

## HORIZONTAL WALKING

### *Shifting practices and emerging landscapes*

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#### **Abstract**

Walking has recently attracted increasing scientific interest within different disciplines, namely, in sociological studies, urban literature, cultural and anthropological research, as well as in health and well-being fields: from walk as an essential part of the urban way of life and as a significant social activity (Joseph, 1998), as experience of the world, its techniques and rhythms (Ingold and Vergunst 2008), to assessment of the “environmental determinants of walking” (Ewing and Cervero 2010) and moment of bodily exercise and opportunity to tackle inactivity in urban lifestyles.

Such an increase in scientific interest has coincided and interplayed with the emergence - in cities - of practices and trends as the rise in walking and the decline in car-use. While these trends have been observed - even if with considerable differences - both in compact and diffuse urban conditions, until today walkability as a project has been largely overlooked in the frame of diffuse cities.

This paper, drawing from the awareness that the form of the contemporary city has radically changed, tackles the role and challenges of walking in what has been recently named: “Horizontal Metropolis” (Viganò, 2013). In such unprecedented “urbanized landscapes” (Secchi, 2011), characterized by a completely new ratio between built and open space, new systems of spaces are made available for a radical rethinking of urban life.

#### *A New Interest in Walking*

Walking has recently attracted increasing scientific interest within different disciplines, in sociological studies, urban literature, cultural and anthropological research, as well as in health and well-being; from walk as an essential part of the urban way of life and as a significant social activity (Joseph 1998; Demerath and Levinger 2003; Thomas 2007), as experience of the world, its techniques and rhythms (de Certeau 1984; Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Edensor 2010), technologies and gadgets facilitating it (Michael 2000; Ingold 2004) to assessment of the environmental determinants of walking (Saelens, Sallis, and Frank 2003; Saelens and Handy 2008; Ewing and Cervero 2010), moment of bodily exercise and an opportunity to tackle inactivity in urban lifestyles, or cultural and aesthetic practice (Davila 2007; Careri 2006). The increasing centrality of walking and of the the figure of the pedestrian in different disciplines and specifically in mobility and urban discourses follows the critiques of the use of the car during the

second half of the twentieth century, both from a spatial and a social point of view, and, later on, discourses of sustainable development, as a response to energetic and environmental imperatives. Such trends have also challenged the old-age pejorative meaning of *Pedestrian*. As an adjective, *Pedestrian*, used to mean “lacking inspiration or excitement; dull” (Oxford Dictionary), “commonplace and unimaginative,” to be pedestrian was to be drab or dull, ordinary and unoriginal as if plodding along on foot rather than speeding on horseback or by coach” (Merriam Webster). To live a pedestrian lifestyle was, therefore, to live a monotonous, uneventful, unremarkable one. The *peons*, *pions*, pawns have always been at the bottom of a hierarchical system, and “have long dreamed of escaping the humiliation of having to use their own body to move in space,” (Lévy 2008). The negative connotations related to the concept of *Pedestrian* seem to vanish as the place and image of the one who travels on foot gradually transforms.

The increasing interest in the theme of *walking* and in its practice goes together with the increasing value attributed to physical activity and to the renewed attention on the “body”. Daily physical activities are today measured, registered, and even shared through social networks by individuals, using fitness trackers, smartphones, and other accessories. In recent years running and jogging have become genuine trends in many cities, increasingly supported by mobile applications, coinciding with the emergence of the notion of Quantified Self (Till 2014; Rooksby et al. 2014), sporting communities and social networks. A simple indicator of such engagement is the increasing number of organized sport activities and events in cities. . These trends confirm an increasing interest in bringing sports to and inside the city, increasing value of physical effort as opposed to a comfort defined in sedentary terms (Bahrami and Rigal, 2017). The increasing interest and motivation of both individuals and communities towards healthier lifestyles seem to open a completely new horizon of expectations and possibilities for what we look at today as the “City of the Future”.

In this frame, acknowledging the common historical origins and interests of city planning and public health, since early 2000s, researchers increasingly underlined the occurred disconnection between the two fields. Hence, a series of works began to emphasize the importance of reconnecting planning with the idea of public and private health<sup>1</sup>.

### *Shifting Practices*

As mentioned above, many city centers (characterized by dense “urban tissues”) are experiencing an observable rise of walking in their modal share, coupled with measures of public transport and households increasingly abandoning their cars in favor of pedestrian metrics.

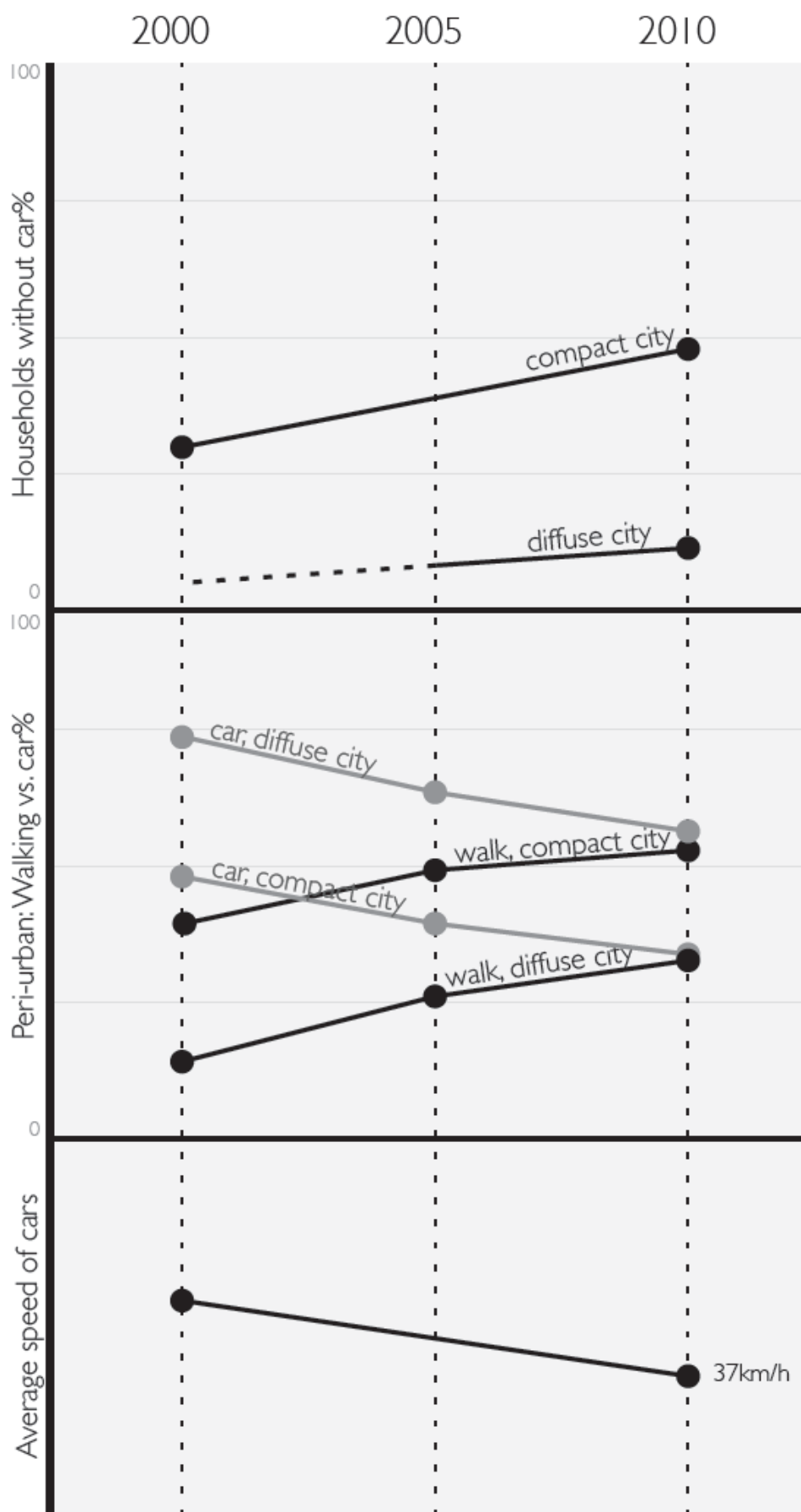
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<sup>1</sup> A 2001 Institute of Medicine report titled *Rebuilding the Unity of Health and the Environment* emphasized that the “environment” should be understood as the interplay between ecological (biological), physical (natural and built), social, political, aesthetic, and economic environments (Corburn 2004). In the same period, the first Walk21, an international conference on walking, in London in 2000 marked an important step in bringing walking into cities’ discourse, discussing it as a health emergency. In its “State of Health and Urbanism Report” Alan Berger (with the Center for Advanced Urbanism at MIT) states that today, the “nature of the relation between urban form and health, is still largely inconclusive” (Berger, 2013).

When it comes to “urban dispersion”, however, this trend turns out to be more modest but still existing.<sup>2</sup> ). In Switzerland, for example, territories characterized by “urban dispersion” as those of the Lemman Region, although slowly, have begun to participate in a transition in mobility practices. This includes, for example, a general disinterest or delay in obtaining driving licenses (Rerat, 2016), a decrease in car mobility, as well as an increase in the modal split of walking. (see Figure 1)

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<sup>2</sup> Within multiple aspects of walk as the subject of research, an important body is dedicated to environmental qualities and correlates of walk, how the built environment and neighborhood characteristics influence the willingness or reluctance to walk. A general consensus can be traced through the results of these studies both in transportation and urban planning literature as well as health and behavioral science literature that consistently correlate walking rates with higher levels of densities and land-use diversity (Cervero 2002, Saelens et al. 2003, Ravalet et al. 2013).



Canton de Geneve, source: MRMT 2010

*Figure 1 - Evolution of modal split of walking and car, as well as car ownership per household in compact and diffuse city between 2000-2010, Geneva canton, Switzerland.*

The number of car per household is strongly related to the place of residence, increasing as urban density diminishes<sup>3</sup>. However, despite the prevalence of car ownership, the modal split of car in these territories (low density, dispersed) has decreased between 2000-2010, proving that car ownership does not necessarily equal to its constant use. Such decrease in car-use has been accompanied by increased rates of walking from 16 to 28% in canton of Geneva and from 21 to 27% in canton of Vaud.

This paper hypothesizes that such “weak signs of change” could be symptomatic of a thorough transition from car dominance, of an inversion in use, presence and importance of the car in the urban realm and in the introduction of a new status for “walking”. Moreover, the presence of such “signs”, within non-dense urban landscapes trigger a completely new set of opportunities, enabling to thoroughly rethink the urban spaces and practices of tomorrow, and of what we now begin to consider a “City”.

### *Emerging Urban Landscapes*

In the last sixty years, urbanization has evolved dramatically, blurring the city/countryside divide and bringing about vast and complex territorial settlements of previously inconceivable size and population (Brenner, 2014; Burdett, 2008). Accordingly, many neologisms have emerged, clearly reflecting changing boundaries, morphologies and scales of human settlement patterns. Vast portions of the territory located outside historic centers, often in areas previously classified as “rural,” have experienced rapid urbanization processes (Buijs, Tan, & Tunas, 2010), which have led certain scholars to think in terms of “planetary urbanization” (Brenner, 2014). Up until the early 1990s, despite the fact that numerous and in-depth analyses were being conducted, the prevailing approach remained one of refusal, inurement and inertia as far as the dispersed city was concerned. Indeed, with the inversion of this trend and the recognition of open space as a structuring element for the city and the territory (Secchi, 1986; Viganò, 1999), the first half of the 1990s witnessed the beginning of a profound reconsideration of the role that “territories of dispersion” (Boeri, Metropolitan, Lanzani, & Marini, 1993; Munarin & Tosi, 2001; Viganò, 2001, 2004) might play, along with the attempt to posit them as the basis for the construction of an innovative urban principle. Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò recently (Viganò, 2013) named these very landscapes “Horizontal Metropolis”, an oxymoron in which “two contrasting terms are juxtaposed to conjugate the traditional idea of Metropolis - the center of a vast territory hierarchically organized, dense, vertical, produced by polarization - with the idea of “horizontality”, a more diffuse, isotropic urban condition, where the borders between center and periphery blur” (Viganò et. al, 2017) .

In this frame, the assumption that some forms of urban dispersion, while entailing certain evident risks for the territory, can also represent a valid substrate for the construction of an innovative project for the city (Allen, 2003; McGee, 1991; Smets, 1986; Viganò, 2013), can be related, to some extent, to the role recently taken-on by open spaces. Such unprecedented urbanized landscapes are - in fact - characterized

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<sup>3</sup> While almost half of the households in dense urban tissues conduct a car-free lifestyle, in tissues of extended urbanization this number drops to less than one household out of ten; ten; 7% in Vaud and 9% in Geneva. (MRMT 2010).

by a completely new ratio between built and open space (Brenner, 2009; Indovina, Fregolent, & Savino, 2005) recently considered crucial to the point of having reshaped the very concept of city (Bélanger, 2009; Berger, 2006, Viganò et al., 2017). This entails the idea that the contemporary city offers and will increasingly offer in the future (this kind of landscape is developing at a very fast pace in many regions around the world) types of spaces (extension, dimension, presence of vegetation, animals) that did not belong to the city of the past. Such spaces could allow the introduction of new practices in the “urban field”, able to take advantage of their remarkable “generosity”. Such a shift could deeply change the way in which we will all relate and move in the urban space of tomorrow.

Systemic comparative mapping of a set of “City Territories” at different scales (Viganò et al., 2016a, Viganò et al., 2016b) has proven the presence - in the urban fabric - of generous and high quality underused spaces. Such availability of large “in between” spaces (public property, often unused/underused) within the vast, low density, inhabited tissue could be capitalized upon to host new uses and support new practices for public life. Public gardens, systems of parks, tracks, routes, crossings could be imagined thanks to the transformation of a wide inventory of small to large-scale overlooked or underused spaces which could accommodate new uses and practices. A set of “light” spatial strategies/transformations could be put in place, able to capitalize on the “City-Territory”’s already existing, and all too often overlooked, signature strengths (Viganò et al., 2017).

Even if today low-density urbanity continues to be strongly associated with car dependency<sup>4</sup> (Masbouni, 2015) which goes together with the weakening of an “outdoor dimension”<sup>5</sup> (Solnit, 2001), by seizing upon new practices and new value of walking as an opportunity new spaces within the contemporary urban fabric could be envisaged.

#### *Towards new spaces for walking*

Walking can be approached in many ways from walking as an aesthetic and cognitive practice, the kind of walking described by authors like J.J. Rousseau that conceives it as a moment of contemplation, animating and elevating ideas<sup>6</sup>, to walking as a means of transport, to move in space from a place to another, for practical reasons. Between the two extreme conceptions of walking, from a *cognitive experience* to a *concrete activity*, there exist a variety of modes, moods and motivations of and for walking, including walking as a highly valued physical activity, or as an opportunity for sharing space and time with other inhabitants - both human and nonhuman - of the “City”. Capitalizing on the emergence of new spaces inside the urban tissue, on the increasing interest in walking, and on the positive attitudes to integrate physical activity in urban commutes (Christie et al 2017; Bahrami and Rigal 2017) could mean imagining a territorial project for a new “walkability”. Such a project could go over and above consolidated established schemes as, for example, the construction of fragmented pedestrian “zones” or

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<sup>4</sup> Masbouni (2015), addresses the question of the car in the context of the “City-Territory” (forms of dispersed urbanization), reviews recent territorial and regional plans and visions highlighting a lack of reflection, projectuality, methodology and governance in relation to on the evolution of the car dependency in “City-Territories” (Masbouni 2015, p.150).

<sup>5</sup> In her book *A History of Walking* (2001), Rebecca Solnit associates the suburbanization trends of the first half of the twentieth century with the emergence of gyms as its corollary, as compensation for outdoors that were ceasing to exist. “If the suburb rationalized and isolated the family life, gym did it for exercise” (Solnit 2001:260). “And the most perverse of all the devices in a gym”, she writes, “is the treadmill: a device with which to go nowhere in places that there is nowhere to go” (2001:264).

<sup>6</sup> “La marche a quelque chose qui anime et avive mes idées.” *Les Confessions* (1782-1789) Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

pedestrian streets in compact urban tissues, proposing instead an extensive and adaptable mesh of interconnected, open, and diverse spaces. Connecting dense with less- and non-dense urban tissues, such project would take advantage of the spatial diversity offered by the City-Territory to structure a new system of spaces, extending and integrating the Territory's existing, dense deposit of natural and spatial capitals (Vigano, 2013), its articulated palimpseste (Corboz, 2001) of existing open and permeable surfaces.

This project, trying to work beyond the city-periphery dichotomy, would aim at generating new pockets of “urbanity” (Lévy, 1993) by “intensifying”, along and inside the territorial mesh, its multiple uses and by introducing new opportunities for both humans and non-human urban dwellers. While the tracks and pathways would be connected to one another, minimizing slopes and level changes to facilitate the everyday walks, the topography - as other salient territorial and geographic figures - would be integrated and serve as “attractive” feature. Inside the large mesh, a recognizable network of connected routes, paths, tracks and permeable surfaces would thus extend including rather than excluding, recycling and capitalizing “underlooked”, mistreated or underused. spaces in one, large “Territorial Garden”<sup>7</sup>.

While the so-called “networked city” tends to correspond to the ideal of minimizing physical effort – in which “transitions” are made from one point to the other in the shortest time – the city of meshworks would consist in a system of varied spaces, valuing not only departure and arrival points, but also the varied experiences of travel for itself and by itself.

In conclusion, beyond more or less convincing design proposals, “in depth” reflections on what new spaces for walking beyond the center-periphery dichotomy and between dense and non-dense urban tissues seem today to be paramount.

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BACI!!!

Perfetto

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<sup>7</sup> With “Territorial Garden” we intend an “ensemble” of open and permeable spaces identifying a specific space of potentiality.

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