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Urban Walks and Visual Exploration

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Abstract

This article is about exploring everyday life within a city—specifically the city of Al-Khobar in Saudi Arabia. My exploration is one of urban identity, space, and the visual communication that can be found within urban public spaces. The aim, through qualitative research, is to observe and better understand the position of city inhabitants through the lens of being a resident, but also a designer navigating its spaces. The visual aspects of this study show parts of the city encountered over time to visually interpret quotidian elements. The city is eclectic, and the visual documentation in this article includes photography, illustrations, and mixed media. The representation of micro and macro details of cities is a way to familiarize the reader and viewer with what can be experienced in but is sometimes too familiar to recognize. It also aims to encourage those interested in urban environments to think about how we shape our cities and are simultaneously shaped by them. City spaces can be similar and different around the world; it is the personal encounter and symbiotic relationships between objects, memories, and actions that add connotative layers to urban spaces.

Keywords: Urban Exploration, Visual Interpretation, Psychogeography, Documentation, Communication.

Introduction

City spaces represent marks of existence as people leave traces of who they are and how they live in physical spaces. When thinking about city spaces, one can visualize a palimpsest that captures changes over time. How urbanites understand their cities and learn about themselves can vary, but there are suggested thoughtful ways to explore cities such as investigations, walks, and using visual communication to interpret spaces. These activities as manifestations of psychogeography (Pinder 383). The term, coined by Guy Debord, a founding member of the Situationist International, combines psychology and geography and relates to people's psychological experiences of cities, while also shedding light on areas that may be forgotten within them. What psychogeographers and urban explorers emphasize is that one must get lost or immersed in a city in order to know it; this is accomplished through *dérive*—French for “drift.” It is a word that amplifies the ability to follow one's own thoughts and inclinations in search of new ways to read and closely understand urban landscapes (Sidaway 560).

In this article, I aimed to put urban exploration into action from the perspective of a designer by focusing on visually exploring the city in which I live, Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia; a coastal city in the Eastern Province that became a settlement in the 1920s and later developed into a lively populated and multicultural city. This investigation centers on documenting the city through walking using media such as photography, and then re-interpreting the images into illustrations, collage, typography, and mixed media. The visuals introduced in this article draw attention to everyday urban elements that may go unrecognized, and aspects that play a role in shaping a

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city.

The main question posed and explored in this article is: How may creative practitioners understand their cities more closely by documenting and interpreting their experiences visually? This qualitative study focuses on my own experiences and observations in parts of one city, with the intention for future research to include multiple perspectives within one city and even different cities. Translating cities aesthetically can be valuable in highlighting how common everyday actions, such as walking, may present opportunities for analyzing urban spaces. These creative experiences can also create frameworks for how we engage with the cities we live in by visually communicating the experiences of its inhabitants creatively.

Through the data I have collected, visual and textual, this article focuses on two main aspects: First, outlining literature on discovering cities through urban walks. Second, observing and documenting the city's features, in addition to interpreting its visual elements—as a designer—in order to analyze the identity of an urban landscape.

1 Perspectives on Experiencing City Spaces

The city of Al-Khobar transformed from a fishing hamlet to a more developed urban environment with the discovery of oil. It is inhabited by Saudi Arabians in addition to a large number of foreigners from around the world. As a physical space, it consists of a mix between residential and commercial areas. While most of its inhabitants commute using cars, there are many who ride bicycles, scooters, and others who choose to walk through its spaces.

Every city is formed by the everyday social practices and lifestyles of its inhabitants. Urban spaces are continuously being made and remade—in varying degrees—by the individuals and collectives that move and interact with them (Lefebvre et al. 152). The social production of space is what influenced artists and thinkers of Situationist International to analyze social practices in relation to—mainly—capitalism and consumerism within cities. According to the Situationists, consumerism and architecture play a significant role in influencing the lives of city inhabitants (Sadler 30). Initially, walking was not the only way to explore cities; at times, the Situationists also drifted through Paris by taking taxis around the city (O'Rourke). They were interested in a contrast between walking and the rapidness of automobiles. However, walking proved to offer a closer look at the city.

According to the Situationists, two main practices are essential to psychogeography: the *dérive* and *détournement* (Souzis 195). The 'drift' is a way to move quickly through an array of different ambiances by embracing awareness in addition to playful behavior. On the other hand, *détournement*, or quite literally 'turnabout', is an intentional reuse of various elements found within the city, such as images, signs, and texts, to create something new out of the everyday existing parts (Figure 1).

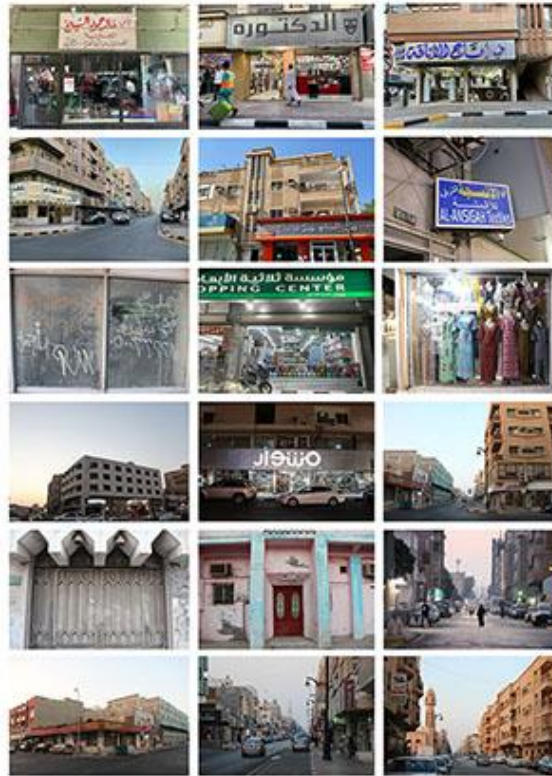


Fig 1.

A collection of photographs documenting the older parts of the city of Al-Khobar; the images document hand-lettered signs, machine-made signs, storefronts, buildings, and door ornaments. (Source: Author 2022)

Different people occupy city spaces: construction workers, commuters headed to work, shoppers, tourists, and flâneurs—a French term that means “stroller,” and it refers to people who wander around observing urban life. The flâneur is a pedestrian figure who engages their senses within the urban landscape and generates forms of creative practice (Coates 31). These “social actors” and many others move through city spaces to fulfill their everyday roles. The quotidian movements in public spaces are omnipresent as part of urban life and culture yet they are frequently neglected. As a social activity, walking is very much hiding in plain sight (Self and Steadman10).

More contemporarily, walking and playing in cities has frequently been adopted and cited as a method to understand and read urban spaces (Souzis 196). In Lee Walton’s *The City System: New York*, a game-based experimental walking experience was designed for New York City in 2003; people were instructed to walk around the city supplied with a book that served the purpose of a navigational device, which guided them through options as they ventured on their routes. These options made room for chance events to interrupt their steps and re-direct them. Occurrences such as the appearance of pigeons or hearing car horns honk; the actions of passers-by, and even the size of their own shadows became ways to experience the city in a different way (Pinder 386).

There is a sense of curiosity and discovery that many travelers encounter when visiting new cities, but what can we discover about the cities we live in? Doreen Massey has written about exploration in her book *For Space*; she highlights the significance of surprises that may emerge within spaces, and coming across the unforeseen (Massey 3). Stories—whether short or long—people tell about their cities can be another way to experience changes and events that occur in urban environments. Oral interpretations can be useful in understanding how visual aspects of cities carry their own layers of meanings. Whether one is reading a map or engaging with a mural on a wall, the different media involved in critically approaching visuals that live within, or represent, the city can be as eclectic and layered as the urban space itself. Similarly, visual communication can be used to reflect upon and translate spaces, not just observe them.

An aesthetically abundant environment adds deep value to the lives of city inhabitants—not only formally, but also by helping them understand the politics of images and the roles they play in individual lives and societies at large. Visual communication in the context of urban exploration can be utilized to reveal parts of the vernacular that are often neglected. Walking can be considered a form of mapping areas, and in its essence, mapping has its roots in exploration and navigation (Miles and Libersat 17). One could argue that Philosopher and urban planner, Jean-Francoise Augoyard also discussed topographical mappings of the city, and explained how urbanites could be asked to map their own everyday routes within spaces (Augoyard 23). However, psychogeography is rooted in a more qualitative experience, and traditional maps do not always lend themselves to the individual details. Mapping, however, can be a valuable method in orienting oneself within the city. Such approaches were artistically highlighted in *ROAM*, a mobile application that was created to encourage players to creatively engage with space (Self and Steadman 24).

Walking is also frequently a mode used to interview participants while being on the move in order to capture a more spontaneous narrative that follows a person's everyday activities (Middleton 301). While such methods may not be convenient for all researchers or participants, alternatives such as individual or group walks to discover the public sphere could be more feasible. These explorations could even make their way into educational settings since walking and mapping journeys can create connections between communities and the urban built environment (Watson 26). While some visual elements found in cities may reflect a more universal experience, other aspects of the public sphere may also bring difference to the surface mainly embedded present in the different perceptions held by distinct individuals; not all city inhabitants experience their spaces in the same ways. In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch, an urban planner, explains how “moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts.” (Lynch 2) It is common to observe people as the most active part of an urban environment; however, every urban physical aspect they interact with becomes a part of the city dynamic. Furthermore, people are not just observers of the city spectacle but are participants in what goes on within it and this participation can be intentional or unintentional. Andrew Hickey, a professor of communications describes urban spaces as identifiable because of their fundamental elements, such as street signs, and signage, which are validated by how they are positioned in a city space, and how people interpret and respond to them. Our perceptions of cities are not fixed or sustained; they are fragmentary, biased, and complex (Hickey 25).

Our senses take part in city experiences, and the images we create of cities are amalgamations of them all. Lynch discusses that people only pay attention to certain parts of a city, and overlook its richness and meaning in their lives (Lynch 15). How we perceive urbanity also relates to the

back and forth between the legible and ambiguous city, which is one of the observations made in Michel de Certeau's essay *Walking in the City*; a piece that is both poetic and semiotic in its analysis of everyday urban life (Certeau 13). De Certeau puts forth a theory for the city that does not follow the rigid structure of an urban planner; urbanites are not looking at the city from a bird's-eye view, but are rather immersed in it. To walk in a city is to "expand your capacity for wonder, to discover delight in things you might have missed had you been aiming to get somewhere" (Rosenbloom).

In *Arts of Urban Exploration*, Pinder, introduces his thesis by describing how artists and cultural practitioners use urban investigation to engage with and intervene in cities (Pinder 385). The Situationists encouraged the combination of playful behavior with the analysis of urban spaces as a way to consciously understand the correlation between cities and how people behave within them (Dibzar and Naef 230). Additionally, discerning between what is experienced on a regular basis and what is a new experience can add depth to how we experience the city. The relationship between familiarity and novelty in a city can be explored through continuous observation, documentation, and interpretation (Talen 100).

Looking at our cities more closely connects us to them. Norsidah Ujang, an academic specialized in urban design and place attachment, describes place identity as being connected to the ways people perceive meaning in relation to their environment (Ujang 130). Telling stories about places can play a role in strengthening place attachments; through these stories, the idea of continuity of place and identity is reinforced, layered, and passed on to the next generation. Ultimately, urban exploration can be a method to understand how multiple existing identities within one city actually contribute to keeping the city alive. The idea of belonging to a place signifies a strong connection that provides room to reflect on factors that would make someone an urbanite of a particular city, or of several cities, for that matter. Space is physical, and place is personal, collective, social, cultural, political, and evolutionary.

Spending time in a place leads to the formation of place attachments between people and their environments, through beliefs, knowledge, and everyday actions; these attachments develop when a place becomes familiar, well identified, and able to support behavioral and functional needs (Manzo and Devine-Wright 50). In the case of diasporic urbanites, which heavily populate the city of Al-Khobar and cities around the world, the role psychogeography plays is a re-positioning of the self within an alternate space. For many foreigners, walking through a city is a method of situating an already established identity within a new landscape and the merging of differences (Powell 18).

The idea of an experimental space can also be interpreted visually using experimental approaches. Multicultural cities are spaces of difference, but also coexistence. Walking through the demographic differences can be starting points to search for individual voices and communication among people who share a collective present and eventually a collective future (Figure 2).



Fig 2.

A City Walk, mixed media collage of different people walking. (Source: Author 2022)

2 Documenting and Communicating Urban Experiences

Walking through the city and observing its details ties into objective versus subjective experiences, and offers a unique point of view on what each of us sees. The connections between psychogeography and interpretation are endless when one argues that every person in the city can represent any detail or object in different ways. These recollections of their walks can be visual, textual, oral, or even involve a combination that culminates in urban multisensory outcomes as well.

I began exploring psychogeography in 2021 and visually created urban images over the course of two years. Many of my observations in the city began with its most familiar characteristics. There are common practices one can observe in any city space. For example, one that can be seen in Al-Khobar—among other cities guided by Islamic values—is how people walk to mosques five times a day to pray (Figure 3). Mosque minarets flank the cityscapes while increasing the buildings' visibility and urbanites gravitate toward these spiritual spaces when they hear the call to prayer. Nothing is experienced in complete isolation. Every person in the world has had or will have associations with parts of their cities, and these experiences are flooded with meanings and memories.



Fig 3.

Mosques play a prominent role in the urban landscape within the city of Al-Khobar. The mixed media images were created to show the relationships between different city spaces and the presence of spiritual practices with the use of photography and digital layering. (Source: Author, 2022)

The urban experience encompasses walking as a form of mobility and drifting that everyone experiences differently depending on where they are headed, and more open-ended approaches such as oral narratives can play a role in guiding exploratory visuals of the city. Methods such as walking and digital photography, or walking and drawing within the city lend themselves as ways of documenting the city. Additionally, recording sounds of the city such as people's chatter or the sounds of construction can also translate visually (Rose 49). Oral narratives from city dwellers may also find their way into visual communication; for example, they may be used as data that accompanies or narrates moving images or static images that communicate city movements (Figure 4). The act of walking through the city as a form of engagement can merge the boundaries between its inhabitants and its contents. Once a person leaves their home and steps onto the sidewalk, they are no longer isolated from the city. They are embedded in ambiances and moods in the cityscape and attribute new meaning to things they pass by, touch, or use.



Fig 4.

Typography in motion can be a visual method used to interpret paths through a city. This image consists of Arabic typography, and was created to communicate walking and city sounds in the evening. (Source: Author, 2022)

Delineating the City and Walking

While walking through a city, it becomes evident that neighborhoods are often divided into smaller sections that contain areas for work, leisure, everyday necessities, education, and medical care to name a few. In every section, there are countless experiences occurring simultaneously. When I first began to interpret my own walks through the city, I mapped out areas that were heavily populated or what appeared to be the most active parts of Al-Khobar (Figure 5). To take a closer look at the city's space from the perspective of a walker, my first step was to analyze how the urban landscape was structured. Walking appealed to me as a flexible way to navigating the urban space since walking in cities has a history as old as cities themselves (Brown and Shortell 38).

Al-Khobar is mostly planned on a grid where streets intersect often to facilitate simpler navigation for both city walkers and motorists—this is especially true in the older parts of the city. After researching this urban planning approach, I learned that it was designed to mimic Manhattan with regards to how its streets and avenues intersect. The experience of walking through the city was spatially informative, and even led me to this lesser-known intriguing commonality that two vastly different cities share. In the beginning, the walks were planned as I explored the city one block at a time. However, other times, the walks were more spontaneous and guided by specific visual cues such as bright signs, to observe and analyze how visual elements in a city can shed light on or point toward new directions.

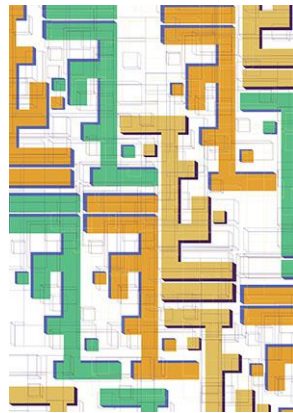


Fig 5.

The word “Al-Khobar” is manually then digitally lettered in Arabic using geometric characteristics to map the different city blocks. (Source: Author, 2022)

Walking and Documentation

The second step I took was to visit different blocks at different times of day. I began to document all the elements I found as I walked through Al-Khobar mainly through the use of photography; these elements included signage, city blocks, sidewalks, doors, windows, buildings, objects and storefronts. These were the details that city inhabitants engaged with the most. Walking through a city and understanding which visual elements are consistently present in the environment helps

tell a story of why specific objects and shapes continue to exist while others fade away.

Like other cities in the world, Al-Khobar is made up of time periods, ethnic features, and social characteristics. While documenting the city, I frequently encountered other inhabitants who would ask why I was taking pictures of the city. It became evident through conversations with many city walkers that some were curious because they saw the city so many times they could not fathom what was worth documenting because it looked familiar to them.

One analysis of such responses indicates that city dwellers would be more inclined to document images of something out of the ordinary rather than something familiar. An analysis from another point of view uncovers that walking through the city is not always observed as a mindful or intentional activity beyond rushing to work or running a specific errand. In everyday life, we may walk down the same streets and pass by the same shops, but do we all notice the same things? In the process of analyzing the city, there is an awareness of one's surroundings that is not obvious to everyone.

Visual Interpretations

The third step of my process was to analyze the images from my walks through the city and create images of the city that invited further contemplation from myself and others. These images may represent signs or places that are instantly recognizable to people living in the city, or they could also be images that represent aspects that require a deeper look. The images were created using multiple senses, such as sight, sound, and touch. While they were created using mixed media, there are others that focus on a single technique such as collage or scanography (Figure 6).



Fig 6.

The combination of visual elements such as textured ornaments from city walls, typography, and building textures (Source: Author, 2022)

The created images in these investigations could be used as a starting point to explore a variety

of content and contexts that could communicate a closer look at cities. I explored multi-sensory experiences in the urban environment and the relationship between how people behave and interact within cities and the types of visual elements, signs, or symbols that are reflective of this more curious mode of approaching cities (Figure 7).

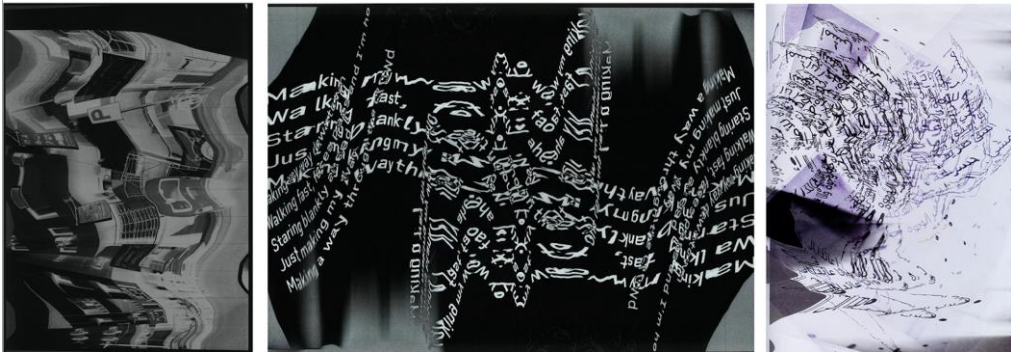


Fig 7.

Triptych of mixed media images exploring typography, photography, and textures through the lens of psychogeography and drifting through Al-Khobar. (Source: Author 2022)

The physical elements we encounter in cities also carry meanings. Cities do not only gain their uniqueness from the people living in them; they can be understood and identified more closely through objects and things in addition to how we use and interpret them. Interpretations of the city have taught me about how unnoticed information can play visual, psychological, and practical roles in everyday life (Figures 8). Even a small city is a big place to take on as a starting point. There is plenty of room to observe, document, and interpret how visual communication can play a role in shaping the vernacular while being shaped by it.

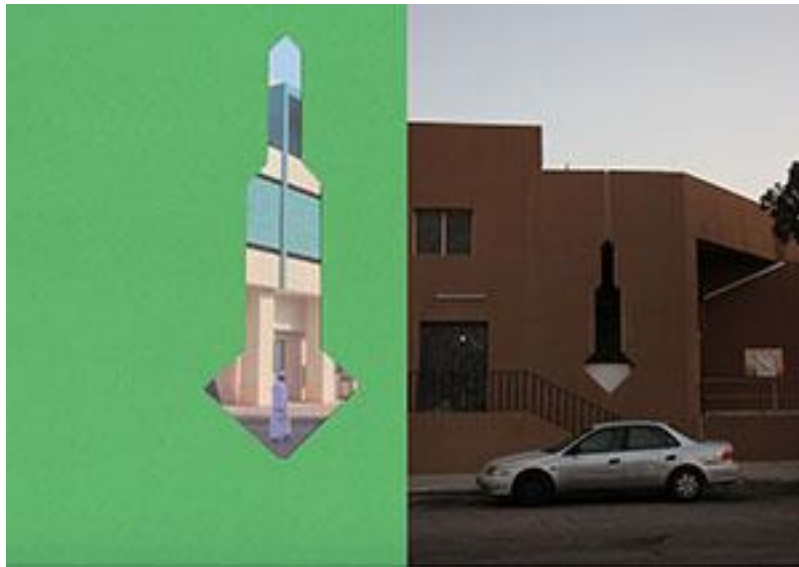


Fig 8.

A mixed media exploration—using colored paper and photography—of the city's ornaments and

Conclusion

This article is a starting point for collecting visual data about cities, and translating everyday pedestrian practices in order to think about how we appropriate spaces that surround us. The exploration of the city space is presented through varied perspectives, documentation, visual interpretations, and the discussion of everyday behaviors that familiarize urbanites with their surroundings creatively. Psychogeography can be a way to scratch the surface of exploring urban spaces in addition to the social and cultural occurrences within them. The act of strolling or drifting through a city is one that merges the individual and the collective.

Walking through urban spaces is a valuable activity to its inhabitants because the variables that exist in the vernacular are filled with spontaneous situations, encounters, and sensory moments that are significant parts of our lives, and acknowledging them provides opportunities to understand our cities. The process by which visual forms are created through urban walks can personify values and behaviors that translate our experiences as city inhabitants. One of the outcomes of this research is encouraging thoughtful interpretation of visual messages within our urban environments and possible future directions that cultivate wider approaches involving cooperation in co-creating meaning not for the sole purpose of documentation and expression, but to also acknowledge that there are aspects of everyday urban life that are universal regardless of individual interests and differences in occupations.

Visual, written, and even oral interpretations of cities closely resemble the act of walking through them; they also have the potential to be translated through the lenses of city inhabitants—regardless of whether or not they are practicing artists or designers. This article acknowledges that the symbiotic relationship between people and their cities can be understood in different ways. Moving forward, deeper research into the subject of urban landscapes can include interviews with city inhabitants regarding how they experience and navigate the city on a daily basis. Inviting creative practitioners, and city inhabitants in general, to document aspects of their daily lives through writing, photography, and other exploratory methods may present a deeper view on how different people experience the same spaces. Such approaches—whether spontaneous or structured—shed light on parts of cities that are at times rendered invisible to inhabitants, yet hold significance in their daily encounters.

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