

Learning to walk (again) and engage with places

By Aled Singleton,
Swansea University

This essay discusses and presents a walking methodology that architects, planners, designers and the general public could use to re-investigate mostly suburban places built in the post-war era.

Caerleon is presented as a case study, drawn from my 2019 PhD fieldwork for the Centre of Innovative Ageing at Swansea University, research to better understand relationships between the ageing population and neighbourhood life. The case study complements existing research on how walking helps the individual to connect with their deeper relationships with everyday spaces like the house and the street. Specifically, I go beyond existing theory to present a way of deep mapping a place by using walking interviews with individuals and two public promenades. To start we ask why the pedestrian perspective has perhaps been neglected.

How everyday walking has been neglected

The reasons why we don't take time to walk our local streets and neighbourhoods can be found all around us: low-density suburban housing estates and a built environment dominated by the car. This shift in urban form has happened in living memory: for example, it is only since 1970 that more than half of UK households have owned a car. More importantly the fabric of urban Britain has been changing: approximately 6.7 million new houses were built in Britain from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s; the majority of which were located in new towns, edges of small towns, and new suburbs around existing cities.

Although many new properties accommodated families of the post-war *baby boomer* population bulge, a significant number replaced older terraced properties in industrial towns and the inner-city: nearly 1.1 million dwellings were cleared in England and Wales between 1954 and 1974. These new environments had a particularly big impact for young adults in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s – using the car for shopping, leisure activities and commuting long distance to work. Perhaps also they unconsciously shaped their everyday lives around motor vehicles.

Inner-city decline had slowed considerably by the 1980s and – interestingly – growth in car use levelled out from the mid-1990s. Indeed, large British cities are much more likely to be populated by younger people; Paul Watt¹ writes about *gentrification* displacing older residents from larger cities. So why does it matter if people move around; break and form connections with places? A review of place attachment research by Hidalgo and Hernandez² found that life-long psychological connections to geographical space are made in adolescence and early adulthood.

Sensing space

Putting the social aspects to one side, many geographers note how certain sites gain qualities and atmospheres over time. Edward Casey writes that space *thickens* with more doing and making; also that space *thins* with less activity. Walking allows us to sense what Casey calls *thick* and *thin* space – concepts used throughout this essay. For example, in 2010 older people took *Rescue Geography* walks through inner-city Birmingham neighbourhoods where only the street layouts remained from fifty years earlier.³

Being in these spaces triggered emotional responses to long-demolished communal spaces such as pubs, shops and factories. Effectively these spaces remained *thick* for this small number of older ex-residents, but *thin* for nearly everybody else. In another case, it was found that young people sense *thickness* in spaces where they skateboard and hang out. The value of walking with people is allowing them to reveal subjective experience.

Post-war planning and economic changes mean that British residential streets are generally separate from shops, factories and employment sites. In Wales, approximately 64% of dwellings were built after 1945.⁴ The Caerleon case study has an interesting pre-war to post-war split: nearly four fifths of houses are on estates from the 1950s onwards. For the Caerleon study I developed a walking methodology to explore seemingly prosaic spaces and find the thick qualities.

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Potential for walking interviews

Walking research techniques range from the scientific to the low tech. At the researcher-led end, experiments can use wearable electroencephalography (EEG) sensors to analyse brain activity. A large EEG study in Edinburgh with 95 participants⁵ made interesting conclusions about how *urban green* and *urban quiet* spaces cause less 'arousal, frustration, and engagement' than *urban busy* spaces. Though promising, such experiments are resource-heavy and – thus far – explain little about why and how the environment stimulates such brain activity.

The low tech end of the scale is a one-to-one scenario where the interviewee decides on routes through streets and neighbourhoods important to their biography and everyday life. The interviewer asks questions as they *go-along* and records the conversation using an audio-recording device. Most smart phones are surprisingly good with sound; short films can help to capture detailed features; and walks can be easily GPS-mapped. The narrative is framed by stories which relate to features such as streets, parks and houses. In many ways this suits an architect, planner or designer who may be uncomfortable seeking too many personal details. From an hour-long walk there were fascinating accounts about topics that I would never have considered asking about – more of which later. However, the downside to the *go-along* is that details of life, whether it was being a teenager in 1960s or a teenager in the present day, may not make sense to the interviewer.

Figure 1 - Walking tour, November 2019



A way to gain meaning from these stories is to complement the walking interviews with public walking tours (Fig. 1). For my project, two public promenades followed a pre-determined route. On a practical level, a fixed line gave people certainty and allowed them access to facilities such as toilets and public transport. Moreover, the walking tour had potential to be highly creative and engaging – especially by incorporating some intriguing practice from psychogeography. To that end I worked with a performance artist to make *site-specific* dramatic interventions which explored stories in thought-provoking and playful ways.

Psychogeography

Psychogeographical practice pursues the deeper psychological connections to geography. For example, 1950s and 1960s pioneers The Situationists – which included artists and architects – developed a walking method around group tours and playful games⁶ to explore ‘the precise laws and specific effects’ of the geographical environment. Of note, they had a political mission to value *thick* urban space and stop creeping suburbanisation. Although history shows that The Situationists’ political mission failed, their desire to experience space with the body and deeper psyche has resonated with many people. We now explore how more recent interpretations of psychogeography are relevant for today’s urban challenges.

Since the 1990s it has been writers and academics, more than design professionals, who have taken up psychogeography. For example, Iain Sinclair walked the M25 around London and followed poetry by John Clare; Sinclair’s books reveal how perambulators open their senses to the detail on the ground. Moreover, routes shaped by motorways deploy The Situationists’ principle of following something external to ourselves; to confront our unconscious bias and not look for what we want to see. Academic Tina Richardson argues that these transparent approaches are important as we try to understand the

Figure 2: Marega plays with stories about spaces, July 2019



‘Psychogeography is defined as the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.’

narrative of a given place. American writer Rebecca Solnit offers further advice: that working with artists can help us lose our conscious selves, but not get lost.⁷ I therefore followed Solnit’s advice and worked with performance artist Marega Palser. Marega interpreted material from my walking interviews to make the accounts playful, thought-provoking and also political (Fig. 2).

My PhD research was also inspired by the Arts Council of Wales’ £3m *Ideas: People: Places* programme (2015–2019) where artists worked with design professionals and provided many new and thoughtful approaches to regeneration and place-based work.⁸

The Caerleon Case Study

Caerleon is a settlement of just under 8,000 people built around a village centre containing Norman, Mediaeval, Georgian and Victorian properties and the visible archaeological remains of a Roman fortress. Until 2017 there was a significant campus of the University of South Wales in Caerleon. Caerleon has the highest proportion of people aged over 65 in the Newport City Council area.

On a personal level, I spent my childhood and adolescence here. My parents bought our family house in 1977 and my Dad lived there until he died in June 2018. Later that year a family friend explained that Caerleon’s incidence of older people would make the place a good case study for my PhD research on ageing and neighbourhoods. Following advice from The Situationists I would need to look beyond what I already knew. My interviews therefore centred on life before I was born in 1978.

I undertook walking interviews and two public walking events, the results of which are presented below. The accounts are structured around one walking route of six stages (Fig. 3). A key point is that space connects people with multiple times – such as the *Rescue Geography* example from Birmingham. Although we move back and forward in time the walk develops the underlying story of how suburban Caerleon was shaped in the post-war era.

To shape the route of two public walking tours in Caerleon I used clues from the text of Arthur Machen’s novel *The Hill of Dreams*. Machen was born in Caerleon in 1863 and the hill in the latter novel was largely inspired by the local area.

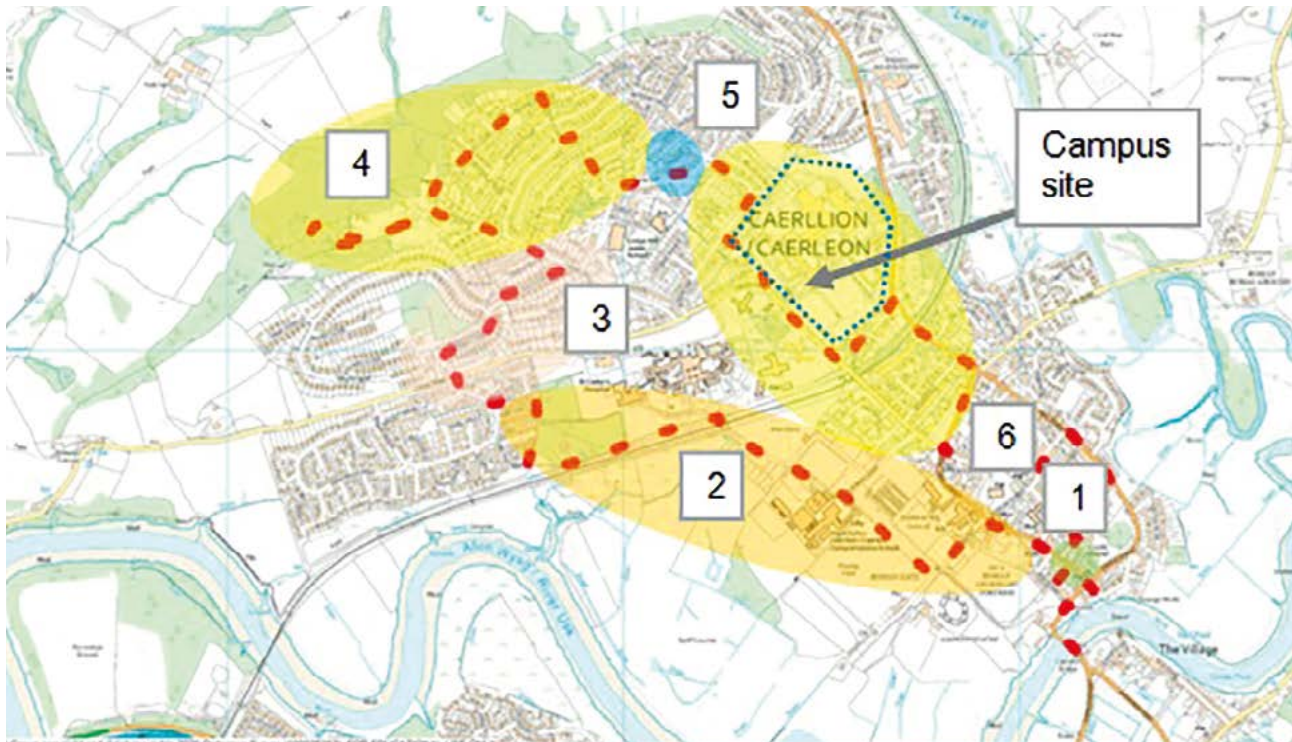


Figure 3: Walking route in red and sections numbered © Crown copyright and database rights 2020 Ordnance Survey (100025252)

Stages One to Four: Following Arthur Machen's text

Stages One to Four walked from Arthur Machen's birthplace on Caerleon High to the Lodge Hill fort. High Street contains Victorian and Georgian buildings and some from the medieval era. Some buildings have been used for the same purpose for at least fifty years: a post office with red post box, two pubs, and the Priory Hotel. However, we learned from interviewees that the bank, grocery and hardware stores had gone; replaced by cafes, hairdressers, eateries and a gift shop. A significant change was the William Hill bookmakers closing in 2019. The owners proposed a change of use to a bar serving gin and prosecco.

In Stage Two we joined a group of 30 people who came to a Caerleon Literature Festival event hosted by myself and Marega on a sunny Sunday morning in July 2019. As we started to walk Marega interpreted stories shared by previous interviews - using dance and other playful activities. For example, she recreated the scene of a young woman in the late 1960s as she got off a bus and ran between gas-lit lamp posts on a dark winter night. The young woman had recently moved to a new housing estate and the bus route did not go that far. Marega's actions captured the nervousness of a newly-built (arguably *thin*) place where people don't yet know each other well and there is no natural surveillance.

In Stage Three the group started to climb the hill from the housing estate. Marega invited people to make a shrine for a bus stop which had recently been taken away. This

element was explicitly political: the road is very steep and most residents are now entirely dependent on their cars. We then took the only cut-through path which links to a large privately-built housing estate. One interviewee said that those who bought a freehold property here half a century back were 'giving up now, for then.' What he meant was that breaking with the prevailing culture of renting a Council house meant a cut back on holidays and nights out. It was only in the early 1970s that owner occupation was available for the majority in Britain.

In Stage Four we reached Lodge Hill Fort and wondered what may have inspired Machen to write *The Hill of Dreams*. Reading out some lines of text we sensed how the novel's main character had one foot in the ever-expanding London of the 1890s (a place of trams and steam engines) and another re-playing his adolescence wandering around the countryside near to Caerleon. Machen's novel is no work of science, but it helps us appreciate how everyday space links us to past experience. As such I ask a question which is perhaps outside the scope of this essay: could the older generations who grew up on terraced streets explore space very differently to the post-millennial generations who rely on the sat nav?

The exploratory part of the July tour ended near the 1960s council-built shopping precinct on Lodge Hill. People had responded imaginatively to Marega's performance, offering detail about life on the housing estates which became a focus for the next round of interviews.



Figure 4: Representing construction in the 1960s, November 2019

Stages Five and Six: The Story of Post-war Caerleon

Stage Five was a return to Lodge Hill; Marega and I teamed up again for a second event with new material to share. The weather on that Saturday morning in November 2019 was rainy, so we spend an hour inside the former post office, now the Community Hub run by Caerleon-based social enterprise Village Services. This second gathering was sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Sciences - giving resource to employ a film maker.

Marega put together a short but simple performance which took people back to the days when construction vehicles sped through local streets to help make a massive new steelworks on the edge of Newport (Fig. 4). This sparked many more stories from past and present Caerleon residents. We discovered that many families came to Caerleon in the 1960s from other parts of south Wales, such as Ebbw Vale and Beaufort. One man who came in the early 1960s said that communities were 'blown apart' when people moved down from the valleys. People started to form new habits, such as driving cars and going to the supermarket, as estates like Lodge Hill had few communal facilities.

In Stage Six we left the Community Hub and walked 1.3km to the centre of Caerleon. Chris Thomas, from Caerleon Civic Society, led for a while. He discussed social housing and how council tenants had the *right to buy* their properties from the late 1970. There were interesting stories about repairing the structural weaknesses of concrete-framed *Cornish* houses from the late 1950s. One lifelong resident explained how the shape of front gates revealed

when certain houses had been sold off by the council. We then walked around a corner, took a short cutting past a hedge and some other former social housing.

Chris stopped the group to reflect on the live planning debate which concerned the former Caerleon Campus site. The planning application that was submitted for over 300 properties was rejected on grounds including air pollution and a lack of active travel. Both of these issues are explicitly related to living in places dominated by the car.

Towards the end of our walking tour we arrived at a row of brick-built shops from the late nineteenth century. We were guided by Nigel, who had spent his teenage years living nearby in the 1970s. He talked us through tales of buying sweets and running errands for his mother; pointing to the former grocery stores, a sweet shop, a transport cafe and a butcher's. From Nigel's stories we learned how new habits in the 1970s *thinned* the local shopping offer and bolstered the supermarket: the chest freezer reduced the frequency of trips to nearby shops and the village baker stopped delivering to the door.

Our guided walk ended at Caerleon Common. Visitors for the day shared some interesting perspectives. One man said that visiting the estates took him back to his youth in a similar place near Birmingham during the 1970s. He reflected how 'kids were all thrown in together'; perhaps *thickening* that place. Another person said she had made friends for a morning as the group walked around and learned about the place.

Conclusion: Walking reveals both the detail and the bigger picture

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has forced habits in office working and much more to change; everyone could be spending much more time living and shopping in their local neighbourhoods. In the future, the walking perspective can bring more to urban design than just planning for health or modal shifts to active travel. When we slow down our experience, we can appreciate how communal space is shaped and where cut-through alleyways exist or not. We also sense how large development sites - such as the former Caerleon Campus - risk being *thin*, isolated entities if they are just shaped around car journeys.

I believe that a nuanced walking methodology could help to scope and establish new social spaces within neighbourhoods. The walking interview uses smart phone technology and the interview questions relate to the knowledge base of designers, planners and architects. By using some psychogeographic concepts the public walking tours find meaning from the individual walking interviews. Every place will have a story which can guide a public walk.

The collaboration with artist Marega Palser challenged the way that public events uncover relationships with the urban environment. On a community level, working with Village Services and Caerleon Literature Festival introduced many local people and their valuable accounts. Being part of the ESRC Festival of Social Sciences programme helped to reach the wider public. In research terms, Professor Andrea Tales, Director of the Centre for Innovative Ageing, commented that this type of walking methodology can 'inform and be incorporated into socially friendly and interactive urban designs; particularly important factors in the reduction of loneliness.'

About the author

From an early age I have loved travel and geography; sensing how languages and cultures connect and diverge. Fortunately I have worked in place-focused jobs. For ten years I managed regeneration projects at Bridgend Council, mostly in the valleys and latterly around Porthcawl. From 2016 I co-ordinated *Finding Maindee* in Newport, where being part of the Arts Council of Wales' *Ideas: People: Places* programme taught me how artists understand and explore places. I have since used some of these approaches in my PhD research. My favourite holidays are walking trips lasting a few days and with pub stops thrown in!

All photos (c) Jo Haycock.

Research and 3-minute film <https://vimeo.com/373090583> funded through Swansea University and UKRI through the ESRC. The complete walking route is available as a digital map. More info @aledsingleton or aledsingleton@gmail.com

Notes

- 1 <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/geography/our-staff/full-time-academic-staff/watt>
- 2 Journal of Environmental Psychology Volume 21, 2001, 273-281
- 3 <http://www.rescuegeography.org.uk/>
- 4 Housing Stock Survey, 2017 <https://www.bretrust.org.uk/>
- 5 Mobility, Mood and Place <https://sites.eca.ed.ac.uk/mmp/>
- 6 Walking Inside Out: Contemporary British Psychogeography - Tina Richardson (2015)
- 7 A Field Guide to Getting Lost - Rebecca Solnit (2017)
- 8 <https://arts.wales/our-impact/how-we-reach-wider-audiences/ideas-people-places>