

The School of Site: *Istanbul Walkabouts*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the potentialities of employing the practice of walking as a critical public pedagogy in the context of the transforming territories of northern Istanbul. It will initially give background information on the current processes of neoliberal urbanization taking place in northern Istanbul. It will then, based on the experience of the independent walking project *Istanbul Walkabouts*, discuss how walking can be used as a critical methodology outside and in academia to question hegemonic approaches to land, record the terra incognita areas of cities, and produce alternative modes of mapping. Ultimately, it will emphasize how performing critical walking in the precarious geographies of northern Istanbul with diverse publics can trigger experiential and place-based (un)learning, produce multiple epistemologies, and generate a community that is critically engaged with top-down approaches to urbanization.

Keywords

Critical walking; mobile methodologies; northern Istanbul; more-than-human Istanbul; neoliberal urbanization

In early 2016, I started walking along and around the route of the recently constructed Northern Marmara Highway to explore afoot the transformations taking place in the northern territories of Istanbul for my doctoral research. My main motivation was to gain in-depth knowledge about this area, which has been a prime site for mega-scaled and state-led infrastructure projects. These projects are imposed via a top-down approachⁱ and have served as catalysts for the Turkish economy since the beginning of the century. The practice of walking allowed me to investigate this territory through direct personal experience instead of the accustomed 'god's eye view' approaches confined to plans, satellite images, aerial views, etc. that prevail in most architectural and urban research. This eventually became the walking project *Istanbul Walkabouts*,ⁱⁱ which employs walking as a critical spatial practice (Rendell, 2006) in order to record the irretrievable transformation of a crucial territory. Walking creates an awareness about the ongoing neoliberal processes of urbanization taking place in northern Istanbul and simultaneously can become a form of resistance. In this paper, I argue that *Istanbul Walkabouts* became an *in-situ* school for diverse publics, where multiple knowledges about the lesser explored northern territories of the city are produced by roaming in the landscape around the highway.

Unlike urbanized, industrialized and populated southern Istanbul, northern Istanbul is sparsely-populated and houses forests, water reserves, floodplains, agricultural lands, farms, military zones and quarries. Until 2004, most of these areas were not even included in Istanbul Greater Municipality's official boundaries (Turan, 2011). Even though delineated as areas to be protected by the 1:100.000 Istanbul Spatial Development Plan (Istanbul Greater Municipality, 2009), the relentless processes of ad hoc geo-urbanism (Tümerdem, 2014; Tümerdem, 2017), implemented by the current government since the beginning of the millenia, transformed northern Istanbul into an immense operational ground. Violating the city's Spatial Plan, the Northern Marmara Highway was also constructed here. Unsurprisingly, the highway is not a utilitarian infrastructure project that will solve Istanbul's congestion problem,ⁱⁱⁱ but acts as a connecting spine to forthcoming megaprojects.^{iv}

The initial walks I performed around the highway were solitary wanderings, or were done with a few interested companions as a part of my doctoral research. Currently, I continue to perform these walks as an independent project called *Istanbul Walkabouts*,^v which offers walks open to the public, free of charge.^{vi} At first, the walks spread through word of mouth; the participants were mostly friends or friends of friends, and included academics, architects, artists, film directors, archaeologists, programmers and journalists. Their ages ranged between 25 and 45. Forty percent were expats living in Istanbul, and most had either activist backgrounds, or an oppositional approach towards the transformations taking place. However, since June 2018, I have been sharing the walks as public events on the project's Facebook page.^{vii} This has significantly increased the number of participants and changed their profile. The age range expanded to include people from 2 to 60; the new participants were mostly from Turkey, and included school teachers, engineers, foresters, and retired citizens. While some were solely interested in attending a 'nature walk,' some shared the oppositional position of the project and wanted to learn more about the ongoing operations in the area.

Organizing open walks proved to be a crucial turn for *Istanbul Walkabouts*, as it brought diverse participants and perspectives. This enabled a creative collision of ideas and offered a platform for discussion. I suggest that the northern territories of Istanbul, previously unknown and uncharted, act as generators of multiple knowledges. By navigating this geography, these territories become known and charted. In the limited space provided here, I will demonstrate my claim that *Istanbul Walkabouts* acts as a *school of site* through three points:

northern Istanbul acting as an exploratory site; human and nonhuman encounters experienced on the site; and the collective knowledge produced by the participants on each walk.

First, the project's strict adherence to northern Istanbul forms the initial layer of the school. The southern belt of Istanbul has been scrutinized for centuries by travellers, geographers, sociologists, poets, writers, directors, archaeologists, architects and urban planners. We have always been exposed to knowledge that has been generated in these urbanized, industrialized and populated parts of the city. The northern regions, on the other hand, have been treated as the outside of the city, and thus have been terra incognita. However, instead of the saturated southern regions—which are intricately tied together, resulting in slow and expensive deals to create new infrastructures—the current autocratic regime of Turkey chose the northern regions as the main focus for its growth. Therefore, shifting the city and anthropocentric lens from its focus on 'urban' Istanbul to the invisible hinterlands of the city is a critical and pedagogical factor for *Istanbul Walkabouts*.

I have performed more than 30 walks since 2016. Here, I focus on the first walk to be announced publicly on Facebook, which took place in June 2018, because it successfully exemplifies the multiple knowledges a route can generate. It was a 20.8 km walk that started in Gümüşdere (Silvercreek) and ended in Kısırkaya (Barrenrock). The walk lasted 8 hours and 20 minutes and there were only 5 walkers. On a beeline, this area is 27 kilometres away from the city's historic peninsula and so the commute to the starting point lasted 2 hours. Both villages are settled in the north-western part of the city. Gümüşdere is an inland village and Kısırkaya is a picturesque village on the shore where an estuary meets the Black Sea on a 1 km beach. Around 4.5 km of the walk was performed in a westward direction parallel to the highway's route. This allowed us to have a first-hand experience of a portion of the 2175 hectares that have been deforested for the construction of the notorious highway (Gümüşkaya, 2017). Even though we were all aware of the deforestation, our understanding of an out-of-sight area that we had never been to was a very abstract idea in our minds. By walking in this area, we have now seen in person how the forest has been shaved off, together with its inhabitants, and how a new topography has been created. Furthermore, we have performed this artificial topography with our own bodies in our own corporeal timing.

After passing two viaducts and two overpasses, we continued northwards towards Black Sea. Here, we started to tread a geography riddled with quarries. Since the quarries have been around for more than two decades, it was possible to see how a new ecology was created around them. Most of them were transformed into ponds and we saw frogs, beetles, and birds around them. The quarries and the quarry lakes were located in the lower parts of the area where we had a limited view, but that allowed us to focus on details that we would have otherwise ignored. However, when we came up on the ridges, our view widened and we started having vistas across the Black Sea, the northern forests, and the quarries we have previously walked by. This allowed us to orient ourselves and find our direction towards our destination without the help of mapping devices. Thus, northern Istanbul became an informal learning ground in which we gained knowledge about the geography, topography and humanmade landscapes, and their interaction with nonhuman inhabitants of the region.

The coincidental human and nonhuman encounters that we had during the walk constitute the second layer of the school. When we reached an altitude of 140 meters, we spotted a plain in between the quarry lakes where some people and some boxes were scattered around. We strayed from our route in order to meet these people and see what they were doing. As we approached, we realized that they were beekeepers and they have a few hundred beehives on the plain located in between acacia trees, which were in full bloom at the time of the walk.^{viii} When we finally met, we learned that they are nomadic beekeepers that travel around

Turkey all year round. Through our conversations, we have learned that they produce acacia, chestnut, and linden honey during their stay in Istanbul. Since I have never seen one, I asked them if they could show me one of the queen bees. They lent me a bee suit and I went to see the queen with them. In my quest for looking for the queen, I got stung on my leg by a bee for the first time in my life. Even though no one else came with me to see the queen, I have recorded the whole thing.^{ix} Thus, solely by being afoot in northern Istanbul and being open to coincidental human and nonhuman encounters, we became embedded in this landscape where we could learn about the current practices and vernacular knowledge of the region, and we gained information that could be shared.

The third layer of the school is the collective knowledge that is formed with the participants of each walk. First of all, the project does not offer immutable routes that have been devised by a walking leader who walks in front, but proposes flexible ones that are walked-with together. The walks are usually composed of semi-designed walks that connect two settlements situated around the highway. The starting point is determined beforehand, while the ending point is anticipated but not fixed. Thus, the course and ending are decided cumulatively during the walk. Each route is co-created by the participants of each walk. For the Gümüşdere - Kısırkaya walk, the starting and ending points were determined beforehand, but the course was decided as a group. These routes are envisaged as an open-source knowledge that can be used by others for future pedagogical initiatives.

It is also essential to point out that even though there are amateur walking groups in the region, currently there is no publication dedicated to walking trails in Istanbul.^x This means that people do not have a direct source from which they can learn where to walk in the city. Further, the existing donkey paths within the forests have recently been disrupted by the highway. In addition, most of the paths in the area are blocked by the highway. Thus, we created our own paths by passing through thick forests where there are no apparent paths, and by passing through the metal fence surrounding the 60-kilometre highway in order to connect settlements located around the highway's route. By materializing these invisible courses through decisions taken together with the participants of each walk, we create counter-cartographies and question the hegemonic modes of urbanization that dictates where our bodies can and cannot go.

Ultimately, I assert that *Istanbul Walkabouts*'s non-hierarchical approach of walking-with can dissolve the myth of the heroic male-leader-walker (Heddon & Turner, 2012; Springgay & Truman, 2018), as the walks become events performed collectively. This can shatter the idea of the 'epic' transformative walk done by a charismatic man in sublime environments, and instead produce multiple narratives of invisible and neglected geographies, peoples and nonhumans. Moreover, the practice of walking-with diverse publics ranging from activists to retired citizens, and from students to dogs^{xi} triggers the in situ production of multiple knowledges and the (un)learning of this valuable and vulnerable region. As Haraway (2015) puts it, "all the stories are too big and too small" and "it matters which stories tell stories" (p. 160). By creating the possibility to learn about the multiple stories of northern Istanbul, *Istanbul Walkabouts* acts as a *school of site* where walkers can discover first-hand that this area is not a *tabula rasa* region that can be used as a vacant ground for capitalist infrastructure, but a critical geography that contains crucial more-than-human epistemologies that need to be recorded, protected, and disseminated.

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ⁱ The recent mega-scaled urbanization operations taking place in Istanbul have been implemented through top-down approaches instead of bottom-up decision-making processes. For example, the recently constructed Northern Marmara Highway has been built in protected forest areas against the city's confirmed 1:100.000 Spatial Development Plan and against expert opinions and opposition by citizens and NGOs.

ⁱⁱ *Istanbul Walkabouts* is an ongoing walking project that was formed as a spin-off to my doctoral dissertation entitled *Istanbul Walkabouts: Critical Walking in Northern Istanbul* completed in 2018 in the Architectural Design Programme of Istanbul Technical University.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to INRIX 2018 Global Traffic Scorecard 2018, Istanbul is ranked second, coming right after Moscow, within European cities for the most congestion.

^{iv} New Istanbul Airport, claimed to be world's largest, started functioning in April 2019. Canal Istanbul, a second strait is planned to be built next to the Bosphorus. New Istanbul, a new city within Istanbul, will be built around the canal.

^v <https://www.instagram.com/istanbulwalkabouts/>

^{vi} Apart from these public walks, *Istanbul Walkabouts* also performs walks with undergraduate students. Subsequently to leading a walk (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrHWt8OKgAQ&feature=youtu.be>) in October 2017 with 250 first-year design students and their instructors, I decided to disseminate the ideas, methodologies, findings and potentials of critical walking through an elective course entitled *Walking and Mapping*. Instructed at Istanbul Bilgi University's Faculty of Architecture to students of architecture, interior architecture, and industrial design, this elective course favours an out-of-school curriculum and takes students on walks through transforming geographies of northern Istanbul. The students are mostly unaccustomed to the practice of walking and are unaware of the ongoing urbanizations taking place in their city. Thus, by walking with them in these critical geographies, the course encourages informal and situated modes of knowledge formation, and positions walking as a tool for design-learning.

^{vii} <https://www.facebook.com/istanbulwalkabouts/>

^{viii} We had many other encounters with humans and nonhumans along the way which include riders, farmers, shepherds, geese, water buffalos, donkeys, sheep, goats, chickens, cats, birds, picnickers, etc., but due to the limited space provided, I will confine myself only to the bees and beekeepers because the existence of bees is a critical subject both for Istanbul and also within the current climate crisis.

^{ix} https://youtu.be/HGIWZ_2pudk?t=110

^x *Hiking Istanbul*, a hiking group formed by two British expats living in Istanbul and a Turkish expat living in the United States, is currently working on a book that will include more than 40 hiking trails in Istanbul.

^{xi} <https://youtu.be/cEUrT45xiP0?t=503>