

Walking, Time and Public Space: Perceptions, Policies, Perspectives

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Abstract

The situation for walking is paradoxical. For example: walking is a very positive activity and yet we have allowed it to become in many ways a negative experience. Or, a second paradox: virtually everyone walks and yet, the interests of walkers are often ignored.

The presentation will look at some of the reasons and myths that negatively affect walking such as:

- Converting political questions to individual problems – in a process of depoliticisation
- Claiming public interests as private and private interests as public
- Disciplining body and mind
- Turning the advantages of walking into disadvantages
- Underestimating and neglecting walking: a vicious circle
- The myth of saving time by increasing speeds

It is these ideology patterns which distort the perception of walking and lead to institutional obstacles on all levels. In order to improve the situation for walking we have to not only change the built environment but also the mindsets. We need to change the perceptions of walking and the notions about time and space. We have to show that the longings of people for freedom and self-determination, for time and deceleration and for dignity and respect are and need to be related to walking.

To achieve this vision, accessibility is a key factor. Only when places can be reached on foot and when a design-for-all is implemented, is the freedom and autonomy for all pedestrians secured.

To support a cultural shift towards less stress and more time means to reverse the current hierarchies and priorities in traffic policies: In the future, slow transport modes should have priority over fast modes and local traffic should get precedence over long-distance traffic. Such a new hierarchy would allow a slower pace to unfold as well as create living streets.

One way to re-establish the dignity of walking and respect for pedestrians is to make it clear that walking has the character of a human right. It means that every village, city and state has the obligation – and not just the choice – to provide the best provisions and public spaces for walking.



Example for the ideology pattern of shifting responsibility from the authorities to the individuals: A road in New York where 85 pedestrians have been killed in the last ten years. The New York City Department of Transport did not feel they needed to improve the road infrastructure or reduce speed. Instead they decided, cynically, to put up signs asking pedestrians to stay alert.

Source: Project for Public Spaces Newsletter May 2004

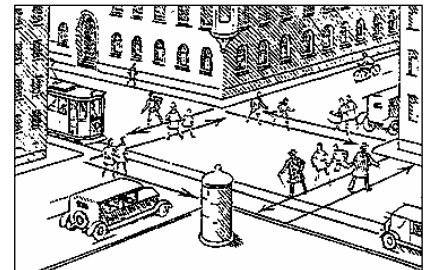
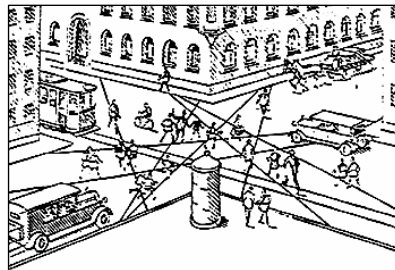
Example for the ideology pattern to claim public interests as private and private interest as public: Car advertisement trying to suggest that all the elements of public space, that are missing in real life, can be experienced in the car. The ideology of the ads takes up our dreams for more and better spaces and tries to sell them back to us in a perverted way.

Source: Lorenzo Custer 1999



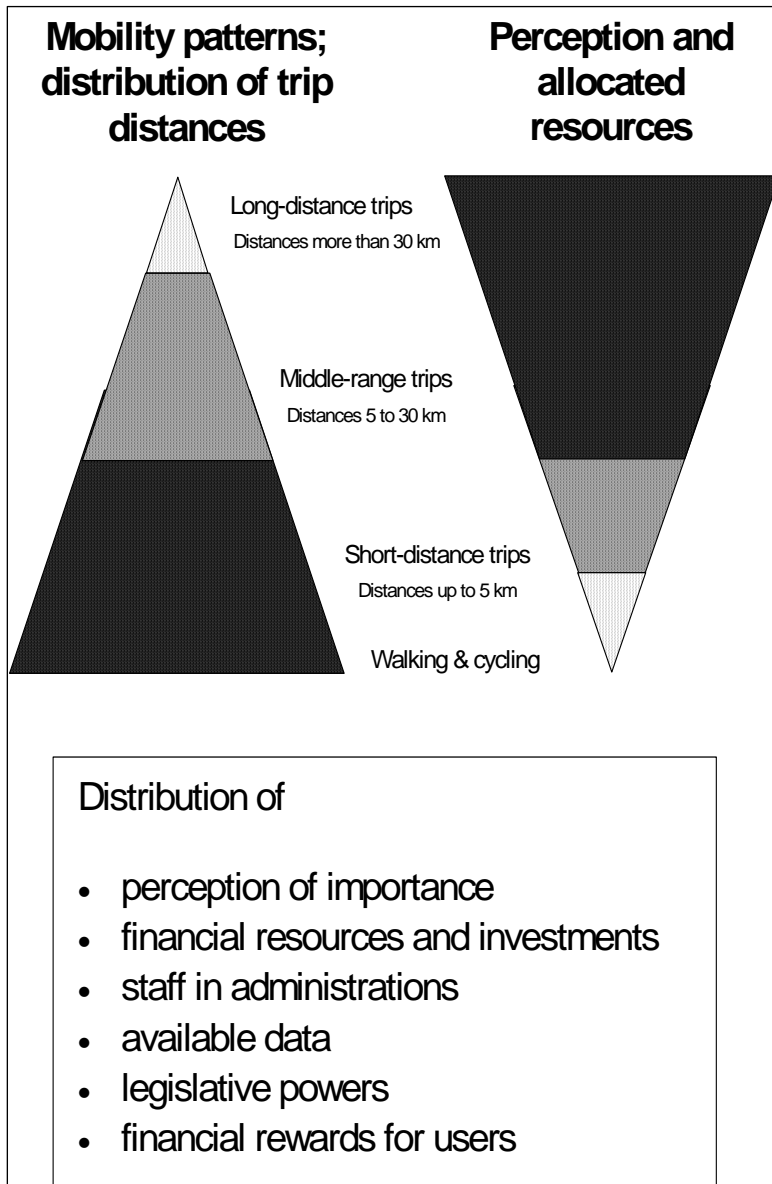
Example for the ideology pattern of disciplining body and mind: Learning to put the body under conscious control in traffic education (1930).

Source: St.Galler Verkehrsbüchlein in Hättenschwiler, 1990



Example for the historical process of channelling pedestrian movements: In Chur 1939 pedestrians still can walk freely across a square; 1953 in Interlaken their paths are given.

Source: Binder/Heller 1997, photos: bfu)



Example for the ideological pattern of underestimation and neglect of walking. While most daily mobility takes place over relatively short distances, and is often done on foot or cycle, it is the long-distance mobility trips and problems that are predominately discussed in politics and the media: congestions on motorways, air traffic problems, new high speed trains etc. This distribution is reflected in the institutional arrangements. Long-distance travel and the relevant infrastructure get the largest share of financial resources and investments. Most staff in administrations and most legislative powers are allocated on this level, detailed data is available and the individuals following such travel patterns are often heavily subsidized or directly financially rewarded. At the same time, staff and money for walking provisions, for essential safety measures and even for small improvements of public spaces are lacking.

Source: Sauter 1999