

Walking (with a buggy) in the City: A Research Project in the Public Realm

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'What is missing from the current debate about the demise of public space is an awareness of the loss of architecture's power to represent the public as a living, acting, and self determining community. Instead the debate focuses almost exclusively on the physical space of public appearance, without regard for the social action that can make the environment come alive or change its meaning'

S Torre in *The City Cultures Reader*, Miles and Hall (ed), Routledge, London

My practice has always been involved with the use of the city. I am interested in how the design and provision of the built environment impacts on the way we live. I have worked with cyclists, commuters, teenagers, older people and a variety of professionals working in fields relating to the design of the city, to develop artworks relating to the their experience of it. Much of my work has been developed site specifically and through performative methods to explore our relationship to the spaces we inhabit in our everyday lives.

As the mother of a small child I have been struck by the changing nature of my engagement with the city. Where I once took to the streets by bicycle, I now wheel my child in a buggy through the city centre, ducking and diving, swerving and maneuvering through the heaving mass that is the pedestrian flow. I am interested in the buggy as another vehicle in the city and the skills and provisions that are needed to allow for a smooth journey through the centre. As a new mother I am interested in how I have quickly learned the way of the buggy and how I am now adept at moving at a quick pace through a crowd without hitting anyone and still get to my destination on time. The 'urbanist' William H Whyte in his book *City: Rediscovering the Centre* writes of "the skilled pedestrian": "He is really extraordinary in the subtleties of his movements, signals and feints... crossing patterns and averted collisions".¹ I like to think of myself as a skilled urban parent and as someone who has adapted to my changing use of the city.

I was fortunate to receive funding through the Art Council's Artist in the Community Scheme for researching the potential to develop an artwork around these concerns, working with the Baby on Board group that meets at Dublin City Council Arts Office, the LAB. The group was formed during the run of my solo show at the LAB gallery in 2011 following conversations with Arts Officer and curator of the LAB, Sheena Barrett, into ways of attracting new audiences to the gallery. Baby on Board is an open group with some consistent members and new members joining all the time. The group profile included a lot of artists, many of whom found that conventional mother and baby groups didn't provide the support they sought at this time of change. For several of the artists, their ability to move through the city, make decisions about their schedule independent of others, network late at night and have quiet research time were eliminated without a clear 'maternity leave' schedule cut off point around these dramatic changes. The group is largely made up of city dwellers and all are women.

The female role in the city is something that has been written about in great depth by Elizabeth Wilson in *The Sphinx in the City*, which looks at nineteenth-century Paris onward. This period brought the advent of the Flâneur: the male urban wanderer. I

¹ W Whyte, *City: Rediscovering the Center*, Doubleday, New York, 1988, 3

am interested in relating this work to the feminist discourse around this.² The existence of the female version of the flâneur – the flâneuse – has been widely debated among the critics. Writers like Janet Wolf and Virginia Pollock claim that she can't exist, because she can't show the same behaviour as the flâneur, wandering aimlessly around town. Deborah Parsons and Anne Friedberg argue, however, that the flâneuse does exist, but in a different form than the flâneur. “The flâneuse was simply not noticed by male history writers.”³

Through this research, I want to think particularly about the relationship of the flâneur to mothers and their buggies. There are a whole series of changes to the way one is viewed in the city. You no longer can take the position of an invisible presence in the city; you are out there, part of society, in a new and sometimes uncomfortable way. From pregnancy onwards you protrude into space in a way previously not part of your experience. With a buggy you take up three times more space and are often louder and more in need of help than your individual counterpart. This idea of space and need is quite important in that your needs are different. Meeting with the group this became very apparent. During round table discussions, the group highlighted their changing needs; where they once would have spent a lot of time in city centre areas, there is a distinct move to other quieter spaces with wider paving, even if it is less attractive or lacks the same atmosphere of the city.

There are two considerations that arise from this information. The first points to the fact that many of the needs of mothers and buggies also relate to those with disabilities. Peter Freund writes in *Bodies, Disability and Spaces*:

“In disability theory, a second usage of disability emerges – a restriction on activity generated by an impairment transformed by a particular socio-cultural context into a disability... more non-disabled people are coming to see that people with disabilities do not constitute an other. In a sense, many individuals have ‘deviant’ bodies that are not easily accommodated in ‘standard’ spatial arrangements. It is possible to arrive at a tentative...context bound... insight into how various cultural norms and socio-material environments can be disabling.”⁴

The female body with its buggy appendage can be seen as part of this temporary impairment when confronted with narrow streets, with paths that are not wide enough to push a child on, or paving that does not have dips for wheels when crossing the road.⁵ As a result, places like the city's cultural quarter, Temple Bar, is seen by many of the participants as no go area.

² The term *flâneur* comes from the French noun *flâneur*, which has the basic meanings of ‘stroller’, ‘lounger’, ‘saunterer’, ‘loafer’. The *flâneur* was, first of all, a literary type from nineteenth-century France, essential to any picture of the streets of Paris. It carried a set of rich associations: the man of leisure, the idler, the urban explorer, the connoisseur of the street. It was Walter Benjamin, drawing on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, who made him the object of scholarly interest in the twentieth century as an emblematic figure of urban, modern experience. G Shaya, ‘The Flâneur, the Badaud, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860-1910’ *American Historical Review* 109, 2004, par 10a

³ A Van Nes and T M Nguyen, ‘Gender Differences in the Urban Environment: The Flâneur and Flâneuse of the 21st Century’ www.sss7.org

⁴ M Fraser and M Greco (ed), *The body A Reader*, Routledge, Oxon, 2005, 182

⁵ Such design features make up part of what is known as ‘Universal Design’: “Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability” www.universaldesign.ie

The second consideration is that of the move outward to large shopping centres by mothers who are looking for ease of access and safety⁶ In nineteenth-century Paris, city gardens, the department store and the shopping mall became the domain of bourgeois women; being seen on the street at that time was to put ones 'virtue' into question. As Elizabeth Wilson notes, "bourgeois consumerism invaded the public sphere, and the very spaces that were permitted to respectable women were in many cases devoted to purchase and sale".⁷ There is an interesting correlation here with current practices as many of the mothers felt that their needs are being catered for more in the peripheral shopping centre, with seating, changing facilities, space and a sense of safety and welcome not present in city centre quarters. Jan Gehl, in his book *New City Life* based on his study of the city of Copenhagen, speaks of a changing use of the city. He notes that those choosing to come to the city centre are now going specifically to experience the city.⁸ Where does this leave the mother? How does society allow for the comfort of families within the city so they too can partake in this urban experience? It was also noted by many of the participants that there was a distinct lack of welcome in some city centre restaurants and cafés (the ultimate location for Flânerie), which also changed the places they frequented and the type of experience they would have. Even in city centre locations, department stores seemed like the obvious choice when wheeling a baby due to the space and facilities they provide.

Alongside the discussion-based research, I have also undertaken individual walks with mothers, mapping the route using GPS mapping apps for smartphones. Discussing their particular route and the choices they make along their route has garnered some interesting information on a variety of locations in the city. Often, it is also the interactions with other members of the public that have struck me. Erving Goffman writes in *Embodied Information in Face to Face Interaction*, "Each individual can see that he is being experienced in some way and he will guide at least some of this conduct according to the perceived identity and initial response of his audience".⁹ This is particularly noticeable when with a baby, as there is often positive and negative attention directed at mother and buggy. Many of the participants talk of how they find themselves talking to people more, as the child is often a catalyst for conversation. But there is also the flip side, with many people feeling inconvenienced by the presence of this vehicle and the pace and space that is taken by mother and child. Any notion of remaining an aloof observer of society becomes impossible.

The research continues as I write, and I plan to undertake further analysis of routes and experiences. I see this work as part of what Teddy Cruz calls "citizenship as a creative act". I am interested in this intersection between life and artistic practice and how this can relate to the wider experience of the city. Through this socially engaged practice I am working towards "new critical interfaces between research, artistic intervention, and the production of the city".¹⁰ Furthermore, through my work with Dublin City Council I hope to effect some change in the thinking behind the design of

⁶ Mothers also spend more time in parks on the periphery of the city, which most would not have frequented before motherhood. Similarly, in nineteenth-century Paris, the city gardens and parks were also places where women could promenade in safety and away from 'moral danger'

⁷ E Wilson, *The Sphinx In The City*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1991

⁸ J Gehl, et al, *New City Life*, The Danish Architectural Press, Copenhagen, 2006

⁹ M Fraser and M Greco, (ed), *The body A Reader* Routledge, Oxon, 2005, 83

¹⁰ T Cruz, 'Democratizing Urbanization and the Search for a New Civic Imagination' in *Living As Form Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* N Thompson (ed), Creative Times Books, New York, 2012, 6

city centre locations with an eye to the particular experience of women and their children.¹¹ As Freund write in *Bodies, Disability and Spaces*:

Once people shift focus from their bodies and their capacities, and see such capacities linked to the organisation of the spaces they utilise, their attendant mode of being in space, and how they relate to it, changes. Resistance then becomes possible. Inhospitable spaces can become a focal point of resistance.

¹¹ I am currently artist advisor on the design team for the Grafton Street Quarter Improvement Plan