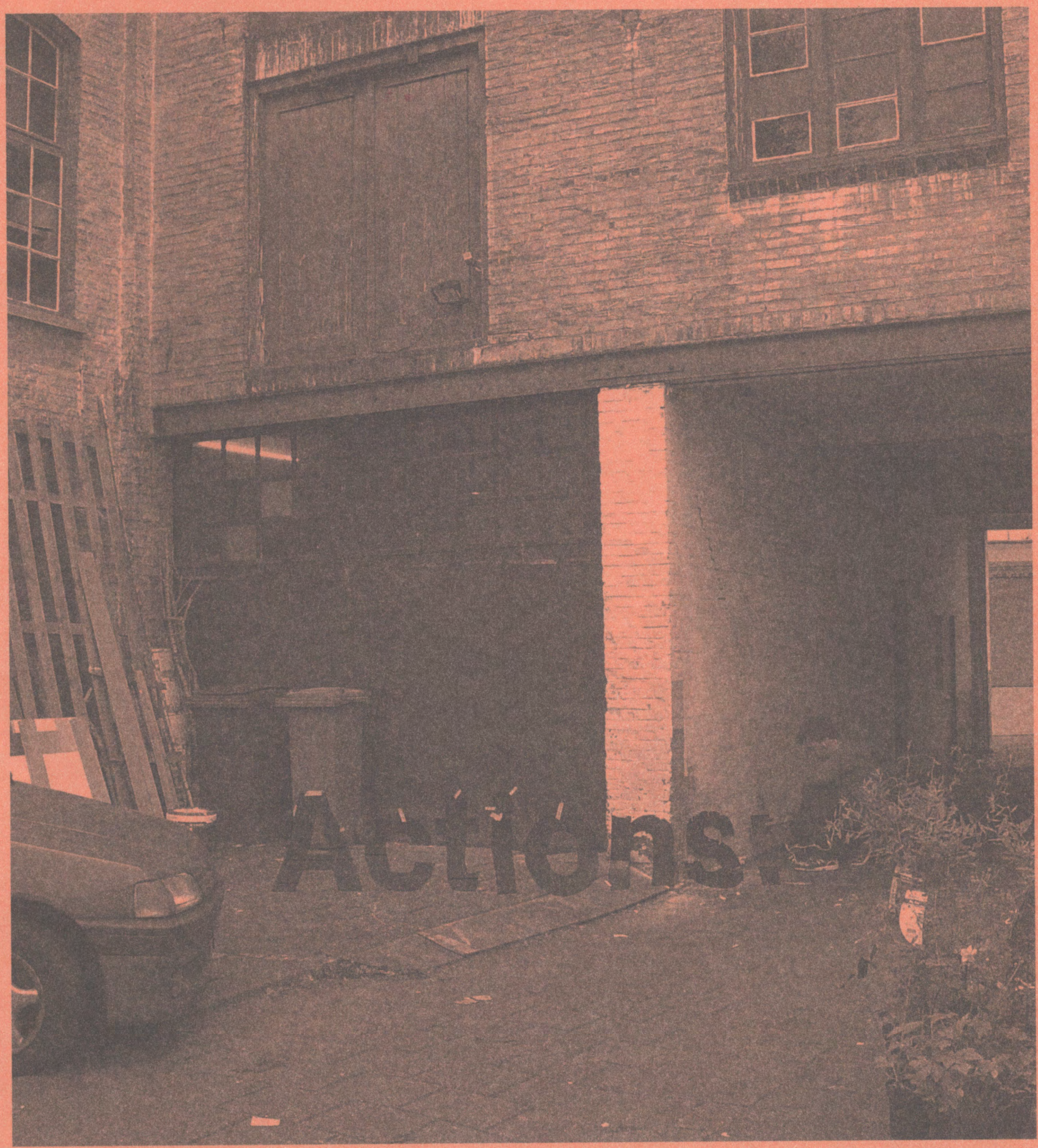
Edited by
Giovanna Borasi
Mirko Zardini



What You Can Do With the City

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Walking as Politics

Tali Hatuka

Tali Hatuka, architect and urban designer, is a lecturer in the Department of Geography and the Human Environment at Tel Aviv University. Hatuka is also one of the foremost thinkers on interrelations between architecture, public space, popular protest, and established power. She recently curated "Urban Design and Civil Protests," an exhibition at MIT detailing the "choreography of protest." Having developed a discourse around the notion of "walking politics," the author proposes that this form of urban walking can bring political change—or re-enforce the status quo. Unlike the journey of the discovery-seeking *flâneur or traceur*, "walking politics" is a tool used to fundamentally alter society's ways of thinking and governments' ways of acting. Hatuka looks at how society and urban space are impacted by such walking politics when used to express discontent or a desire for rapid change.

In some places it seems that the demonstration was happening in various layers in the city [London]. We had a sense of the huge size of the march when we (on the Embankment) passed under one of the river bridges. Above us, the bridge was crowded with people, leaning over the edges, all waving, cheering and whistling at the main march below. All these people were on their way to start points back east. Some sections of the route along the river were so busy that new-joiners were being directed across the bridge...

Ailsa Gunson, narrating anti-Iraq-war protest, February 15, 2003

Political marches begin with footsteps, with repeated and multiplied rhythms of sound and social bonding. As the most primal form of human locomotion on land, walking is a spatial method by which people make their opinions on the dominant political order into a public event. Dominant political orders are also manifested in our built environment. Buildings and monuments—designed by architects, planners and policy makers in an endless process of production—define and change our landscape and establish a spatial array. This socio-spatial array forces us to adjust to particular social contexts, behavioural codes, and political regulations. But at the same time this spatial array also provides us with a space in which to negotiate, oppose, and resist. This particular dialectic of constraint and freedom is what makes urban spaces so crucial to political dissent, so strategic as a tool allowing people to negotiate their claims. True, information and communication technologies (ICT) contribute to social movements (though they also contribute to information overload, misinformation, access restriction and predominance of use by elites), yet by no chance do they replace direct action; rather they compliment and enhance it.[1] This is why walking as a political act still serves as an ever-growing socio-physical phenomenon, in terms of both quantity and scale, in spite of mistaken claims that this physical form of resistance will vanish with the expansion of cyberspace and global media platforms.

How do we explain this timeless phenomenon of "taking to the streets"? It is difficult to find a single explanation among the countless theories continually contested and debated.[2] Some scholars see the act of protest as a planned, articulated and sustained action. Others see it as a random, inarticulate, even episodic event. Some perceive protests as gatherings,[3] campaigns,[4] or movements.[5] Others employ the terms "non-violent" or "collective" action.[6] However, most scholars would agree that the act of

protest is instrumental to the achievement of collective goals. Understanding space as both a material and social construct, I would like to draw particularly on the act of walking, one among the many dimensions in the choreography of dissent and demonstrations—a strategy by which political powers and citizens alike manifest their ideology in public. Distinguishing this act from perambulation movement on land, I name this act *walking politics*.

The walking politics of *protest* is an opinionated and planned ideological action with significant spatial attributes—opinionated because walking politics is an action that expresses a conviction of wrong or injustice.[7] Since protesters are seen as unable to correct the situation directly by their own daily efforts, this action is intended to draw attention to grievances, to provoke the taking of ameliorative steps by some target group. As such, protesters depend upon a combination of sympathy and fear to move the target group to action on their behalf.

Consequently, this form of ideological walking is first and foremost a planned display whereby protesters use their footfalls as a tool of power. It is an act of dissent against a regime, and it is a method of forming temporal collectives among participants who do not normally have strong relationships with one another. These purposes—external (protestors encountering a target) and internal (protestors encountering themselves)—further extend the role of the space and its symbolic use. Thus, by choosing to walk together, protesters aim to reclaim or symbolically possess their cities. By extension, they can thus be seen as imposing their order over whatever space they occupy. Protesters modify the daily hum of urban life with dynamic vocal and visual messages, through which they challenge the established social order identified with the dominating powers. In other words, the temporal occupation of space by walking as a group challenges habitual practices and, as such, challenges rules, laws and social codes that govern that space.

This insistence on walking as a political act and as a tool of power is also connected to the spectators who are not actively involved but who play an important role in the protest, either voluntarily or involuntarily.[8] A march attracts spectators with noise, symbols, and physical disruption in the streets, contributing to the impact of an event and attracting those not previously involved in it. Thus, the form of a march and its route are critical to attracting spectators. Marching in the main plaza of a city or passing by government buildings indicates the intention of protestors to communicate with officials and challenge or sway their decisions.

A march from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square via Piccadilly Circus calling for the withdrawal of British troops from Iraq. Protesters also warned the government against attacking Iran and opposed the replacement for the Trident nuclear missile system, London, February 24, 2007

The Madres del Plaza de Mayo is an association of Argentine mothers whose children "disappeared" under the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983 and remain unaccounted for. Active to the present day, the mothers have been gathering every Thursday, for an afternoon walk around the plaza, which lies directly in front of the presidential palace, Plaza De Mayo, Buenos Aires, August 31, 2006

Marching in residential areas or gathering at non-governmental venues, off centre, indicates the group's intention to protest far from the hegemonic powers based in the centre, as a contraposition to them. An example is the Monday demonstrations in Leipzig, which were a series of peaceful political protests that took place in various churches every Monday evening against the socialist government of East Germany. The church in this case served as a space/sanctuary in which to resist hegemonies and as a gathering place for the demonstrations to come, which eventually filled the municipal Karl-Marx-Platz (now renamed Augustusplatz). Thus the spatial context of the event gives meaning to the display of people walking together. However, one must note that the route of political rallies in democratic regimes is the result of a bargaining process about the form of dissent itself (that is, the form of an action within a particular space). Over the demonstration's long history, organizers have frequently struck bargains in advance with authorities and police.[9] These negotiations among organizers, demonstrators, authorities and police, both before and during the event, create limits on all parties and determine the predictability of encounters during the demonstration.[10] Any violence that occurs is often a result of failed bargaining or unanticipated encounters.

Generally, the walking politics of protest is often scheduled either in a loosely defined arena (due to a lack of resources and/or to the need to react quickly to a current political event), or in a fixed arena where temporary features such as banners and other related tools are used to politically re-symbolize the neutral architectural arena and to "sanctify" the rally space. In both cases, the display of banners, flags, pins, and clothing and, in particular, the use of the body, create the appearance of symbolic coordination or unity. These temporal characteristics of walking politics keep the audience's attention on the ideological message.[11]

An example of the walking politics of resistance on an international scale was the protest on February 15, 2003, decrying the imminent invasion of Iraq. Millions of people walked in approximately eight hundred cities worldwide. These international protests were unprecedented not only in terms of participants and global reach, but also in terms of the international coordination involved. Another example is the innovative performance of the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo, marching in circles around the pyramid in Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, wearing embroidered bandanas that displayed the names of their "disappeared" children and relatives.

The term walking politics also refers to performances projecting dominance by the state. In this context, walking, often performed by soldiers,

is an acoustic power display in constant rhythm with an invariable beat that signifies an imagined, unified order. Extreme examples of symbolic manipulation of rallies are associated with the Nazi regime, although these sovereignty displays do not only serve dictatorships like the Nazi regime but can also be found in most official ceremonies of democratic states. Many states use walking performances to project dominance and order to its citizens—in other words, walking politics in this sense is a tool for performing and speaking to those who are being dominated.

Above all, place matters. Protests tend to happen in loosely defined arenas, while in the case of the state, walking politics often takes place within a tightly defined arena with high rental costs and complex planning. The setting for the audience is most likely coordinated and spatially enclosed, often a demarcated plaza or closed stadium where political ideology can remain predominantly directive, and arguments can be staged and controlled. This raises a crucial question: where should walking politics as an act of resistance take place? Should it take place in marginal places in the city or in its central hegemonic "stages"? The choice of place is significant. If these acts of resistance were to take place in the "centre," the resistance would, in effect, be obeying/negotiating the spatial rules of the dominating powers, playing in the field of the ruler. If these acts of resistance were to take place in the outskirts where space is less controlled and flexible, the resistance would, in effect, be suggesting alternative spatial rules to the dominating powers. Still, whether dissent takes place in marginal spaces that offer more openness or in restricted urban centres, the walking politics of protest is a very basic tool for citizens to temporarily break free of individualist constraints and to resist and suggest collective counter-position. This temporality, however, has consequences. As Elias Canetti puts it:

> Only together can men free themselves from their burden of distance; and this, precisely, is what happens in a crowd. During the discharge distinctions are thrown off and all feel *equal*. In that density, where there is scarcely any space between, and body presses against body, each man is as near the other as he is to himself;... But the moment of discharge, so desired and so happy, contains its own danger. It is based on an illusion; the people who suddenly feel equal have not really become equal; nor will they feel equal forever. They return to their separate houses, they lie down on their own beds, they keep their own possessions and their names.[12]

Even with such limitations, walking politics of all stripes remain a methodology involved in political partnerships and a tactic for maintaining or changing politics. It reminds us that politics is dynamic, moveable, and unfixed. As for the walking politics of protest, it is more than a question of grievance, control, legality or even collective behaviour. This form of walking politics is about reclaiming the national, local spaces of our cities so that citizens can create more opportunity for open debate, dissention, and resistance. Moreover, during such events, initiated by the state or citizens, space becomes the ground upon which politics is made real for the citizen.

As noted at the beginning, the socio-political order is manifested in our built environment, in our cities. If we perceive the city's landscape as driven by socio-political ideology,[13] then dissent, protests, and demonstrations are tools generating new meanings of both the landscape and political practices. These complex and reciprocal interactions between space and political practice not only create our urban landscape; they also transform our cities into a social property whose symbolism and iconography are constantly defined and recreated by its users—starting with the rhythm of our feet.

Notes

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