, including one attendee with a walking cane. The scheduled stops created formal opportunities for meeting organizers to share information and ask questions of the group. Between stops, participants mixed and side conversations developed, between each other and with meeting organizers. In the small group setting, participants felt comfortable sharing and posing questions to the group. The activity fostered direct observation and discovery, even for those who would have considered the place very familiar. The participating artists' feedback, shared verbally and through notes and sketching,



Figure 2. The artists walk along Holly Shores to observe the park first stand and provide feedback along the way. Photo: Sarah Gamble.

came together with comments from other community meetings organized by Osgood and Gamble to shape three themes for the action plan and direction of future public art commissions: “history of the neighborhood, the strength of the local culture, the stories of struggle that residents faced, and the daily rhythms of life that characterized the area for decades.”⁶ Outlined within the Plan, these themes guided recommendations for future public art commissions within the park and was included in the broader park masterplan as an addendum.

WALK AUDITS

The Walk Audit is a well-known tool for the survey and analysis of existing physical environments by individuals or groups of various sizes. Most commonly used to assess the level of walkability of roadways and intersections, the non-profit advocacy organization America Walks, defines a walk audit as “an assessment of the pedestrian safety, accessibility, and comfort of a particular area.”⁷ The American Association of Retired Persons’s (AARP) Livable Communities Program has published a range of resources related to community design and livability issues, including walkability. Their Walk Audit Kit provides a step-by-step guide designed for the general public that doesn’t require expert knowledge in transportation, planning, or design. With guidance from the provided forms, users select an area or roadway and map it, then rate crossings, sidewalks, driver behavior, comfort,



Figure 3. Muralist Fidencio Duran (left) shares about his artist work in the area. Photo: Sarah Gamble.

and more.⁸ The organization encourages users to “take action” by sharing their findings with local officials, rallying others to produce their own walk audit, and reporting unsafe conditions to the local transportation department.⁹ The kit includes easy to understand instructions, printable forms, and a leader’s guide to make the exercise accessible to individuals and groups. The walk audit provides a repeatable and adaptable analytical tool, often customized by built environment professionals in the context of transportation or planning projects.

Begun in 2019, the University of Central Arkansas Center for Community and Economic Development (CCED), with partner Crafton Tull and Associates, developed a Walk Audit program, serving 10 rural communities in Central Arkansas over the first three years. Evolving out of their Community Development Institute, the Center, which serves communities with 15,000 or fewer residents, selects 2 to 4 participants per year through a competitive application process to receive the professional service free-of-charge. In 2021, the Center received 33 applications for the available spots.¹⁰

From beginning to end, the process takes 2 to 3 months from planning to receipt of a project report. Following selection of the community, Center staff work with the local leaders to establish an area of focus, compose the group of 10 to 15 individuals



Figure 4. Community leaders in Beebe, Arkansas participate in a Walk Audit of their downtown. Photo: Greta Hacker.

to take part, and organize the event. Typically, the Mayor or Chamber of Commerce President / CEO serves as the primary contact. The recommended area is a 3-block by 3-block portion of the downtown, or where the community hopes to “focus all their energy”.¹¹ As explained Shelby Fiegel, Center Director and lead on the Walk Audit program, the team composition is important to the success of the audit. “I think that the most important thing that comes out of these walk audits it is being very specific about who’s at the table. Those community leaders that actually have the power to change the areas that we’re talking about . . . And then actually taking them [there]. . . we’re walking in person together in real time, sharing...”¹² Representative stakeholders are invited to participate, including small business owners, city planners, city commissioners, transportation engineers, chamber of commerce representative, school district and community college administrators, and more. A week before the in-person Walk Audit, a virtual information meeting provides the opportunity for event organizers to introduce themselves, explain the walk audit, and review important terminology together.¹³

On the day of the event, participants gather for a two hour, in-person walk exploring the area of focus. Dave Roberts, Certified Planner of Crafton Tull and Associates, leads the group through the 9-blocks, making real time observations and engaging in discussion with local leaders about what they are physically and

visually experiencing.¹⁴ With a walking group of no more than 15, all participants have the opportunity to engage and dialogue with others. Conversation focuses on accessibility and connectivity at multiple scales, including physical barriers at a detail level (for example, cracked walking surfaces or missing curb cuts) and the ability of stakeholders to move into, thru, and out of the area (for example, small business patrons arriving on foot). In an interview with a Greta Hacker of CCED, Roberts explains, “I always hear a mayor or public works director say ‘I’ve never noticed that’ when talking about a barrier in the built environment . . . Sometimes it is a little thing they stepped around for most of their life, such as a lack of curb cuts and crosswalks that make access for a wheelchair user very difficult.”¹⁵ Following the event, Roberts authors a report documenting the observations and making a range of recommendations, including ADA-level accessibility improvements, opportunities to embed local culture and/or public art in the built environment, beautification opportunities, and more.¹⁶ “. . . the foundational elements of what we do is thinking about accessibility . . . And then adding those quality of life initiatives.”¹⁷

Walk Audits in Beebe (population 8,168¹⁸) and DeQueen (population 6,534¹⁹) served as pilot projects for the program in 2019. Both communities have begun to make changes and implement recommendations outlined in the Walk Audit reports. In Beebe, they have focused on cultivating a sense of place, exploring public art and beautification opportunities. Local leaders installed murals, improved building facades, and jumpstarted a clean-up in the downtown to draw new businesses to the area. In DeQueen, demographic research by Roberts following the Walk Audit event revealed “Sevier County had the highest rate of differently-abled children . . . and that really sparked something in those leaders,” explained Fiegel.²⁰ Led by the De Queen Rotary Club, community leaders have developed plans for an inclusive playground at Herman Dierks Park, designed by Landscape Structures.²¹ In collaboration with the city government, the community is grant writing to raise the \$250,000 to \$300,000 needed to construct the playground.²²

CONCLUSION

As evidenced by the two case studies, walking, for data collection and community engagement, is a simple and accessible tool with a high level of customization possible for local conditions. Within a one-of-a-kind event and/or replicable toolkit, walking poses a range of possibilities for the designer and community to explore, engage, and collaborate in shaping of an inclusive built environment. The power of first-hand observation cultivates a heightened awareness to the physical environment, and the collective act fosters healthy dialogue. As designers and community engagement professional look for opportunities to innovative and overcome barriers to inclusion, such as language, transportation access, education-level, and more, low cost tools like walking present a range of opportunities.

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