

Art and Architecture

A Place Between

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LONDON • NEW YORK

Chapter 3

Walking

The nomad is my own figuration of a situated, postmodern, culturally differentiated understanding of the subject in general and of the feminist subject in particular. ... The nomadic subject is a myth, that is to say political fiction, that allows me to think through and move across established categories and levels of experience: blurring boundaries without burning bridges.¹

Walking, along with discussion, performance and publication, forms the core of the work of PLATFORM, an interdisciplinary group of environmental and politically engaged artists for whom practice and research are intrinsically connected.² Over several years PLATFORM has been researching the Fleet and refining this knowledge by walking the course of this river through London, from its springing-point in Hampstead, down through Camden, King's Cross and St Pancras, on then to Clerkenwell and along the Farringdon Road to the point where the tributary enters the Thames near Blackfriars Bridge. The odd thing is that the walk does not follow a silver line of water cutting through the urban terrain, but instead traverses the tarmac and concrete of north London. The walk, which I joined in May 2001, is a meditation upon the course of this buried river.

It is spring in London. Across the tender green of Hampstead Heath I see a cluster of people; a wedding is taking place outdoors (fig. 59: opposite page). But I am being asked to look down, at the earth; beneath my feet

new life is emerging. The river Thames is oozing through the soil, in the form of the Fleet, one of its many tributaries.

Before we leave Hampstead, we pause for reflection in the ponds at the Vale of Health. We learn that they are possibly artificial and consider the distinction between what is natural and what is man-made. PLATFORM comments on the trees and plants around us; some are indigenous, others are, or at one point were, strange to this land. At what point does a newcomer become an old friend?

After Hampstead, the Fleet runs underground. When a river is buried, canalized, contained and arched over, what does it become – a flood drain, a sewer? Is it still a river? We note remnants of the impact the river once had when it cut channels through the surface of the city. Road names recall watercress beds; there are laundries and swimming pools, pubs that grew up around springs. In Camden, we stop a while to watch the reeds in the slow-moving canal – a complex microbiology that cleans up the water. We hear how the babbling brook and the dialogue of the reeds in the wind taught humans to speak.

An interesting conversation starts up in St Pancras churchyard about the poet Aidan Andrew Dunn whose recent epic, *Vale Royal*, recalls the history of the Fleet in this part of London, in a manner not dissimilar to a twentieth-century Blake.³ The churchyard has some strange memorials – Sir John Soane's mausoleum designed by his wife, Thomas Hardy's grave – as well as some fascinating stories about the dust heap that used to shadow this site. Like the river, this portion of London was a dumping-ground for all kinds of waste: rubble from the brick-making industries, blood and entrails from the tanneries, as well as human effluent. As far back as the thirteenth century, the foul-smelling Fleet was a source of complaint. At one point it was described as a 'cocktail of effluent', and Ben Jonson claimed that it outdid the four rivers of Hades in its vile stench. Anxieties about the river's filthy condition and fears of flood damage were among the reasons given for its burial. The bottom reaches were covered over in the seventeenth century and the upper reaches later, at the end of the nineteenth century. Today the Fleet is a sewer.

What does it mean to bury a river? At the outset of the walk, this did not seem to me such a big deal. But during the day, as I walked the Fleet, my views shifted. PLATFORM told us about a school group they had been working with as part of their campaign to uncover the buried rivers of London. When the children were told that a river lay beneath them underground, they were bewildered. How? How, they had asked, do you bury a river? And, technicalities aside, why? Why would anyone do such a thing? Why indeed would anyone want to bury a river?

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Nearby, also underground, apparently under platform nine at King's Cross station, is the body of *Boudicca*, defeated and buried after Battlebridge. This part of north London remains still the site of conflict, though today it is over the regeneration of King's Cross. Are there any links to be made between the buried body of this ancient British queen and the burying of the river Fleet? Our present culture is one that attempts to deny the natural in so many ways; medical knowledge and technological expertise seek control of wayward human flesh as we turn a blind eye to the terrifying indications of global warming and environmental disaster around us.

As evening falls we reach the lower stretch of the Farringdon Road; with the Thames now in sight we come to a grim halt by some bolted iron doors under Blackfriar's Bridge. This is where the Fleet ends its journey into the city, behind this set of metal grilles. They pass around a postcard of an oil painting made by Samuel Scott in the seventeenth century – 'Mouth of the River Fleet'. It shows a grand scene, London as Venice, in the style of Canaletto, with a turquoise Fleet glorious, proudly joining the Thames.

It is hard to reconcile this magnificent image with the rather bleak view before me. All along the river, ancient tributaries are falling apart, removing a special way of experiencing London. I learn so much that day, not just facts about the Thames, but a new way of relating to this city. Walking to the Thames along the Fleet offers a particular sense of 'being in the world', an ecological view that connects me to an environment that is both natural and cultural. Unlike reading a book or watching television, I walk the river as I find out about it. Ley lines, song lines, story lines, some lines only speak as you walk them. The stories I was told that day are intimately connected with the places in which I first heard them.

PLATFORM ask us to imagine what London would be like with majestic rivers flowing down its valleys into the Thames. 'Imagination is the root of all change,' they say.⁴

PLATFORM's walk reminds me of another artist's walk I participated in a year or so earlier. In 1999, in autumn this time, I followed Marysia Lewandowska's 'Detour' through the Paddington basin in west London. The project, funded by the Public Arts Development Trust, took the form of a route through the city, but this artist chose to adopt an anonymous role. Following months spent researching the area, Lewandowska devised several walks. The knowledge she gained was imparted to a number of professional tour guides who, along with workers and residents of the area, took us on 'Detour'.

We went to some strange places – 'strange', that is, for a conventional 'tour'. We spent a good hour in a storage warehouse for a major Oxford

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Street retailer hearing the site manager give a full and detailed account of his day's activities, the organization, moving and storage of various-sized cardboard boxes. We visited the place where penicillin was invented (quite by accident), rummaged through an antiques market and squashed into a tiny council flat to hear the inhabitant talk about life on the estate (figs. 60–1).

Lewandowska's research into the history of this part of London focused on aspects of exchange – production, consumption and waste. As in many of her projects, most of them conducted with Neil Cummings, Lewandowska's passion for investigations of material culture and aspects of the 'everyday' is a driving force.⁵ Via tour guides, she brought to our attention neither historical facts and dates nor famous monuments or sites of architectural interest in the area, but rather the sort of stuff that is all around us but so ordinary that it remains ignored and invisible. I was left pondering on the huge number of objects we acquire, only to get rid of them again.

Tim Brennan is another artist who has reworked the guided tour as an art form but, unlike Lewandowska, he prefers to remain physically present, positioning his work across visual and performing arts. In 1999 Brennan produced 'Mole Gap Trail', a three- to four-hour walk in the Surrey Hills linking Leatherhead, Boxhill and Dorking railway stations through the historic landscape of Norbury Park.⁶ Brennan has also produced a series of walks and written texts in east London, 'A Rising', 'A Cut' and 'A Weave' (1999).⁷ Informed by his background in public history, Brennan intersperses periods of private archive research with public input gathered on journeys and guided tours. Brennan's walks operate as forms of 'discursive performance' that aim to construct performing and reading subjects.⁸

But perhaps the most influential artist's walk in recent years has been Janet Cardiff's 'The Missing Voice (Case Study B)' (1999), a work commissioned by Artangel in Whitechapel, London, in which the artist took on the role of story-teller. Cardiff created a soundtrack layered with historical narratives about Jack the Ripper's activities in the area in the late nineteenth century, fictional detective stories and more recent descriptions of this part of London made by the artist. A CD-ROM obtained from Whitechapel's public lending library led the listener, wearing headphones, on a choreographed route through the city. On the walk your emotional state shifts between empowerment and fear; at one moment you are encouraged to take the role of a detective following clues, the next you are a victim being followed. Sometimes the voice you hear describes what you see; at other times the two do not coincide.⁹ Cardiff articulates aspects of site, which exist as much in our imagination as in material form, highlighting our existence in a world that is simultaneously internal and external.

It is not the first time artists have been interested in walking; one only has to look back at the work of Hamish Fulton or Richard Long in the 1960s and 1970s, or further back to the history of pilgrimages and trade routes.¹⁰ Today there certainly seems to be a fascination with walking among artists, as a way perhaps of engaging with concepts and experiences of place, space and site. By relating one location to another in a particular sequence, walking provides a way of practising space through time and time through space. As a critical spatial practice, walking operates in a similar mode to much of the work discussed in Section 1 – rethinking place as unfixed and site as performed. Importantly, as an activity, walking temporarily positions the subject in motion between a series of scenes that at times might resemble dialectical images; depending on the histories of a precise combination of objects at a particular location, these scenes might be constellations where the thinking stops, allegorical compositions or montage constructions.

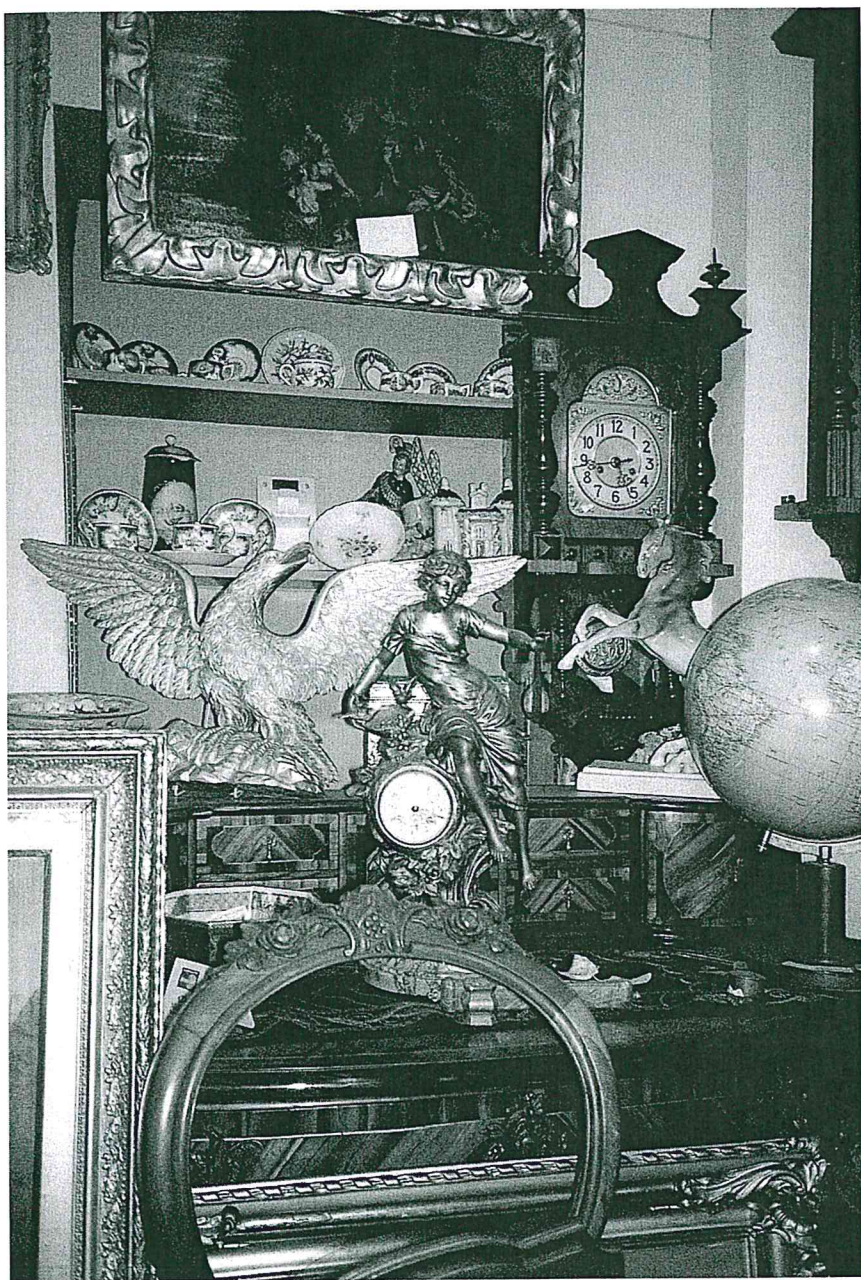
This interest in walking explored through theory and current art practice can open new possibilities for architecture. The design of buildings based on predetermined routes has a strong precedent in architecture, from the axial route through Egyptian burial complexes to the carefully sequenced promenades through picturesque parklands and baroque opera houses. Recent designs, arguably led by the early work of Rem Koolhaas and OMA, merge plan and section by creating a ground plane that winds its way up through the building. UN-Studio takes things one stage further in its concrete and glass 'Möbius House'.¹¹ The Möbius strip is a twisted figure of eight where one side becomes the other. It is a diagrammatic form or a topological model derived from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory that allows us to describe the interrelation of inner and outer spaces.¹² According to the architects, 'The Möbius strip model has the advantage of showing that there can be a relation between two "things" – mind and body – which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate "things" being related, they have the capacity to twist one into the other.'¹³

The commission for the 'Möbius House', located in the Netherlands, came from a couple who both worked from home during the day and wanted a house where they could have 'complete individual privacy, but also the possibility of instantaneous connection to one another'.¹⁴ The Möbius strip provided a spatial diagram of how connection and separation could be achieved at the same time. The house is designed around a flexible programme, where activities of sleeping, eating and working can take place at any point on either of the two routes. Gentle ramps or 'stramps' and sliding screens are employed as connecting and separating elements (figs. 62 and 3).

**60-1**

Marysia Lewandowska,
'Detour' (1999)
London.

Photographs: Jane Rendell (1999).



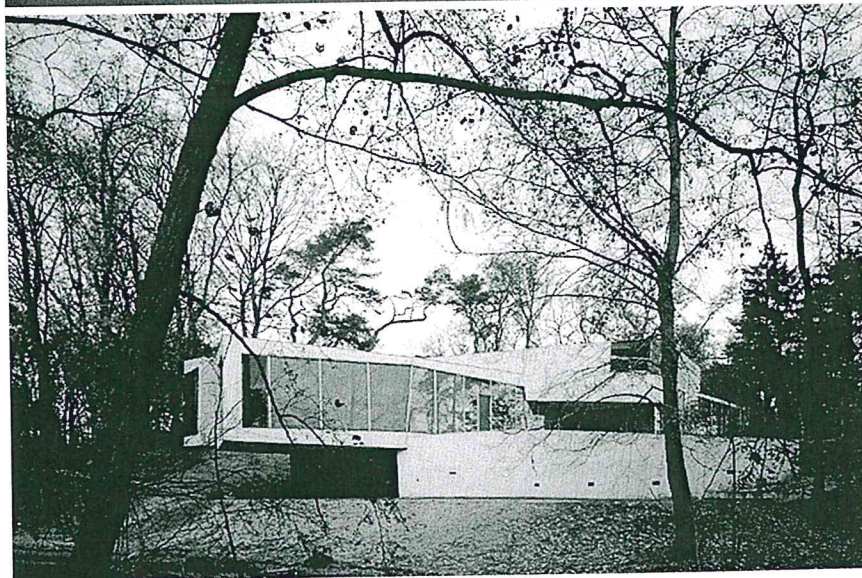
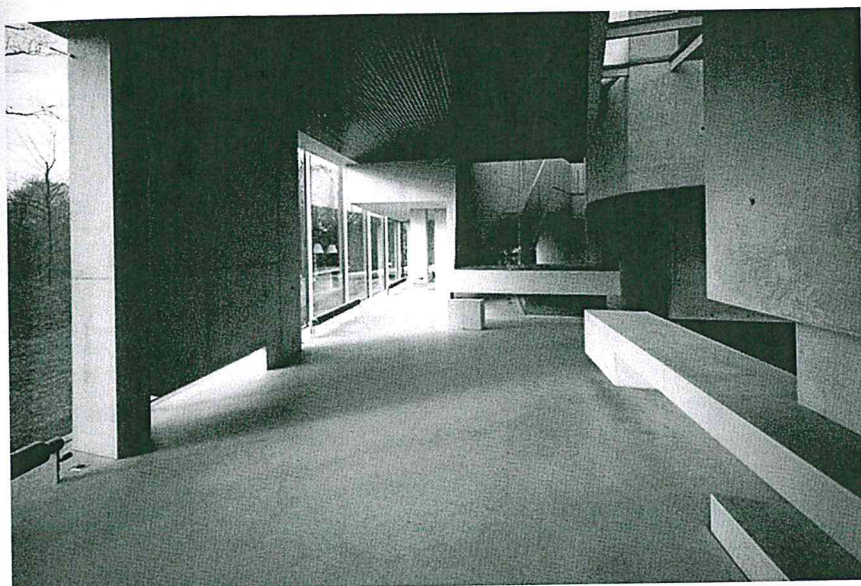
Walking provides a way of understanding sites in flux in a manner that questions the logic of measuring, surveying and drawing a location from a series of fixed and static viewpoints. When we walk we encounter sites in motion and in relationship to one another, suggesting that things seem different depending on whether we are 'coming to' or 'going from'. Rather than proceed from the observational, to the analytic, to the propositional, by intervening and moving through a site, walking proposes a design method that enables one to imagine beyond the present condition without freezing possibility into form.)

The group of Roman architects called Stalker (Laboratory for Urban Interventions) – their name was inspired by Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979) – reclaim land by moving through it and take this occupation as a starting point for architectural design. Stalker use walking as a way of getting to know the city: not only their hometown Rome, but also Naples, Turin, Paris and Berlin. For Stalker, walking allows one to link up neglected parts of the city, locations that may be physically proximate but have been separated by walls and fences to make way for roads or other urban redevelopments. Stalker are particularly interested in parts of the city that have become what they call *terrains vagues* – areas that have been abandoned or are undergoing slow transformations. Stalker's project is to transgress, to go where they should not, to cut through barriers, to climb up and over obstacles in unusual ways. Such actions heighten awareness by rendering familiar places 'strange'.¹⁵

Stalker call their mode of operation architectural practice, precisely the kind of practice that extends and critiques definitions of what architecture might be. Stalker's methodology consists of a three-part process accompanying their walks. First, 'preparation of the terrain', the collection of historical surveys and maps of the area to be walked; second, 'spot visit', a visit to the site to prepare the itinerary, to select a track for making a walk, often following abandoned rights of way and other infrastructural lines; and third, the production of an exhibition following the walk, including documentation of the walk in photographs, video and writing, as well as suggestions on how the city might reuse abandoned areas.

There is a kind of thinking that corresponds to walking, one that follows an itinerary, keeps up a certain pace and remains in constant motion, moving from one thing to another, engaging only in passing; the external world operates as a series of prompts for more philosophical musings. The spatial story acts as a theoretical device that allows us to understand the urban fabric in terms of narrative relationships between spaces, times and subjects. The notion of 'spatial stories' can be connected to surrealist wanderings, to the situationist *dérive* as well as to more recent theoretical ideas about nomadology. Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti's

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**62-3**

UN-Studio (Ben van Berkel with Aad Krom, Jen Alkema, Matthias Blass, Remco Bruggink, Marc Dijkman, Casper le Fevre, Rob Hootsmans, Tycho Soffree, Giovanni Tedesco, Harm Wassink), 'Möbius House' (1993–98) 't Gooi, The Netherlands, UN Studio ©.
Photographs: Christian Richters (1998).

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interest in nomadism does not so much describe the nomadic subject as the person who moves from place to place; rather, she is inspired by nomadism as a way of knowing that refuses to be pinned down by existing conditions. For those concerned with issues of identity and the oppression of minorities, the kind of thinking engendered through walking is important for emancipatory politics since it provides a way of imagining a beyond, an 'as if'.¹⁶ As Braidotti states:

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of a beyond

Political fictions may be more effective, here and now, than theoretical systems. The choice of an iconoclastic, mythic figure such as the nomadic subject is consequently a move against the settled and conventional nature of theoretical and especially philosophical thinking. ... It is the subversion of set conventions that defines the nomadic state, not the literal act of traveling.¹⁷

Through the act of walking new connections are made and remade, physically and conceptually, over time and through space. Public concerns and private fantasies, past events and future imaginings, are brought into the here and now, into a relationship that is both sequential and simultaneous. Walking is a way of at once discovering and transforming the city; it is an activity that takes place through the heart and mind as much as through the feet.

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