

# The perception of Mediterranean cities through walking. The Landscape of Béjaïa in Algeria and Loulé in Portugal.

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## Abstract

Walking is the simplest and most effective way to perceive the landscape. It is a way to stop and think about the values we recognize in the surrounding spaces. Walking is considered both a practice and a phenomenon, a dynamic that is happening here and now and that shapes the city landscapes of Béjaïa in Algeria and Loulé in Portugal while we experience them. In the article, two case studies are shown to present the act of walking as a relevant way to understand Mediterranean cities, especially those landscapes. The result involves reasoning through walking journals that help us to reconsider the importance of landscape values, including genius loci, architecture, culture, colors, rhythm, and more. The reading of a landscape leads to different levels with both scientific and humanistic approaches. As a living structure, the landscape is constantly evolving; therefore, its analysis must also consider the dynamic elements of the landscape. The text discusses the importance of maintaining a walking journal as a research method in the two case studies. A popular tool among academics worldwide, particularly those who use qualitative approaches, the walking diary enables the documentation of characteristics seen when exploring areas, both inside and outside of cities. In this research, special attention is given to sketching and drawing as methods of recording perceptions and making sense of the landscape as a whole. Artistic sensitivity is something extra, sometimes unnecessary, but it can make a difference in contemporary design that is increasingly conscious, researched, but also open and communicative. The article aims, therefore, to show the results of that practice of analysis through a sensory exploration of two different Mediterranean cities by walking.

**Keywords:** *Walking, Perception, Mediterranean Cities, Landscape, Genius Loci.*

## 1. WALKING AS A METHOD OF RESEARCH AND A TOOL FOR PERCEIVING LANDSCAPES

Walking is a natural act that allows us to explore, absorb, and immerse ourselves in the landscape we traverse through the full engagement of the body and senses. In a chapter titled *Walking the Past in the Present*, published in the book *Landscapes Beyond Land*, Christopher Tilley emphasizes that it is insufficient, in the study of landscapes and environments experienced by humans, to rely solely on external knowledge - such as reading landscape and historical maps, interpreting aerial views, analyzing photographs and narratives, etc.; he suggests instead using walking as a research method and a tool to reveal the features of environments. Walking provides internal knowledge acquired through perception at a human scale. *"Walking in the landscape is an attempt to understand it at a human scale. The limits of this knowledge are the limits of my own body and how this body limits and facilitates my perception. The goal is to acquire an 'internal' knowledge of archaeological sites such as megalithic monuments and settlements in their landscape contexts, as opposed to knowledge gained through mediated representations that can only provide an 'external' perspective"* [1]. Walking is also regarded as a participatory research method; it allows experiencing real situations within societies and being in direct and close contact with people, to understand their culture, way of life, social dynamics, and their impact on the spatial structures of environments [2]. This approach is

## Proceedings

of the International Conference on **Changing Cities VI:**  
Spatial, Design, Landscape, Heritage & Socio-economic Dimensions  
Rhodes Island, Greece • June 24-28, 2024  
ISSN: 2654-0460  
ISBN: 978-618-5765-02-6

known as ethnographic walking. This type of walking is widely used by anthropologists, including British anthropologist Tim Ingold, who teaches at the University of Aberdeen and authorizes several books and scientific works in this field. Ingold is particularly interested in perception; he argues that any interaction with the environment stems from a set of present elements and cannot be carried out independently of the world [3]. In the field of art, walking is approached in three different ways: sometimes as a main subject, sometimes as a medium, and sometimes both as medium and subject. For decades, numerous artists have used walking to create works reflecting social phenomena or describing individual situations. This practice allows artists to immerse themselves in the space around them through movement. This natural act, often performed spontaneously, allows artists to enrich themselves with new ideas and to imagine and design representations of the spaces they traverse. Among the famous artistic works created through walking is that of Richard Long, who traverses natural landscapes, leaving marks on the ground to signify his passage, like alignments of stones or tracks on the earth. One of his most well-known works, which has significantly influenced contemporary art and connects three main concepts: Landscape, Culture, and Art, is titled *A Line Made by Walking* [4]. This work is also considered a participatory act. Similarly, Canadian artist Janet Cardiff works with participants using AudioWalks, where people are guided through urban spaces while listening to surrounding sounds or music [5].

### 1.1 Sensory perception through walking

To understand the sensory aspects of the landscape, the researchers must wander and explore all facets of the site. They must smell, observe, touch, listen, and even taste later to interpret these elements through their sensory perception [6 ; 7 ; 8]. The smells and aromas encountered, the heat or cold felt when moving from one place to another, the sounds, the wind, the textures - all these are elements that allow for a sensitive understanding, forging a bodily relationship with the site, a process possible only by walking [9]. Yannis Hamilakis, an archaeologist and professor at Brown University, introduces an important concept related to walking: sensory memory. In his book *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect*, he critiques the superficial vision traditionally attributed to archaeology, which overlooks the often forgotten affective characteristics. He argues that mere physical engagement is reductive and does not allow for a complete understanding of ancestral heritage. In a study on Minoan palaces, the author proposes a new way to approach historical sites, based on bodily engagement through walking and founded on the principle of multi-temporal and sensory archaeology [10].

## 2. WANDERING AS A MEANS OF REDISCOVERY AND INTERACTION WITH THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

In his book *Urban Wanderer*, Xiaohui Lin argues that getting lost in the urban environment enhances our interaction with it, thus offering us the opportunity to travel through its different facets via an enriching experience. According to Xiaohui, wandering allows us to connect the body, mind, and land; indeed, during the act of wandering, we are freed from all pre-established considerations and judgments that can be associated with the environments we traverse, allowing us to perceive them differently [11]. Meanwhile, Bradley Garrett emphasizes the importance of urban exploration through wandering, considering it a way to rediscover, explore, and even reinvigorate abandoned or neglected spaces in the urban environment. Garrett focuses on urban explorers who practice wandering, viewing them as highly significant figures in the city. He develops the concept of infiltration, meaning traversing urban spaces that are forgotten or marginalized and considered weird - places no one would imagine exploring or simply passing through. This is also considered a political and cultural act and a form of engagement in the city. In his study presented in *Undertaking Recreational Trespass: Urban Exploration and Infiltration*, conducted with a group of urban explorers in London over four years, Garrett highlights the importance of free and spontaneous urban exploration that alters our perception

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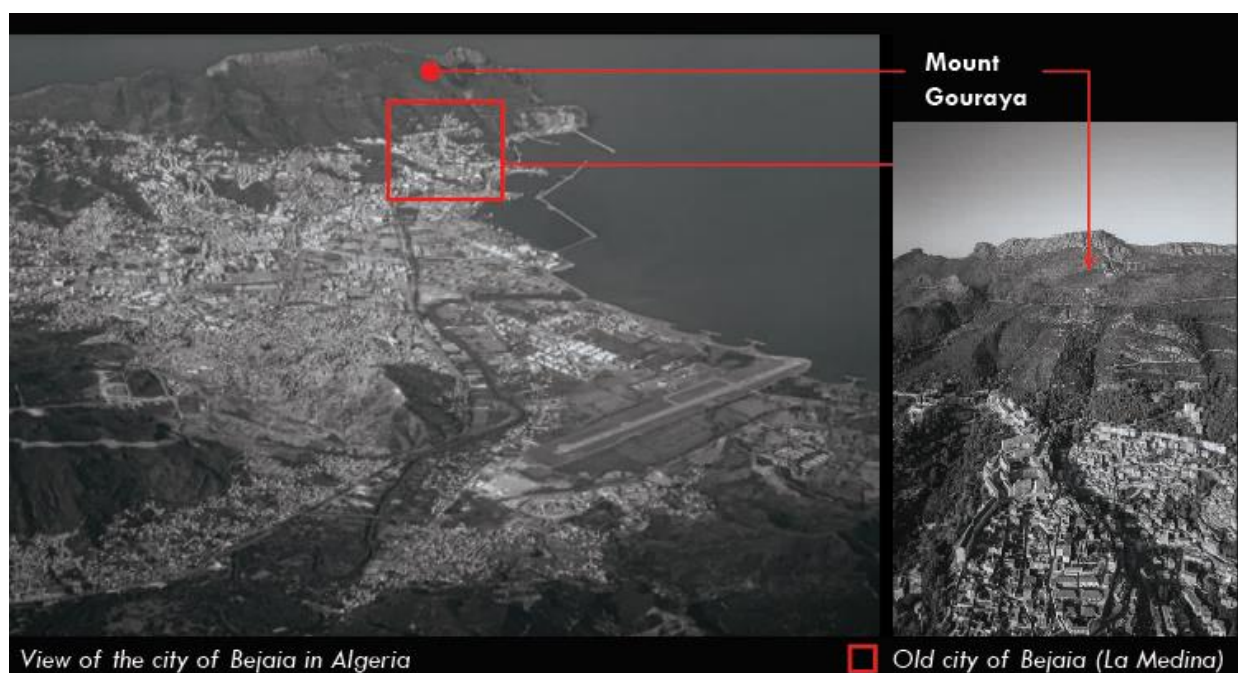
of the International Conference on **Changing Cities VI:**  
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ISSN: 2654-0460  
ISBN: 978-618-5765-02-6

of environments. The explorers observed by the researcher transgressed all conventional and natural boundaries in city exploration. They traversed on foot through the London underground networks and sewers, old buildings, cranes, etc. [12]. This is crucial for us, as it allows for a profound interaction with the city, ensuring we do not overlook many elements, even those that might sometimes seem subtle or mundane to our minds.

### 3. TWO CASE STUDIES: BEJAIA IN ALGERIA AND LOULÉ IN PORTUGAL

#### 3.1 Case study: Bejaia, Algeria

Bejaia, also known as Bgayet in Kabyle (local language) or *Bougie*, is a crucial city in Algeria and the Maghreb region. It is located in the southern basin of the Mediterranean Sea and occupies the heart of the North African coastline. Situated 230 kilometers from Algiers, the capital, Bejaia enjoys a strategic position in northern Algeria thanks to numerous features, including its easily accessible natural site and port, one of the country's foremost. Its geographical location has attracted the interest of many civilizations that have traversed the Mediterranean region. Several writers and historians, including Louis Salvator, have written about this city. In his book *Bougie la perle de l'Afrique du Nord*, he describes the iconic symbols and captivating history of Bejaia [13]. Many traces of these civilizations, which have shaped the city's landscape, are still visible today. The urban fabric of Bejaia consists of two main parts: the old city or medina, which includes all the precolonial urban configurations, and the lower city, built primarily after Algeria's independence in 1962.



**Figure 02:** Aerial view of the city of Bejaia. Source: [www.skyscrapercity.com](http://www.skyscrapercity.com). Accessed on: 18-02-2021

#### 3.1.1 Exploring the cityscape of Bejaia by walking

To begin our framework of study, wandering constitutes the first step in our field research. During this initial phase, we explored the urban fabric of Bejaia, which is divided into two main parts: the old city and the lower city. We wandered freely to gain an initial contextual understanding. Guided primarily by our natural curiosity, we posed various questions as we moved through the city's different neighbourhoods. Thus, we could appreciate, through our perception, several "spatial qualities" related to the physical and sensory characteristics encountered. Furthermore, we interacted

with the inhabitants and observed the urban scene" and the activities there. We used participant and non-participant observation to grasp the cultural aspects and anthropogenic characters of Bejaia's urban landscape. During this exploration, we climbed to the city's heights, up to Mount Gouraya, passing through the historic neighbourhoods of the old city. We descended to the sea and the fishing port. We traversed the lower city, exploring the plains and heights of the ZHUN of Sidi Ahmed and the peripheral areas and spontaneous urban fabrics of Taghzouit and Sidi Ali Lebher. In parallel, the morphological study allowed us to trace the various transformations that have shaped the city's urban landscape. Through this study, we identified the paths used by walkers in the past, which gave us an insight into the routes that have persisted and evolved over the years. This morphological analysis is combined with the sitological study of the landscapes of the old city and the lower city, organized according to three main frameworks: primary, secondary, and tertiary. On the other hand, iconographic analysis was used to interpret many old photos and engravings collected throughout our research, employing the denotative code method [14 ; 15] and the connotation method [16]. Several routes in both parts of the city have been identified and explored at different times of the year, using the walking journal as the primary tool for data collection.



**Figure 03:** Photos taken in the old city of Bejaia. Source: Taken by Yacine Mansouri, 2023.

### **3.1.2 Landscape values between the old city (medina) and the lower city of bejaia. What impact on the urban and sensory experience?**

The sensory experience in the old city of Bejaia (medina) is particularly interesting. Our walking explorations revealed that this part of the city is very rich in landscape qualities, significantly influencing the perception and attachment of both residents and tourists. However, several urban elements need to be addressed and could be revitalized to enrich the city's landscape, including old stairs dating from the precolonial period. It is also important to note that ongoing restoration work must consider sensitive and affective aspects to provide an enriching experience.

The lower city of Bejaia exhibited a wide variety of spatial configurations, with spontaneous fabrics (mainly containing illegal constructions) and planned fabrics (such as Zones Urbaines Nouvelles - ZHUN). The created spaces show a certain visual homogenization and uniformity of landscapes due to the standardization and application of typical models, mainly in the construction of residential cities. This monotony, observed in many parts of the urban landscape, results from the need for more consideration of sensory elements, which reduces the immersive experience. On the other hand, discontinuities in the urban experience and breaks between different landscape components are observable, such as the disruption of the city-sea relationship in a significant part of the city, creating a sense of disconnection, especially towards the rear port of Bejaia. Moreover, the disregard of identity and cultural elements in the design has generated meaningless spaces that do not preserve

collective memory. Many lessons can be learned from the urban landscape of the old city and applied in the processes of requalifying the urban spaces of the lower city.

### **3.2 Case study: Loulé, Algarve (Portugal)**

The Algarve (literally "the west" from Arabic) is the southernmost region of Portugal. It faces south and east towards the Atlantic Ocean and is characterized by a typical Mediterranean climate. The center is represented by Albufeira, the Barlavento zone is west of Sagres, while the Sotavento zone is east to the Spanish border. There are three geographical belts in this area: the serra, the barrocal - where Loulé is located - and the littoral. The serra is a unit of shale boulders rising to more than 500 meters, the peaks being Serra de Monchique and Serra do Caldeirão. The rocks are dark and the vegetation dense, with oak and chestnut groves. Terracing is abundant in that area. The barrocal, at the foot of the limestone hills, has reliefs of shale; almond, fig, and carob trees cover the ground in such quantities that, seen from a high point, they look more like dense spontaneous forests than crops in which man intersperses cereals, broad beans, and peas. The barrocal is identified by slight limestone hills on which almond, fig, and carob trees grow. In contrast, the littoral is made up of clear limestone rocks, with whitewashed constructions of limestone, dark patches of tree groves, clumps of mastic trees, oleanders on the water's edge, and low fans of dwarf palms [17 ; 18].



**Figure 04:** Photos taken in the city of Loulé. Source: Daniele Stefàno, 2015.

#### **3.2.1 Exploring the city of Loulé by walking**

The walks lead to an understanding of how the landscape changes. The Conselho de Loulé encompasses all three geographic belts, with a very diverse landscape. In contrast, the city of Loulé is located in the vicinity of the Algarvian beaches, which are renowned for a large influx of tourists. For this reason, and for possessing a remarkable historic center, it is an important point of passage for many people.

Services are concentrated in the northern part. The historic center of Loulé represents a major cultural identity for the region; rich in artistic and architectural assets, it is defined by a very compact mesh. The city, in which a salt mine is also located, is laid out horizontally on a slight ridge and is visibly structured in three parts: The Santuario da Nossa Senhora da Conceição, which constitutes a landmark to the west, the historic center, and the peripheral area in which the mine is located to the east.



**Figure 05:** Sketch of the historical center of Loulé. Source: Daniele Stefano, 2015.

### 3.2.2 Drawing to acknowledge landscape values

What emerges from the drawings and sketches made by walking, on the one hand, is the richness of the flora of the surrounding landscape and, on the other, a very identifiable typically Algarvian architectural style. Bright colors between deep blue and yellow predominate, recalled in turn by the endless graphic patterns of the azulejos. The city of Loulé is a centrality with its strategic location near the tourist beaches. Despite this, its interior is sharply divided between the historic center, modern fabric, and recent expansion. In the latter part lies the mine: with a passthrough role between the countryside and the city.

The arid, undulating land of the Algarve contours Loulé's recent expansions. Among the Mediterranean plants, mostly grasses, the mine's elevator-tower stands out. The mine, on the other hand, is a rather neglected area, defining the eastern edge between recently constructed buildings. On the surface, it is an uncultivated field of grasses, while the underground rooms are the reddish-yellow color of rock salt, the ore mined here. The Loulé rock salt mine arose because of the geological mutation that came about from the separation of Europe and Africa that created the Mediterranean Sea 250 million years ago.

By drawing, it was possible to collect all these data and put them together in an overall image that resituates the complexity of the Mediterranean landscape made up of historical and natural stratifications. In particular, it turned out to be a way to highlight the distinctive values we recognize in the landscape.



**Figure 06:** Sketch between the city and the countryside. Source: Daniele Stefàno, 2015.

#### **4. THE IMPORTANCE OF USING A WALKING JOURNAL FOR OUR RESEARCH**

The walking journal has proven to be a highly relevant tool in the context of our current research. Used globally by many researchers, mainly those who adopt qualitative methods, it allows for recording qualities encountered during wanderings, whether in urban environments or beyond. In our study, this tool served a dual purpose: On the one hand, as researchers, we used the walking journal to record all our impressions and sensations, as well as our emotional and affective reactions to the different characteristics perceived in the spaces we traversed, in the form of texts, drawings, photos, and even sound recordings.

The two case studies are the result of two separate works and compared here by analogy. The walks through the selected urban routes were carried out several times over the year, during different seasons and in varied weather conditions, to account for temporal variability and to provide a complete and nuanced understanding of the city's qualities. Moreover, walking was practiced both during the day and at night, allowing the capture of the diurnal and nocturnal dynamics. Alongside our subjective experience, researchers also recorded their sensations and perceptions throughout the predefined routes and locations. They thus compiled several walking journals during guided walks.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This research demonstrates the crucial importance of walking as a research method and a tool allowing for total immersion in the environments traversed. Thus, walking surpasses being merely a means of transportation to become a powerful tool for discovery, requalification, and valorization of our landscapes and urban spaces. As demonstrated in this study of two Mediterranean cities, Bejaia in Algeria and Loulé in Portugal, this practice reveals all layers of complexity in our living environments. It enables the integration of operations that take into account all characteristics of the landscape and primarily prioritize the human, cultural, and sensory dimensions during the implementation of planning and development operations, thus promoting richer and more suitable living spaces adapted to our needs. The walking journals used in this study prove to be a powerful tool for capturing all multisensory elements and interactions during the walk. Using this tool allows researchers to reveal aspects often missed by other methods used in urban and landscape analyses. On the other hand, the study highlights the exceptional richness of Mediterranean cities in landscape

#### **Proceedings**

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ISSN: 2654-0460  
ISBN: 978-618-5765-02-6

qualities that now require deep exploration to be valorized through the implementation of studies that place the practice of walking at the heart of the methodologies used.

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of the International Conference on **Changing Cities VI:**  
 Spatial, Design, Landscape, Heritage & Socio-economic Dimensions  
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