



CHRISTIAN URBAN WALKABOUTS: A MANIFESTO AND GUIDE¹

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*Build up, build up, prepare the road!
Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people.*

---- *Isaiah 54*

- Prayer walk **PLUS** “psychogeography”:

The interdiscipline here (psychology mixed with geography, and borrowed from the French “Situationists” of the 1950s and 60s) takes the time-honored Christian practice and equips it for the TRANSMODERN CITY.² The basic idea behind the Christian walkabout is to leave one’s comfort zone, whether it’s in suburbia or one’s psyche, and engage in immersive “streetwork”; the gist is to “take learning to the streets,” where any and all education is concerned, or to just *experience* urban realities face to face, or to, perhaps, connect head and heart in the context of processing the multitude of urban languages—and to do these things alone or in small groups, step by step by step, as it were. In short: the person on walkabout is to READ, REACT, and RESPOND, where the latter notion is fleshed out in terms of greater responsibility, greater brokenness, greater love. Walkabouts, as one might gather from the following comments, can be seen as an end in themselves, or they can be viewed as a preparatory step toward further person-to-person, or agency-to-agency work in the city.

- Not a “post”-ideology or a “post”-practice:

Rather than tap into the strategies of postmodernism and/or posturbanism, the theoretical foundation here envisions the possibilities heralded by the prefix “trans.” Transurbanism, for instance, always looks simultaneously toward transmission and transformation, where the former considers the larger “urban field” entailed by the confluence of physical and electrical space (which is the dual nature of globalization), and where the latter seeks new and better forms of urban living, or seeks, in Christian parlance, to “redeem the time” (Ephesians 5:16). The prefix “post,” on the other hand, usually connotes a rather unmanageable or disconcerting “stage beyond,” as well as, in some cases, an epistemological nostalgia for the past.

- Walking as reading the city:

Christian psychogeographers “on walkabout” are to interpret the myriad languages of metropolis. But in order to be exposed--and correctly predisposed--to the great diversity here, the psychogeographer must “drift” (from the French term *dérive*) amidst various “ambiances” of need and desire, and allow him/herself to be consumed (by love) through what is experienced. (The idea of being “consumed by” stands in stark contradistinction to the archetypal *flaneur*, who is a CONSUMER OF images.) Such street-level semiotic practices are meant, first of all, to “defamiliarize” the walker, to arrest and disrupt his/her process of habitual or institutionalized cognitive mapping, especially with regard to all those biased and inaccurate presuppositions about cities. Such practices are meant, second, to particularize the walker’s experience, to contextualize that experience in a radical street-level way; third, to introduce the complexities of difference and the geographies of exclusion; fourth, to uncover the sociospatial logic and consumer-driven hyperreality of urban life (which impacts both the “haves” and the “have-nots”); and fifth, to “move” the walker (to empathy and action) in the very process of peripatetic motion. (Einstein’s early studies on rivers show that sustained meandering produces a strong centrifugal force, a force toward the periphery, the edge. This idea speaks to the Christian’s need to move beyond a whole range of “centrisms,” and to operate, rather paradoxically, solely along the path of the radical love gained from a CHRISTOCENTRIC orientation, which is, simultaneously, to be radically centrifugal.)

- Walking as writing the city:

In order to be fully engaged with the city, the psychogeographer must “write back” in response to what he/she reads on walkabout. A newly contextualized cognitive map is the goal here, one which responds to the various ambiances of the cityscape. It follows that a symbol system must be developed (see below, “part three”) to identify or name, much as in poetic practices, what is witnessed in the city. Along with such a system, an expressly *literary* psychogeography can be summoned here as a helpful tool. Texts concerning the city quite naturally feed the imagination of the psychogeographer in the very midst of the walkabout itself. But rather than allowing literary texts to freeze the imagination such that one’s experience of cityscapes is strictly dictated *by those texts*, the idea here would be to let the literature enhance one’s appreciation of the novelistic structure of cities themselves! In a word, cities,

like novels, admit of the simultaneity of individual lives and multiplicity of information crucial to the unique opportunities posed by transurbanism.

- *Bricolage* and Myth-Making:

A psychogeographer, therefore, is a *bricoleur*, in the classic interdisciplinary sense outlined by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. He/she must choose from what is “ready-to-hand” when faced with the ambiances of need and desire encountered in the city, and then must be prepared to “piece together” a response (a bricolage of heartfelt responsibility). Levi-Strauss also discovered that the *bricoleur* was a myth-maker, and, indeed, street work does admit of a mythopoeic dimension. The psychogeographer, armed with the literary imagination, creates or participates in myths, narratives with supernatural import which are capable of offering hope and healing in the context of those exigencies calling for such. (A parallel: Paul journeyed like Odysseus and thus embodied--walked out--the hero archetype; finding that it was precisely *this* mythic structure that was needed by the cities he visited, he nonetheless transcended mere myth by also, in a clearly dominant way, embodying the Spirit of God and God’s work in the world). To use the sweeping distinction offered by J.R.R. Tolkien, myths with catastrophic endings are to be countered by those offering an “eucatastrophe,” a glimpse of hope and goodness. Such a notion might bear itself out simply through a willingness on the part of the urban wanderer to be used of God as He scripts His story of hope and healing in the city. But it might also somehow align itself more explicitly with the various ARCHETYPES available here: heroic initiation and liminality, the underground (and perhaps the Dostoevskian Underground Man himself), the search for a father motif, the quest toward home, death and rebirth, et al.

- Narrative and Identity:

Much of Christian mythopoesis limns the war-like triumph of good over evil (and, indeed, few people will argue that palpable battle lines *do not* exist), but “softer” stories of reconciliation and covenantal meeting are also needed (e.g., Martin Buber). If a large part of contemporary urban ministries involves divesting the Christian of the “us versus them” model of work in the city (which is part of the larger “conquering army motif” in mainstream evangelism), and if it involves instead an attempt to see Christ in the face of the stranger and an openness to being changed in the very process of instigating change (for others), then the identity sought in psychogeography is normatively characterized by a life-changing reciprocity. This idea returns full circle back to the role of the *bricoleur*, understood at this point through a sort of sorites: A) identity is forged/found via narrative and myth; B) the *bricoleur* is a creator of myth; C) the psychogeographer is a *bricoleur*; THEREFORE, D) the psychogeographer is charged with creating identity through story. But, in light of the reciprocal movement inherent in change and identity, this creation, this mythopoesis, must be seen as a “two-way street.” In other words, engagement in the deeper mythic structure here has the potential to change in equal measure city-dweller and psychogeographer alike. One person meets the other in the rich and fluid space where all self-actualization takes place, where human flourishing is given a chance,

where, finally, one can find out who God intended them to be (and, of course, social justice is needed here to bring this about).

- Resistance and the Everyday:

A “no right turn” street sign is designed to dictate traffic. Construed as larger urban fields, cities are designed to channel all sorts of movement--physical, mental, and spiritual--toward various nodes of desire and regulation. Certain nodes are meant to induce consumption (sometimes merely the intake of images), others are meant to automate behavior (for the “greater good” of the whole). The psychogeographer is challenged with the problems of A), whether and how to resist such channels, and B), how to “flood the market” with new desires or to create altogether new “songlines” (those more or less habitual paths set forth by the walkabout itself). Such resistances would evoke Michel de Certeau and his “practices of the everyday,” those seemingly minute gestures which can have a ripple effect over time. But more importantly, such acts would find legitimation in emergence theory (e.g., Steven Johnson), which has become part of the transmodern Zeitgeist. In short, if emergence is correct in assuming that the city functions as a consciousness and as such can be influenced by persistent feedback loops, then the PERSISTENT RESISTANCE of the psychogeographer can indeed be seen to promise life-changing results.

- Physical Maps and Cognitive Maps:

Resisting a pre-given map of the city can be, as the Situationists held, quite revolutionary in and of itself. Traditional cartography is oriented “from above” and is meant to impose order in a detached fashion. As a counterbalance to this detachment, “terrestrial” mapping is needed, mapping that is subjective-emotive, “in the moment,” fully engaged and geared toward street work. Beyond this, one must consider the parallels between physical maps and cognitive maps. A similar dichotomy arises: cognitive mapping can come “from above” or it, rather, can be formed in an immersive state where what is experienced first hand is interspersed with subjectivity. The immersive state here recalls Edward Soja’s notion of “thirdspace,” that zone of lived experience achieved over and beyond conceived or perceived space. For Christians, the process of entering such a space is critical in that it parallels the move from a (merely abstract) worldview orientation to a more empathic lifeworld orientation. To be sure, one of the many benefits of the exploration of mapping (of both kinds here) is that it can aid in LIFEWORLD SENSITIVITY AND LIFEWORLD TRAINING.

PART TWO: How to Get Started:

- Develop a preliminary and easy to execute (on the fly) symbol system (again, see “part three” below for examples). Draw a map of the terrain as you go. “Encode” the map and compile/connect/compress it with other maps over time (until an entire area is canvassed and/or physical maps and cognitive maps can be

- compared). Write explanatory notes on the margins of the map. Compare maps of the same area, process information, dialogue, etc. In short, READ, REACT, and RESPOND.
- Execute a walkabout (perhaps with a group of three people) in a specific city area, but with the idea that the route may change according to the “pull” of various ambiances. Map that area according to the symbol system (and, of necessity, come up with new symbols *on the spot*): read the terrain, the semiotics therein, and then respond back by assigning the symbols to places and structures noticed along the way; respond also by praying (peripatetically), by talking (better, listening) to a stranger, and, finally, by relating what is seen and heard to one’s storehouse of artistic texts about metropolis (e.g., Edward Hopper’s painting, *Nighthawks*, or Italo Calvino’s novel, *Invisible Cities*, or an instance of Film Noir). But, remember, allow for defamiliarization, leave a sizable segment of the old cognitive map at home (what the city has always represented to you, biases, etc.) The question here should be: What is this segment of the city crying out for? What does it need, given its own structures and stories? (As opposed to, what do *I think* it needs, given my old cognitive map?)
 - Be intentional about what narratives/myths are being incorporated here—and walked out. Has the apocalypse motif in film, say, coupled with some other institutional bias, strongly influenced both your reading and writing of the city? In finding yourself in a sudden “liminal” zone, does the potential for greater vulnerability open your heart to a more radical *agapē* ?
 - In light of the lager urban field that is the city, perhaps use electronic devices (phones, blackberries, cameras) to enhance or perhaps problematize the process of cognitive mapping (and the physical process of encoding a map).
 - Use what is collected here, as well as what is experienced in the specious present, toward developing some of the ideas/ideals presented above: e.g., being divested of the “us versus them” mentality, achieving greater empathy through Christ, becoming more responsible with regard to the plight of the city, using *bricolage* and myth-making to establish identity, engaging in resistance and in flooding the “market” with new desire (i.e., desire for justice, for love, for Jesus).

PART THREE: A Possible Symbol System:

= This sign could represent sidewalks, both literally and figuratively. It was the urbanist Jane Jacobs, of course, who first pointed to sidewalks as the arteries of lifeblood in cities, as the originary PUBLIC SPACES providing the eyes of the neighborhood as well as the proper margin between public and private life. Where there are sidewalks (construed broadly and creatively), there is at least the potential for the spontaneous, “emergent” rise of healthy city living.

≠ A “no-go” space is the opposite of a sidewalk. More than a mere absence of those arteries of lifeblood, a no-go space seems ominous, forbidden, threatening. But here one must be sensitive to the wide variety of interpretation of no-go spaces. A dark alley may seem like such a zone for one person, a clean and fortress-like downtown church may

seem threatening to another. The above mentioned reciprocity might be felt within the context of debate here.

○ A circle could stand for a “non-place,” to draw from the language of Marc Augé, a space with no real purpose or value, where one is forced to wait (on some service perhaps, or on a means of conveyance, etc.) and where one loses further touch with reality, the civic realm, meaningful work. A circle with a line drawn through it might represent, then, a “no-go-non-place.” Note also that a circle can also symbolize completion, wholeness, and healing—which summons the possibility/challenge of transforming these seemingly dead spaces to those filled with life.

？ A question mark might denote a forgotten or abandoned zone.

§ A dollar sign ascribed to a place or institution might denote a zone of INDULGENCE, an ambiance that seems to speak to, or be beholden to money, consumerism, materialism, etc.

☀ A sun, though a bit clichéd, might represent an EFFULGENCE, a place with a discernable “good spirit,” or a place of light, hope, or healing—in a general sense. The challenge is to relate these spaces to Christ, the only true light of the world, or the ultimate source of light.

⌘ Edward Soja, mentioned above, argues that much of our contemporary architecture makes the city-dweller feel disoriented, to the point, even, that he/she is left more vulnerable to manipulation. This sign, then, represents any labyrinthine space. A methodological question emerges: should Christians actually want to get lost in the city?

@ As a universal sign in our electronic missives, the “at” sign might symbolize a space centered upon, or expressly related to, electronic communication. It might denote a space where information is offered as a commodity per se.

Ω Related to the “at” symbol, the omega sign might represent a place where the city, because of its “wired” infrastructure, indeed seems to function much like a human brain. The idea of an “omega point” and an attendant “nōosphere” (that extension of the biosphere found within the multifarious and dendrite-like urban field) comes from the highly speculative work of the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin. Here, the city may appear to be “looking back,” or processing the information entered into its various networks.

♂ This familiar sign might stand for spaces designed for males, or to the exclusion of females. Such a zone, then, might be deemed a no-go space from the perspective of *anyone* falling outside the socially sanctioned norms of maleness.

♀ This sign would stand counterpoised to the above sign as designating a female space, but it too can be problematized (consider, for example, Christ, a male, as the paradigmatic nurturer).

∕ A division sign can represent any place of conflict or segregation.

■ An eye would almost immediately symbolize surveillance, for all those under the influence of Orwell, but an eye *incorporated within* a sidewalk might emphasize the idea that true public spaces promise protection.

SUB This abbreviation would mark those zones carrying the outside influence of suburbia (and, indeed, one currently finds, for myriad reasons, a reciprocal blurring of the urban/suburban distinction). So-called “city-within-a-city” spaces are popping up everywhere; here one can expect all the convenience of a local Walmart, a CVS, a Starbucks, an ethnic restaurant, et al., et al., which are all easily accessible and often actually inhibit the experience of urban environments--multiculturalism and diversity, need and story.

☺ Places designed purely for amusement can be symbolized by this icon. They might be accompanied (often) by a dollar sign or a sign of gender. They may be ironically mixed with no-go spaces or spaces under strict surveillance (or the supposed effulgence of a place of worship).

↔ Back and forth arrows can designate a place where dialogue (any true meeting, an “I/Thou” experience) happened, or happens on a regular basis (due to what “architectural” effort?).

↑↓ The north-side/south-side binary opposition seems to be universal. Arrows oriented vertically can represent areas where the binary seems thwarted, convoluted, or reversed.

△ This sign, roughly a house, might symbolize all those places where people “dwell,” or try to make a home, *or be at home*, in metropolis; the sign, therefore, can have multiple connotations.

Similar to the dollar sign, the number sign might denote a materialistic reduction, where humans or human spaces are “mathmaticized,” denatured into mere number or measurement.

* An asterisk, finally, could symbolize the need to “read beyond the text given.” One might feel as if some historical research is in order, for example, or that an interview with an habitué or denizen is necessitated.

AFTERWORDS/AFTERWARDS:

Certainly, a key to the Christian urban walkabout is intentionality, which plays out in many ways, including intentional learning. A peripatetic reading and writing of the city requires that one be intensely aware of how the city is seen, how it is categorized, and whether it is loved or abandoned in terms of imagination and intent. It also mandates an almost monastic discipline toward prayerful and responsive attentiveness. If, as many urbanists are wont to say, it is true that “as the city goes, so goes the culture,” then

Christians should see that much is at stake in our reading and writing along these lines, *along these songlines*, as it were. Yet, nothing remains as important as the singular life which might be changed through loving and engaged streetwork. Urban walkabouts offer both the opportunity to effect (reciprocal) change on the spot, in the specious present, and also in some projected and provided for future, where one banks on ever-novel ways of, as the prophet Isaiah puts it, “preparing the road” and “removing the obstacles” out of the way of God’s people.

¹ My diligent and compassionate students in the IDS program at North Greenville University have in various ways contributed to this manifesto/guide. In particular, Jonathan Atkinson deserves credit for challenging my thinking on the symbol system presented here, just as Aaron Grant continues to challenge me apropos of the whole theoretic bent of the walkabout. Kelly Sundt has inspired me regarding the theme of justice through Christ, and Raquel Soto (a truly interdisciplinary linguist from Maracaibo, Venezuela) opened my eyes to the “universals of metropolis.” Shea Vinson and Brooke Stephens have shown me the way toward the investment in story and the (parallel) uniqueness of life, et al., et al. In general, this is indeed what educators would call a “collaborative writing” project—and will continue to be so as we move our own in-scripted walkabouts from Greenville, South Carolina to neighboring metropolises such as Atlanta and Asheville.

² Odd partners indeed: Christians and Situationists! This may seem especially true with respect to the latter school’s insistence on doing away with churches in metropolis (those complicit with rationalism, by the way) and with regard to its visions of a cybernetic “New Babylon.” Yet, Christian urban practices are currently undergoing radical revision, and, along these lines, situationism—oddly—offers some extreme(ly) helpful ideas and strategies. See Simon Sadler’s *The Situationist City* for a thorough and engaging introduction to the movement.