Walking city streets: Spatial qualities, spatial justice, and democratising impulses

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**Abstract**
The information, practices and views in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG). 2019 Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). Walking fosters self-efficacy, empathy, and connection, and large and small democratic actions. Such capacity seems especially the case when walking is attended by certain spatial qualities that engender, for instance, physical accessibility, a capacity to socialise, a sense of safety, or a pleasing aesthetic. Sometimes, adverse spatial alternatives dominate and then - at very least - indifference seems to loom large and spatial injustices prevail. And in the worst conditions, indifference and injustice tip over into fear and danger. This paper's orientation is towards optimism, however. Our conceptual focus is on the relationship of walking to geography and philosophical pragmatism, and on small and effective antidotes to indifference and injustice. Our empirical contributions come from a qualitative research project in Wollongong, Australia, and specifically from conversations with 25 adult residents who shared with us their experiences of regular walks in the city centre. We interpret those experiences in pragmatic terms as transactions - or experiments in what to do and how - in relation to self, others, and environs. We show how participants are affected by walks and the transactional spaces created by them, and consider how they come to care for things that might not directly concern or affect them. In the process, we discern that they experience how their actions shape and can enrich life in the city - findings that have wider salience for those interested in spatial qualities, spatial justice, and democratising impulses.

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Abstract:

Walking fosters self-efficacy, empathy and connection, and large and small democratic actions. Such capacity seems especially the case when walking is attended by certain spatial qualities that engender, for instance, physical accessibility, a capacity to socialize, a sense of safety, or a pleasing aesthetic. Sometimes, adverse spatial alternatives dominate and then—at very least—indifference seems to loom large and spatial injustices prevail. And in the worst conditions, indifference and injustice tip over into fear and danger. This paper’s orientation is towards optimism, however. Our conceptual focus is on the relationship of walking to geography and philosophical pragmatism, and on small and effective antidotes to indifference and injustice. Our empirical contributions come from a qualitative research project in Wollongong, Australia, and specifically from conversations with 25 adult residents who shared with us their experiences of regular walks in the city centre. We interpret those experiences in pragmatic terms as transactions—or experiments in what to do and how—in relation to self, others, and environs. We show how participants are affected by walks and the transactional spaces created by them, and consider how they come to care for things that might not directly concern or affect them. In the process, we discern that they experience how their actions shape and can enrich life in the city—findings that have wider salience for those interested in spatial qualities, spatial justice, and democratizing impulses.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author, Elaine Stratford. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consider three relations. First are those in urban settings that foster sociality, commerce, or culture, for example. Second are those involving people as they walk—acts implicating bodies, sites, and networks at varied scales. Third are the relations that emerge between walking as an act and city streets as sites acted upon—relations supported or stymied by design elements or modes of governing and planning. In this paper, our aim is to reflect on those relations and consider how, when geographers engage with philosophical pragmatism in analyses of people’s experiences of walking, new understandings emerge about its capacity to foster spatial qualities, spatial justice, and forms of participation and engagement in civic
life that we describe as democratizing impulses. We advance that aim by reference to 25 rich conversations about the socio-spatial relations of walking in the city using a fourfold pragmatic logic or framework to suggest that people experience the (walking) world objectively, socially, subjectively, and aesthetically. Those conversations involved residents from Wollongong, a coastal small city 85 kilometres (c.53 miles) south of Sydney, Australia. We consider their reflections on city life as recorded on one or more routine walks in the city centre and we share what their experiences reveal about civic and political engagement.

1.1 | Gaps, antecedents, and agenda

Geographers publish a lot on the politics of mobility (for example, see Nikolaeva et al., 2019). Here, we want to add to that corpus; augment those limited numbers of studies that reflect on what connects walking, streets, and democracy; and link these issues to others framed by pragmatic philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952). As Nichola Wood and Susan J. Smith (2008, p. 1527) note, “pragmatism … [has] inspired some of the most enduring social, political, economic and aesthetic debates. Yet this style of working has received little attention from geographers” (emphasis added). For them, pragmatically-nuanced geographies can enliven debates about how to flourish in the world and recognize being and becoming as labours nourished in what Dewey referred to as transactions (see Hankins, 2017; Lake, 2017a; Purcell, 2013, 2017).

A transaction can be seen as a dynamic, co-constitutive process between organisms and environments; an “unfractured observation—complete as it stands” (Dewey & Bentley, 1946, p. 506). This description of transaction should not be seen as passive; rather, observation is performative and infers respectful and open attention, and commitment to engage and encounter—a discipline that also gestures to habits. Indeed, Dewey describes the relations between organisms and environments as habits that nevertheless are contingent, mutable, and
marked by “potentially limitless change” (Pratten, 2015, p. 1033). For Dewey, then, “there is no limit to the results that might eventually emerge. All things … are in the making … in process” (ibid). Encouraged by one reviewer to think more deeply about these matters, we intuit that these ideas might connect to a growing literature on the geographies of encounter. Helen Wilson (2017, pp. 451–2), for example, refers to encounter as a “shorthand for a body of work broadly interested in social diversity, urban difference, and prejudice, which has sought to document how people negotiate difference in their everyday lives” and as a “genre of contact”. In the senses to which she refers, it is possible to draw links between encounter and transaction. Such is especially the case if one considers ideas aired by Dewey (1934a) about democracy and secular faith, attitudes to all entities and experiences of them, and people’s capacities to exhibit “socialized intelligence” in relation to one another (Eldridge, 1996, p. 27). Indeed, for Dewey, democracy and the large and small impulses—the attitudes, actions, and experiences—that enrich or deplete democratic processes and outcomes are creative: a composite “moral practice of openness to others in the collective project of hammering out answers to the question of how we should live” (Lake, 2017b, p. 480). In addition, Dewey’s thinking about ephemeral, stable, and durable processes and human and more-than-human actors presages later thinking about *assemblages* (see Schouten, 2014). We acknowledge that the filaments connecting ideas about transaction, habit, encounter, and assemblage warrant further conceptual development, but that remains for another time.

In transactions, subjects and objects, the knower and the known, are radically, ontologically inseparable: systemic, ecological. Knowing is cooperative and integral to communication, and is liberating and aesthetic. This point becomes important in later pages as we seek to make sense of how residents of Wollongong come to know, speak about, and shape the city and the streets they *walk into existence*—even as these sites and movements co-constitute them. In short, in the terms provided by Dewey and Bentley (1949, p. vi),
knowledge is inquiry: “It demands that statements be made as descriptions of events in terms of durations in time and areas in space. It excludes assertions of fixity and attempts to impose them. It installs openness and flexibility in the very process of knowing”.

In turn, transactional rationalities are *lively* experiments in which people engage, using *had* or implicit knowledge and *known* or cognitive knowledge, and drawing on bodily, sensory, and social insights. They are, in short, people’s experiments in will-formation and habituation—what they decide to do and how. Transactional rationalities produce spaces of reasons that people consciously or unconsciously use to justify, contest, and resolve. One of the early proponents of pragmatism’s utility in geographical thinking, Gary Bridge (2013, p. 310) thinks such rationalities emerge most powerfully when “people learn to be affected”—learn to imagine differently—and then collectively decide to coordinate action to “take care of the consequences of things that do not directly affect them” (and see Latour, 2004, p. 89).

Walking seems to be one such livery experiment—disparately conceived as somatic, cognitive, socio-cultural, political, and inexorably spatial. Consider, for example, when individuals are moved to take to the streets to protest against injustice, or nod to one another on a morning meander and co-create generalized trust.

In this light, ideas about transactional space should matter to geographers because they prompt reflection on spatial quality and spatial justice as fundamental to democratizing impulses. As Bridge (2013, p. 307) notes, *spatial quality* is that which is “concerned with connectivity and qualities of communication that enhance problem-solving and enable the growth of organisms both as individuals (the ‘live creature’) and as a social species”.

Connectivity and communication lead to agonistic and democratic transactional rationalities—participation in civic life, debate, and co-constitutive relations in which people flourish often most pronounced in municipalities (see also Stratford *et al.* 2003). Walkability might be one such spatial quality, and walking—safely, among other vitally engaged
people—might be one such outcome. *Spatial justice* is “the push to assist human growth [and] open connections and to enhance quality of communication to encompass fuller elements of experience” (Bridge, 2013, p. 315). Spatial (and indeed mobility) justice concerns rights to the city and capacity to engage in politics *per se*, and involves the democratizing politics of walking more specifically (Hinchliffe & Whatmore, 2006; Lefebvre 1996; Sheller 2018; Solnit, 2002). Such matters are central to this paper.

With these comments in place, in section two we review some of the literature on liveability and walkability. In section three, attention turns to work on pragmatism and democracy, and to a fourfold framework focused on objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic readings of lived experience. In section four we explain the methods used in the Wollongong study, and present our findings in more detail in section five, using elements of the aforementioned fourfold framework to discern insights about walking in that city, and consider its relationship to democratizing impulses. In section six we further interpret and describe the significance of the Wollongong study in relation to the larger research problem under investigation, and seek, by way of conclusion in section seven to outline our thoughts on the salience of what has been learned.

## 2 | LIVEABILITY AND WALKABILITY

Liveability is a feature of city life subject to several international benchmarks, including the quality of government (Giap *et al.*, 2014) and the vibrancy of democratic processes. Thus, liveability is a politicized quality implicated in the drive to improve cities’ viability and vitality; the impulse to attract investment in commercial and retail activities; and the push to secure effective and efficient leisure, cultural, and governmental functions (Balsas, 2004; Riggs, 2017). At the same time, liveability may be limited where unfair property regimes prevail or democratic processes are in deficit (Angel, 2017; Davidson & Arman, 2014).
Walkability is one element of liveability. Consider space per pedestrian, flow rates, speeds, or ratios of volume to capacity (Frank et al., 2004; 2005; Fruin, 1971; Leslie et al., 2007; Stewart et al., 2016; Todd et al., 2015). Consider, too, qualities that foster diversity: participation, intergenerational accessibility, connectivity between ground floor activities and streets, as well as comfort, environmental integrity, economic viability, and design competence (Appleyard, 1980; 2012a, 2012b; Hassen & Kaufman, 2016; Kashef, 2011, 2016; Lynch, 1960; Southworth, 1997, 2016). Security and well-being are crucial in this mix.

Pedestrians want safety from traffic hazards, incivilities, and criminogenic conduct (Carver et al., 2010; Saelens & Handy, 2008; Satariano et al., 2012; Stratford, 2016). Forsyth and Southworth (2008) suggest pedestrians feel safest walking when transit systems are convivial and accessible; barrier-free, and supported by high-quality infrastructure; have amenity, aesthetic style, and interest; and are sustainable (see also Hendrigan & Newman, 2017; Schoner & Cao, 2014). Pedestrians also value democratic possibilities in walking and streetscapes (Certeau, 1984; Middleton, 2018; Stratford, 2015, Ch. 4): given their governmental, cultural-symbolic, and strategic significance, city centres are iconic spaces in which governments and others labour to produce liveable and walkable environs.

Thus, in more-or-less liveable and walkable cities around the world, on any day or night, billions of us walk the streets where we live: some willingly, some without choice; some easily, some with great effort. Mobilities are, in short, always already differentiated by the intersections constituting our identities and engagements with each other in place and on the move. Adaptable creatures, many of us seem inured to walking in large and dense built environs staged more for tourism and elite privilege than for residents (Birtchnell & Caletrio, 2014). Bipedal creatures, when walking in cities we constantly negotiate complex transportation networks dominated by motorized devices with velocities markedly different from our own. Individual and social creatures, we need privacy and connection, and walking
aids both self-actualization and collective enrichment, rendering the city more liveable.

Political creatures, many of us know that streets can constrain or diffuse singular and collective acts of civic engagement—some of which start with walking (Middleton, 2018; Solnit, 2002). Little wonder that liveability and walkability are deemed human rights crucial to debates about governing and planning (Bialsiki et al., 2015; Harvey, 2008; Lefebvre, 1996; Purcell, 2013). And little wonder that streets become sites of protest, especially where the hallmarks of democracy are compromised—among them citizen and majority rule, fair and free elections, participation, cooperative conduct, and the observance of individual and minority rights. Yet, to be fair, even when democracy is vibrant and functional, walking can be a subversive feature, supporting people to work for socially and spatially just lives.

Providing effectively for walking is, then, a democratic responsibility. Ideas about micro-democratic impulses seem useful here: instances of where people use “foundational democratic skills to act in new ways and in new places … [show how we also foster] democratic action” (The Right Question Institute, 2018). Such skills—walking among them—are always embodied and co-constitute our environs (Sullivan, 2001). They require agency (Mouffe, 1995); self-realization and self- and collective efficacy (Sampson et al., 1997); and empathy (Morrell, 2010; Scudder, 2016)—other hallmarks of democracy. It is to such matters that we now turn.

3 | PRAGMATISM AND DEMOCRACY

Pragmatism is fundamentally associated with democracy as both a mode of governance and a way of life, and cities are places in which democratic processes and impulses, streets, and walking are strongly connected. Dewey’s ideas are key to this association. Consider, for example, Democracy and Education in which Dewey (1923, p. 101) writes that democracy:
is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The
extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that
each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others
to give point and direction to his own … (emphasis added).

Later, in *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey (1927 [2012]) argues it is not enough to
trust experts and assume varied publics lack competence to participate in democratic
processes. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the need for majority rule and popular voting, even
while he contends that democratic life is shaped by diverse institutions comprising a social
habitat beyond mere politics, and democracy is a powerful means by which to identify and
solve common problems and best based on experiment. Thus, Dewey grants central
importance to consultation, debate, and persuasion as groundwork for decision-making,
stressing that criteria to judge the success of such activities must be emergent and
experimental. In short, democratic life is about learning how to respectfully challenge oneself
and others to optimize the common good by reconciling individual and collective interests.

Introducing *The Public and Its Problems*, Melvin Rogers stresses that Dewey thought
state institutions were insufficient for democratic outcomes; instead, “publics must seek to
build power externally … [This] is the essence of democracy’s radical character” (in Dewey,
1927 [2012], p. 29). In turn, Dewey forcefully argues that democracy is not the product of
some immanent idea or governmental process, and exists to ameliorate the negative
consequences arising from the missteps of prior political institutions (see pp. 84–5).

In our reading, some such amending efforts might include claiming space per se, claiming
the street, walking at all times of day or night, and creating walkable and liveable cities. Yet,
by direct reference to municipal politics— with which we are also concerned—Dewey
cautions that intense interest in given issues is almost always followed by periods of
indifference. Such indifference arises because, he suggests, urban life is too socially,
spatially, and technically complex, as a consequence of which “the public cannot for any length of time identify and hold itself … [there is too] little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole” (pp. 115–6). We have some sympathy with this reasoning and, for us, it and its implications underscore the importance of micro-democratic acts—not least because “democratic action on one level is democratic action on any level”, exceeds advocacy, and is a habit of mind (The Right Question Institute, 2018). We return to such matters in our closing comments.

Dewey (1927 [2012]) is convinced that habit is decisive in democratic acts because it may aid or diminish capacities to be interested, orderly, and skilled in conduct, and impede or enable capacities to innovate, imagine, and renew (and see Bissell, 2011, 2013). So, Dewey writes, habits may “instigate fear to walk in different ways” (p. 128), an observation that also points to the importance of aesthetics to democracy in his work. As Martin Jay (2002, p. 55) notes in this respect, Dewey’s “vision of democracy necessitated a robust commitment … to the self-realization that came through active participation in the public sphere. The model of that self-realization he saw best expressed in the sensually mediated, organically consummated, formally molded activity that was aesthetic experience”.

Hence, too, the importance of transactions as constitutive of transformational spaces: transactions forge new ecologies and new ways of seeing and knowing, and reinforce the idea that bodies are activities, dispositions, intelligences, and forms of communication. Dewey (1929) often refers to bodies as *body-minds* with a clear capacity to experiment using all available sensory, cognitive, affective, and other capacities. In pragmatic terms, then, being and becoming are shaped by things outside the skin as well as inside it—by experiences or *bodying* processes that are discursive and somatic, verbal and non-verbal. If that is the case generally, surely it is also the case for walkability in the city, and for attendant or emergent democratic processes and outcomes.
Bridge (2008, p. 1582) advances like ideas by building on Habermas’s work on communicative actions: “sites of social reproduction and social change” that enable people to understand the world in objective, social, and subjective terms—to which Bridge adds a fourth aesthetic dimension that harks back to Dewey’s (1934) work on art and experience, among others. In the fourfold framework that emerges from Bridge’s thinking, the objective world embraces physical setting and context; the social world comprises agreed and contested norms; and the subjective world is that experienced by the body-mind through bodying processes. The aesthetic emphasizes Dewey’s (1934b) conviction that communication is always art-work: creative, transformative, renewing.

Bridge’s longstanding interest in the city stems partly from appreciating its close connections to reason and [limited forms of] democracy. It stems partly from his engagement with philosophical pragmatism’s relationship to postmodern and poststructural thinking. And it emerges from his understanding that urban space can foster communication between and “within communities and within the ongoing project of the self” (Bridge, 2005, p. 2) in ways that spatialize large and small democratizing impulses. Like Dewey, Bridge is preoccupied with ameliorating the indifferences arising from inhabitation and complex politics of place and movement, especially when indifference is counter-intuitive to transactions fostering conditions in which to flourish. Transactional rationality holds part of the key: a kind of “holding operation that coordinates materiality, embodied … imagination (informed by emotions) and argumentation from diverse perspectives … a cumulative dispositional competence” (Bridge, 2013, p. 309). We return to these insights shortly by reference to the Wollongong study, which is introduced next.

4 | WALKING IN WOLLONGONG – METHODS OF APPROACH
Wollongong is a small city and a municipal government (figure 1). In such cities, critical agglomerations and complex public transit systems are less likely than in large or global cities. In such cities, car dependence and suburbanized retail functions prevail, and amplify rate payers’ concerns about parking—often over other amenities and services. Adaptive responses by local governments to automobility and suburbanization include providing or upgrading downtown malls, refreshing façades, adding urban design features, and creating central car-parks. Yet, lacklustre economic opportunities, high vacancy rates, and empty buildings and lots may typify small city central business districts. So economic strategists often push for centralized public sector facilities and encourage public-private partnerships, inner city housing developments, and light rail. Pedestrian flows then can be privileged and linked to smart growth policies leading to multi-modal transportation to enliven the city (Kelly et al., 2017; Leanage & Filion, 2016).

Yet, Wollongong’s city centre revitalization emphasizes walking, and creating pedestrian-friendly environs is an overt goal of the City Centre Vision (Wollongong City Council, 2015; Wollongong City Council no date). To such ends, in 2014 Council became a signatory to the International Charter for Walking, which aims to increase inclusive mobility; provide well-designed and well-managed places for people; integrate networks; optimise land-use and spatial planning; design safe roads; reduce crime levels and fear of crime; provide supportive authorizing environments; and engender walking cultures (Walk21, 2006). That year, Council commissioned the Danish company Gehl Architects to conduct a trademark public spaces and public life study entitled A City for People. Wollongong Public Spaces, Public Life 2015 (Gehl, 2013; Wollongong City Council, 2015). Findings show how pedestrian mobility in the city centre is largely restricted to daylight hours and concentrated in and around Crown Street Mall, Western Crown Street, and the Blue Mile foreshore—sites we refer to below in more
detail. On that basis, Council sought to understand what qualities would encourage or discourage walking.

Our own research with Council began with a mail-out survey, *Impressions of Wollongong City Centre*, sent by Council to 5,000 households (Ethics Clearance HE15/224). That survey, which was returned by only five per cent of the sample, does not concern us here. However, an invitation to participate in semi-structured interviews was included in it, and that is our focus in what follows (Ethics Clearance HE15/355). Fifteen women and ten men consented to work with us and the research reported below draws on those interviews. A diverse group in terms of socio-economic status and educational attainment, those 25 participants ranged in age from their mid-20s to mid-60s, and lived in several household types. All were residents of Wollongong, and habitually walked alone or with others in the city centre, some first driving there from surrounding suburbs. All consented to interviews in which they were asked to map and share their experiences of walks along chosen routes. Interviews were designed to elicit insights on places passed through or visited; memories invoked; encounters and conversations; stops, pauses, and pace; and things taken along. Fourteen participants agreed to take a member of the research team on a subsequent “go along” conversation on one of those routes (Carpiano, 2009). Three of those agreed to record their regular walks over a full week using a light-weight video-camera that can be attached to clothing (Pink, 2007). Those second and third stages are the subject of other work not discussed here (and see Anderson, 2004; Butler, 2007; Cook et al., 2016; Middleton, 2010; Pink, 2012).

Our work with participants enabled us “to instigate deeper qualitative reflection and engagement on social and cultural practices that foreground[s] the role of the mobile body in space” (Merchant, 2017, p. 184). Mapping was a comfortable starting point to share experiences of walking and the meanings made from those experiences (Jaimangal-Jones,
2014; Spinney, 2015). To start, participants were shown a city centre street map and asked to describe regular walking routes; one example is provided here (figure 2).

Interviews generated several hundred pages of transcripts that were read multiple times as an immersive strategy before being uploaded to NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis computer software package produced by QSR International. During the immersive process, we asked ourselves: is it possible to read participants’ narratives about experiences of walking Wollongong’s city streets in terms of objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic frames of reference? If so, is it possible to discern in those narratives tendencies to strive for self-efficacious, empathetic, and democratic transactions?

5 | FINDINGS

In what follows, we accept the idea that walking is a praxis involving body-mind and transactional rationalities with self and other. We understand walking routes to be both emergent, relational, processual expressions of that praxis and systems contingent on unpredictable feedback loops operating at multiple scales and generating specific spatial qualities. Those qualities may lead to spatially just outcomes and enhance democratic processes and impulses—and they may not.

Acknowledging that city streets are politicized spaces, our thematic analysis of participant interviews and maps in Wollongong suggests that journeys on foot and emergent qualities of walkability and liveability involve certain transactional rationalities—experiments that help people decide what to do and how. Those experiments draw on had and known forms of knowledge that can be described as objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic. They produce frictions—points at which forces are felt and known that emanate from physical infrastructure, social difference, inequality, self-efficacy, or aesthetic response. We suspect that these are points at which empathy and democratizing impulses grow or decline.
Those parts of Wollongong city centre that concern participants include the hospital precinct in the southwest, east to the Wollongong train station and Piccadilly Centre, and further east to Keira Street, MacCabe Park, Burelli Street, and Crown Street Mall; or north up Church, Kembla, or Corrimal streets, or east along Campbell, Smith, or Market streets to the Blue Mile—a stunning stretch of coast along Marine Drive and Cliff Road (figure 3).

These places will mean little to those unfamiliar with Wollongong, but they were anchor points in wide-ranging and lengthy conversations about participants’ ways of being in the world and viewing the world. The 25 routes drawn by participants when interviewed were later consolidated into a composite map (figure 4).

What becomes apparent is that each walk is unique, each accumulates to an individual’s habitual perambulations, and all amass to form a pattern that suggests their transactions on the city streets of Wollongong are broadly comparative. Broadly comparative, too, are views of the various parts of Wollongong that participants walked; of the act of walking itself; and of the ways in which it informed the quality of their lives, their perceptions of just actions, surrounds, and outcomes; and their sense of being citizens. Next, we provide evidence for such assertions by reference to interview transcripts and objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic readings of them.

5.1 | Applying the fourfold framework

The idea that people can understand their embodied transactions in at least four ways is central to our immersive reading and subsequent thematic analysis of participant transcripts. By way of introduction, Table 1 provides two orienting examples that show how data were initially categorized—noting that this work was not done to force utterances into boxes where
they did not fit, nor to stop us thinking about how some such utterances might reflect more than one kind of reading.

Table 1 Fourfold framework to understand participant experiences of walking Wollongong

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience defined/described</th>
<th>Objective</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Subjective</th>
<th>Aesthetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John R</td>
<td>• post-industrial landscape • urban consolidation possible • too many missing footpaths • mall seating fails to provide for arms and legs • footpath widths matter and are often too narrow</td>
<td>• saying hello is important and not too stressful • malls are meant to be about congregation, people-watching, interaction … but this mall is not like that … it is not a people place • more development is needed to give a buzz at nights</td>
<td>• I take a direct route to the church where I volunteer each week, but my route home may meander depending on my mood • it’s not good at night—no lights— but I don’t feel unsafe … just difficult to navigate</td>
<td>• when I turn here and see the sea I get a really good feeling about what a beautiful place this is … the church precinct is calming … a contrast to the entertainment precinct • the trees on the avenue are impressive— they create an arch you walk under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>• all sorts of parts of the city have changed over the years • the mall is functional but not social • plantings soften the city landscape so well</td>
<td>• anti-social behaviour around the cinema is off-putting • want my kids in “a pack” with others I trust so they are safe and not alone or just in a pair</td>
<td>• memories fill the place—now I am looking for the wisteria … it’s not there now but there used to be an arbour • we see everything in long distance now</td>
<td>• the trees give beauty and shade and the “beachness” is so lovely • but Piccadilly is inexcusably grimy— something ought to be done</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apparent in Table 1 and in the transcripts more generally is also evidence of spatial qualities filled with possibilities, as we show below. According to Bridge (2013, p. 312) such prospects might involve not “blueprint plans or elaborate designs but rather a pragmatic audit
of where and how communicative energies prevail and how those conditions might be enhanced”. As he underscores, any such audit needs to be conceptual, empirical, and comparative, and then be institutionalized—including in democratizing impulses and practices—and we are mindful of that.

(a) Objective readings of walking in Wollongong may relate to physical setting and context, and quantifiable “certainties” such as measures of walkability outlined above, as well as certain physical components of walkability such as footpath and “street width; traffic volumes; tree canopy; building height; number of people; [and] weather” (Ewing & Handy, 2009, p. 67).

Participants in our study regularly referred to such objective spatial qualities as features that can enable or hinder connection and communication, which are both preconditions and outcomes of a city’s walkability, and of democratizing impulses. They appreciated the physical presence of tree canopies, planters, seating, and lighting; interesting façades and set-backs; and informative signage logically placed—and we grant that this was partly for features’ social, subjective, and aesthetic qualities as well as their physical ones. So, for example, participants explained how more-or-less congested, cluttered, or narrow footpaths prompted them to adjust wayfinding or negotiate with others when sharing a pathway. They also noticed how traffic conditions and the relative proximity of motor vehicles affected their position in relation to fence-lines or crossings.

As a quality, accessibility clearly mattered. For some participants with no cars, the weekly shopping expedition did not involve driving and parking, then walking and shopping, and then unburdening their bodies or trolleys by placing grocery bags into cars for the drive home. As Catherine described it, “I’ll stand [at the Keira and Campbell Street roundabout] in the rain with all of my groceries for five, six, seven minutes, and the cars just keep going and
going and going”. At some point she decides to make an initial dash to a narrow safety island followed by a second dash to the other side of the road. For her, the physical characteristics of Wollongong’s city streets impede safety, amenity, accessibility, and her overarching experience of walking. Opportunities to engage, communicate, and connect are casualties of such circumstances—and these, we note, are the rootstock of many democratizing impulses.

Participants also made observations about how smooth or rough surfaces affected their walking practices, and these comments extended to other statements about risk. Nerrine told us “a bit of rough pavement” did not bother her, but she could see how misplaced brickwork, gouges, or obstructions challenge some people; then empathized with them; and then hoped that someone might instigate remedial works. Others also mentioned trip hazards, uneven steps, low-hanging branches, poor lighting conditions, or the inconvenient absence of footpaths at the margins of the city centre. Some said they contacted Council to report these issues, narrating such acts as civic duties. The locations of parking spaces, elevators, travellators, and escalators were important to those accompanying children, the elderly, and people needing support because of physical or other characteristics. These features added efficiencies to walks, and participants valued their provision and the inclusion they foster.

Several commented on the difficulty of using shared paths where markedly different velocities are involved—and skateboarding and cycling were often mentioned. Illustrating the spill-over from physical to social readings of walking, Bob shared recollections about ‘Ratbag’—a name that he and others on his “Blue Mile walk” gave to one cyclist: “He would come through screaming obscenities and riding way too fast”, Bob said, until observed by a police officer out on a recreational walk, after which the behaviour “suddenly” moderated.
(b) **Social readings of walking in Wollongong** relate to agreed and contested norms, rightness, or legitimacy. For instance, Andy described how the footpath helps him observe trust-building social norms. He said, “I think the environment conduces that conversation. It’s a meeting place. I think the footpath does that. It’s wide enough … and you stop and talk.”

Almost universally, participants welcomed recognition rituals, many referring to a acknowledgement hierarchy from eye contact, to nodding, waving, offering a verbal greeting, and stopping to converse. Warmly, Gavin described how, on one walk, “I heard someone’s life story before he went left and I went right”. Ann suggested people were friendlier on weekends, and thought perhaps civilities were more usual among her [older] generation. Steph speculated that acknowledgement was a “morning thing … a beach thing”. For Anthony, it was “nice to have a chat and swap conversations—and smile. If you smile, you usually get one back”. Lee suggested that sometimes it “is as simple as being around people when … there’s no expectation to engage … it’s just good to get out”. He also observed that many people are absorbed in their music or on their phones because sometimes “you try and shut off the world”. Nevertheless, he said, you still acknowledge people: “you have to do it … like wave, kinda thing”. Beth valued how walking enabled her to connect and communicate with her husband. “We go from one thing to another … walking just starts up the conversation … I think it’s a bit easier than when you are just sat there, facing each other … I don’t know what it does … but you talk the whole way and [work] … everything out”.

The refurbished Crown Street Mall was subjected to scrutiny by participants in terms of social functions and norms. Rebecca’s ambivalence was clear. She was put off by seeing “two people on two occasions throw up in the mall” and then acknowledged that the space is “not really what I’d call lively, but yes, [it’s] a people place of sorts”. Steph thought the mall—while safe—was “pretty dead at night”, although she thought the skaters added “a bit of fun”. Several participants questioned the removal from the mall of a children’s play area.
and comfortable seating. Others lauded the advent and conviviality of mall-based events known as Eat Street and the Farmers’ Market. Colin, who self-identified as disabled, noted that the “mall is good, but whether it has a knock-on effect [for development down] the rest of Crown Street, I don’t know”. Part of his concern to see more such development related to a view that many people live in precarity and need work.

Participants were perennially alert to the presence of those they felt were not observing social norms and around whom they felt emotions ranging from discomfort to mild fear. So where their positive connections with others were narrated as externalized connections of trust, their negative responses to anti-social behaviour were internalized as subjective and moral tussles—and we were struck by how often they said they heard in their own heads multiple and conflicting voices of judgement, sympathy, frustration, fear, and helplessness.

(c) Subjective readings of walking in Wollongong concern the world as it is experienced by the body-mind and by associated bodying processes, and in terms of expressions of censure or sincerity, for example.

Bob and John R described encountering both “young blokes … [who] obviously haven’t got a job” and “people with mental issues … yelling at each other, things like that—it’s a big turn-off”. Kathleen described her heightened awareness of “odd characters” using MacCabe Park, and referred with discomfort to the methadone clinic near the dilapidated Piccadilly shopping centre and train station. Gavin described how the conduct of “the druggies” made him feel like retreating—“like, let’s just get home”. Andy said, “I know I shouldn’t say [this] … I have nothing against [the methadone clinic] … I just think it is in the wrong place … people just get turned off and walk away”. Catherine, felt propelled across the street if “somebody [was] coming towards me [and] was really sketchy or dangerous looking. But that hasn’t really happened”, she added. Corrine described a “demarcation line” at the mall’s entry where “druggies collect … it’s like walking through a smoke screen”, she said. A
disabled person, Lee said, “I feel the city should be everyone’s place and even people like them … they have a right to be there too”. Others implied that sentiment, but overwhelmingly a common response to awkwardness was to avoid eye contact, increase pace, and disconnect.

Positive subjective readings were also common. Most participants said that part of their motivation for walking was to exercise, be fitter, and experience their environs first-hand. Several shared conversations about the moods that weather and light have. Many derived pleasure from different paces of walking and periods of lingering or stillness. Andy knew a “place where you can sit down and just look at the Pacific Ocean … they’ve designed these little—what do you call them?—landings … so at the top we always just stop and have a look”. For him, that act was restorative. In contrast, the mall had failed to prompt much in the way of feeling from him—"I just think it needs to be more liveable … get the Melbourne [laneway] feel”.

Hinting at the labours involved in fostering self-efficacy, many participants used their walking space-time to “chat” with themselves. Nerrine aims for pleasant thoughts and “practices thinking about gratitude’ on her walk. Anthony told us that he figuratively lines up and then ‘thinks about the day … [and] about how lovely a spot this is”, but he qualified that by saying that “the beggars are a bit of a pain” when they interrupt his private time. Others had similar response to hawkers or crowds who disturbed their quest for solitude while walking. Yet Maria also pointed to the negative feelings that arise when cities are devoid of people. “In Portuguese,” she said, “there is a word, ‘inhospite’—like it’s not a place that invites you to stay … it’s isolated and [you] don’t feel safe there”.

And Gavin shared how the presence of certain features in the built environment grounded him in place. Wollongong born and bred, he described memories of seasonal changes, of paddling at the rock pool, and of surf-parties near the lighthouse. He pointed to a part of the map, saying “I’ve a mate who’s anti-concrete and development, whereas I’m pro-
development. I like to see things change and be renewed … but [then] they chopped down this massive fig tree—and now it’s just this ugly carpark”. That saddened him—the tree had been part of the fabric of his lifeworld for decades.

(d) Aesthetic readings of walking in Wollongong pertain to sense of beauty, style, creativity, and innovation, and to renewal and transformation. Overwhelmingly, participants thought the city centre comprised places in which aesthetic values were absent, flawed, or partial at best; this was in contrast with their perceptions of the Blue Mile along Wollongong’s Pacific coastline.

So, while John S celebrated heritage in the inner city, and described how he valued a sense of history in a city that has been subjected to the vagaries of economic maldevelopment, others criticized the city’s hard surfaces, ugly façades, pollution, and congestion. Many had ideas about how the centre could be revivified, justifying the need for change in several ways. Common among them was an understanding that a more walkable, liveable city would support economic development, which could support locals to gain employment and stay in the region. And many participants viewed city improvements as benefiting all residents and including them in the social life of the city—from the youngest children in prams, to the frail elderly, to marginalized sub-groups (including those among whom they actually felt uncomfortable).

The Blue Mile was singled out in relation to the “best” aspects of the city. Participants valued the coast’s aesthetic qualities. Among those who regularly walked the Blue Mile, Corrine described how “you’re so near the water and the freedom … I love, love, love that walk. Don’t let anything ever happen to it”. Marilyn simply stated of that mile-long walk: “The view and the breeze. It’s nice feeling a breeze on your skin—it’s beautiful”. For Joe, walking the Mile was a total experience, all “because I love the beach and ocean … all the people … little cafés, and the walkway with the continental pool, the rock platforms, and the
lighthouse … the fish market … it’s all lovely”. It is noteworthy that those whose walks
encompassed the coast tended to be more forgiving of those parts of Wollongong’s
commercial and retail precincts which they found wanting physically, socially, or
subjectively. Their narratives about themselves, their bodies, their psyches, other people, and
their environs tended to be more buoyant—a sense only perceptible when their transcripts
were read on multiple occasions in an immersive fashion.

Close reading of the foregoing suggests to us that, in large measure, participants’
responses to the aesthetic qualities of particular spaces were also highly influenced by their
objective, social, and subjective experiences. In short, objective conditions affected how
participants gauged situations, deployed social norms, apprehended beauty or ugliness, and
tapped into new ways of engaging, thinking, feeling, and being. Their suggestions for ways to
enhance liveability and walkability in Wollongong almost inevitably embraced aesthetic and
design solutions. Those solutions showed the importance of thinking beyond quantified and
commodified indexes of walkability and participants’ capacity to think across objective,
social, subjective, and aesthetic domains. This insight points to the importance of embracing
the complexities of transactional rationalities and integrating different readings to gain the
fullest possible picture of the experiences of walking in Wollongong—or indeed elsewhere.

6 | DISCUSSION

Walking is a mundane and yet profoundly important part of life in cities, and rightly has been
of interest to geographers over many years. In this paper, we have added to reflections on
walking and walkability by taking up an invitation proffered by Wood and Smith suggesting
that geographers do more to engage with ideas from pragmatism. Indebted to insights from
Dewey and Bridge, we have reported on qualitative research considering narratives of
walking in Wollongong. We have asked how walking experiences might be seen as
transactions and understood in terms of objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic readings. Overarching this comparative, empirical work has been an interest in how, as embodied, adaptable, and political creatures, people’s walks on city streets may be occasions for self-efficacy, empathy, and democratic engagement. We find that there are few grand gestures here: revelations appear in the mundane, fine-grain, and small-scale; in Bridge’s terms—people learn to be affected.

Take self-efficacy first: it is possible to suggest that walking does foster opportunities for self-reflection, moments of self-realization, and the admixture of confidence, competence, and commitment. In deciding to walk, in walking itself, in creating habits and accommodating deviations from routines, participants experienced the world as a series of transactions, difficult and delightful, that invited them to think and feel—to be alive to possibility. Here, we think, is one antidote to indifference.

Next, consider the relationship of empathy to walking. Following Dewey’s ideas about flourishing, we suggest that the self-awareness moving in the city on foot awakens in people makes them more receptive to connecting and communicating with others. Again, this is a step from learning to be affected to taking care of the consequences of things that might not directly touch us. It, too, is an antidote to indifference. To us, it is striking that on their walks our participants were most put off by the conduct of others whose lives are precarious because negatively affected by addiction, poverty, and associated co-morbidities. At the same time, they were able to reflect on their discomfiture. Their concerns for themselves, for others affected by anti-social conduct, and for those they saw trapped in hurt lives manifest as specific recommendations. Some wanted those in government to make different decisions about the location of facilities. Some wanted different design solutions that softened and revitalized certain precincts. Others connected the dynamics of street life to larger structural challenges related to post-industrialization, including un- and under-employment.
Throughout, each participant was willing to allow that everyone has a right to the city. In our reading, embedded in this acknowledgement are constitutive elements of a commitment to streets where generalized trust and democratic outcomes are valued. That commitment is not discernible in declarative statements or calls to action. Rather, it is to be found in people’s experiences of their walks and our readings of those acts in terms of the objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic spatial qualities that foster spatial justice and democratizing impulses.

In the final analysis, this work has been one small exemplar showing how pragmatism’s utility for geographical thought and empirical analysis might ‘cash out’. It also points to the continuing importance and possibilities inherent in walking as a corrective to ennui and the slowly corrosive effects that indifference might otherwise engender.

7 | CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this paper has been to reflect on co-constitutive relations involving people and city streets in order to consider how walking supports or undergirds large and small civic and democratic actions that can foster greater levels of liveability and walkability, and engender particular and positive spatial qualities that enhance spatially just outcomes.

Such deliberations are, we think, important for geographers and those in allied disciplines seeking to contribute to debates on: (a) the politics of mobility; (b) the spatialities of democracy and associated ideas about citizenship; (c) what it means to flourish in place and on the move; (d) the continuing value of qualitative research and narrative analysis; and (e) the utility of collaborative conversations across disciplines including—in this instance—pragmatic philosophy, which has received limited attention from geographers.

By immersing ourselves in the narratives that participants shared with us, and by thinking with a pragmatist lens, we have been able to discern that they have a common desire to live
well—to flourish—and to conduct themselves in ways that support such outcomes for others. We have noted their ambitions for Wollongong as a place in transition, and registered their concerns for those doing it tough as the economy restructures. Their attempts to be candid are strongly apparent—perhaps most obviously in relation to the ethical and moral obligations they feel towards the most marginalized in their community, and in relation to their more personal, visceral discomfort when ‘confronted’ by those very same people. They recognize in themselves both the capacity to include and foster spaces of just conduct, equity, and empathy and that which would exclude and censure.

We acknowledge that these revelations might have emerged from discussions about acts other than walking, but they did not. Moving as body-minds around the city, people feel the footpath through their shoes and feet. They smell salt air, petrol fumes, or the smoke from joints. They see huge trees and blossoms, and the dilapidated scars of maldevelopment. They hear the unsettling rumble of too many vehicles, the taunts of the disenfranchised, bird call. These experiences—these transactional experiments in being in the world—necessitate an openness to life, to learning to be affected. And bad days and petty moments aside, our participants seemed to want to be in the world in ways that were inclusive, fair, and would support micro-democratizing impulses that accumulate to produce more just and more amenable spaces in which to live and move.

Doubtless, other readings are possible: we are too optimistic, or too naïve, or subject to deliberate or unconscious manipulation. And doubtless, our analysis is necessarily partial and, if not ideologically driven, then certainly inclined to a particular set of ideas. After all, our orientation is towards optimism, which requires a commitment to the idea that people are not just sapient but caring. In short, and returning to Dewey, people are able to perceive the full [democratizing] import of even the smallest or most mundane of their activities, walking city streets among them.
For us, the added benefit of thinking about these matters using objective, social, subjective, and aesthetic readings is this: these categories have strong translational capacities. They can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively; documented; and inform governance, policy, and planning. They can help us understand both social and spatial dynamics and change, and their constitutive elements can be shaped and enhanced such that city life is improved. So here, perhaps we part company with Dewey in his more pessimistic moments: just maybe the public can hold itself together and avoid the crippling indifference that so often typifies life in cities, doing so by being in and moving through the world in ways that consciously seek to care about the self, the other, and that which environs us. Life in Wollongong is not perfect, but each day that people walk self-efficacy, empathy, and democratic engagement into existence, they keep the alternative at bay.
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Figure 1 Wollongong municipal [outer] and suburban [inner] boundaries. Source: https://profile.id.com.au/wollongong/about?WebID=10
Figure 2 Tanya’s map of walking in Wollongong. Source: this study
Figure 3 Wollongong city centre. Source: https://www.google.com/maps/@-34.4214306,150.8940133,16z
Figure 4 Composite map of participants’ walks in Wollongong city centre. Source: David Clifton and Theresa Harada