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One Way of Walking: Fourteen Derives Through Berlin

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## Instructions for a possible *dérive*

- 01 examine a map of your location
- 02 choose a destination neighborhood/zone/area
- 03 establish a vector from your present location to that area
- 04 put down/close map
- 05 set out
- 06 walk until you see a vacant lot
- 07 stop
- 08 face the vacant lot
- 09 take a photograph - move closer to or further from the lot as desired
- 10 note your location (street between cross-street and cross-street, e.g.)
- 11 repeat steps 6 - 10 until done, tired, bored, scared, cold, etc.
- 12 return home
- 13 chart your walk on a map, using notes and memory
- 14 place a marker on each vacant lot that you found
- 15 upload photographs
- 16 correlate photographs to map markers
- 17 repeat as desired

Nathan John

# One Way of Walking

Fourteen Derives Through Berlin

In my mind there is a city, long and low and empty. Poignant with stories I can't ever hear, pregnant with possibility and the most accidental kind of life. Marked upon by other voyagers whom I have never seen, whose colors and designs etch and re-etch aged surfaces, it is a city that only I have ever been to, and which I will never find again. Not by the map of it that I drew, or by any other.

Berlin, it should be said, is a city with more than its fair share of stories. It rests atop richly veined strata of experiences both transcendent and terrible. It is a palimpsest in the strictest sense, its ground marked and rubbed clean and marked again. Its many lives are legible; this city is home to a sublime aesthetic, of beauty glinting amidst entropy, a perfect white cube resting in the decayed remnants of a broken or forgotten order. To visit it today is to perceive, in a glancing, impossible way, a raft of memories that runs generations deep.

Memories, that are always already distorted shadows of the events that they represent in our minds. All of the lived experiences that we carry with us, which we might consider to constitute an essential kernel of selfhood, are faded transcriptions of things that we translated in the very moment of their happening. Each time we take a memory out to look at it, it wanders further from the observed reality that generated it.

And that observed reality itself was never what it seemed to be: we each exist in a world that is ceaselessly parsed and filtered by our perceptual and mental apparatus, whether we should desire such a filtering or not. We are each palimpsests of our own making, endlessly erased and re-written according to evolving ideas, maturing perspectives, shifting tastes. We read our memories iteratively, youthful exploits undergoing a process of transmutation into evidence of the folly of youth.

Our understandings of cities are equally mutable—we each reflect and refract them, considering their features through the lens of our own experience first and foremost. Squalor is not squalor: it can be bohemian, it can be tragic, it can be inevitable, it can be transformative, it can be an origin or a destination, those origins and destinations themselves explanations or plaudits, all depending on who is doing the perceiving. The very aesthetic that I find so compelling, of minimalism layered into apocalypse, would doubtless be read differently by someone who survived the cataclysm that preceded it, or by someone for whom a vacant building is a source of shelter rather than inspiration.

At the same time, squalor is squalor. It is a state, a set of physical, economic and social conditions in an actual place, as is opulence, or liveliness, or industry. Each of these states, condensed to a word, represents a whole slew of very real adaptations in the fabric of a city: they are apartment towers, trees, and benches; awnings, tables, chairs, and kiosks; warehouses, pockmarked streets, steel grates, and loading docks.

How then can we make sense of cities, and their inextricable mesh of memories, meanings and physicalities? They are where most of us live, after all—we can't throw up our hands and declare them ineffable. Yet neither can we bring ourselves to take something as simple as a road map as a true representation, if we accept that cities are more than the sum of their physical elements. And so we find ourselves in need of a



way to mediate between the two—our experiences and the flattened unreality of the roadmap—in a way that acknowledges each.

The Situationists, a group of French artists, architects and intellectuals active in Paris in the 1950's, developed a mechanism for this mediation. Led by Guy Debord, they argued for a more plastic, multivalent understanding of urban places. In their model, cities are places that we construct for ourselves, by way of our movements through and our experiences of their spaces. Each person has a unique understanding of the city; therefore, each of us lives in a city different than the one occupied by our neighbor. Central to this new, phenomenological understanding of urbanism was the belief that it could be explored, mapped through the repetition of an exercise that they called the *dérive*, or drift.



Figure 1 Photograph by author.

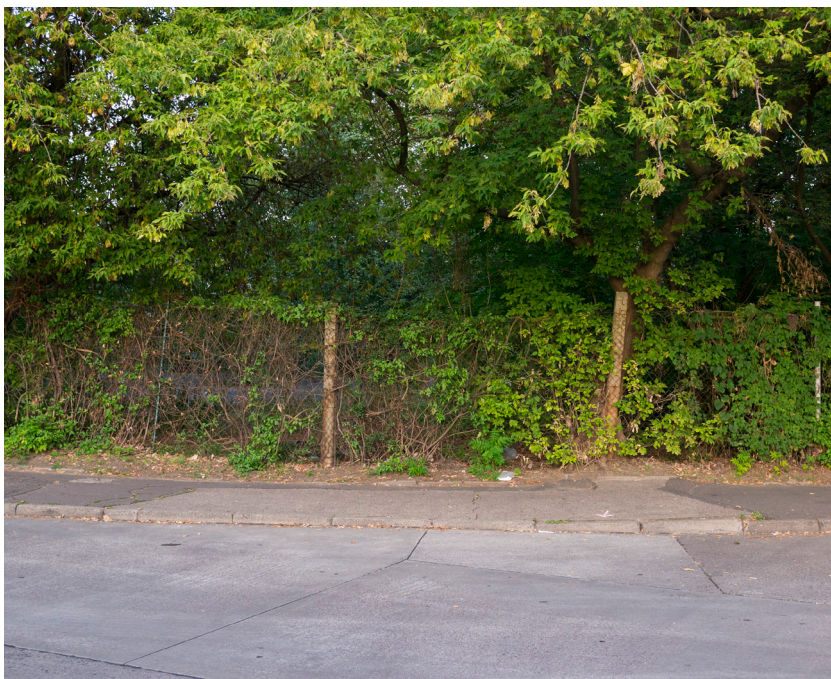


Figure 2 Photograph by author.

A *dérive* is, at its most fundamental level, an unplanned urban walk, and at first that's all they were. From a bar, a group of Situationists might strike out, with varying degrees of steadiness, along a street. Moving according to the dictates of interest and perception rather than a course charted on a map, new understandings of the city and its neighborhoods were achieved through time. As these walks were repeated, they gradually became more act than accident, and gained a name: the *dérive*. Even still, the line between what is a *dérive* and what is not is nebulous to say the least, and has, for me, everything to do with intent. Am I walking to get somewhere, walking to see the sights, or walking to draw a map of a city with my feet? Can I walk more than one way at once?



Figure 3 Photograph by author.

This question is more than academic for me. A child of the suburbs, I began to fall in love with cities when I moved to the periphery of New York City for college. A year spent working as a bicycle messenger in Dublin, Ireland, learning all of its patterns and paces, cemented my affection. I was never the same afterward; I have never looked back. I have made cities my vocation, and have come to know a good amount about a good number of them. Coming to a new city, the things that I see are frequently filtered through the lens of things that I knew before I ever arrived, and this was the case with Berlin more than with most places. In the summer of 2012, I moved there in the midst of a one-year travelling fellowship investigating temporary interventions in urban public spaces. Berlin was in many ways the proto-site for the larger



research project, and in the three years leading up to my stay, I had learned a lot about it.

I read about the layers and lines left upon it by recent and not-so-recent history, as Berlin moved out of the Great War and became the cosmopolitan capital of the Weimar Republic, a churning cultural engine that ground to a halt with the onset of Nazi rule in the 1930's; as it was largely obliterated in the Second World War; as it was wracked with hunger and further damage as a proxy for the disagreements of that war's victors; was cleaved in two; as it was turned by the Cold War into a schizophrenic showpiece of Western and Soviet values; as it was reunified, but rendered lame by the exodus of its people to wealthier locales; as it was redeveloped, piecemeal.

I pocketed a memorable cocktail party tidbit about why trams are to be found in some neighborhoods and not others, the history of the tramway network being a datum against which one can read municipal investment, disinvestment, and privatization in the former East and West Berlin. Where Western development prevailed, the tracks were dug up, as they were in so much of the world, with the onset of the automobile. East Berlin, lacking the money to invest in a wholesale renovation of their transit, went along as it had, leading to the paradoxical situation of today, where that badge of economic underperformance has been transmuted into perhaps the most well liked piece of infrastructure in the city.

Most of all, I devoured stories about how it came to pass that a bunch of punks and squatters created a cultural locus in former East Berlin and inadvertently launched a radical experiment in urbanism at what had been the frontier of the Berlin Wall. Where the wall cut through neighborhoods, the desirability of nearby property plummeted during the era of a divided Germany. At the same time, both East and West Berlin focused all of their attention on a few areas





Figure 4 Photograph by author.



Figure 5 Photograph by author.

in the center of each newly created city, in a bid to transform these neighborhoods into paragons of the states they represented. In West Berlin, this neighborhood was Mitte, which was redeveloped into a take on late mid-century Western Europe, all modernist office blocks and apartment buildings. In East Berlin, it was Karl-Marx-Allee, where the government poured enormous resources into the construction of a parade ground-like boulevard hundreds of feet wide, flanked on each side by massive residential structures, and punctuated at regular intervals by monuments.

With the attention and resources of both municipalities focused elsewhere, the liminal zone along the wall was forgotten by the forces of progress; the result was whole neighborhoods of untouched historic housing stock—sturdy, lovely apartment buildings on quiet streets. At the onset of reunification, these neighborhoods, and in particular the area of Prenzlauer Berg, became a global destination for punk subculture. Rife with squats and informal venues, the area eventually became so full of life that it began to attract more formal residents. As artists and businesses moved in, the familiar cycle of gentrification began.

But instead of starting with a poor or working-class community, as is generally the case, in Prenzlauer Berg gentrification began with buildings that had almost no value whatsoever according to traditional planning and land use metrics. They were so “worthless” that hardly anyone thought twice about letting a whole neighborhood of squatters move in. The area’s subsequent transformation into some of the most valuable real estate in Berlin set off flashbulbs in the brains of architects, planners, artists and urbanists around the city. A series of temporary uses had reshaped the permanent fabric of the place, and if it could be done in Prenzlauer Berg, it could be done elsewhere. So over the last two and a half decades they have collectively set out to build within vacancies, to find and make use of opportunities, around the city.

And so I arrived, to see and to talk and to learn, familiar with these stories of Berlin and many more besides.

At the same time, I knew nothing at all. I had been to none of the parties that made Prenzlauer Berg what it is. I had never seen the wall that it used to abut, which gave rise to the decrepitude that made it such fertile ground for a counterculture. I knew the stories, but was bereft of the memories. Trapped in the strange state of knowing both too much and too little, the *dérive* offered a path through my conundrum. Abandoning my map and my devices, I was able to lose track of my geographic position with relative ease, thereby freeing myself from much of my knowledge about the history of the city. Walking where I wished, according to a schema in my head, I was able to confront only, or at least primarily, the evidence of my own perceptions.



Figure 6 Photograph by author.

A fringe practice to begin with, intermittently revived in the seven decades since the Situationists passed out of vogue, the *dérive* is increasingly germane in a world where hyper-personalization has become ubiquitous even as being truly lost has become much more difficult. Turning away from my devices, I became a participant-observer of an urbanism, entering into experiences and territories equipped with a certain awareness of my context, alive to my knowledge, but not overburdened by preconception and expectation. Never looking at a map, I noted the names of intersections as I passed them instead, and would discover my route only after the fact, when I plotted my course and reconciled the experiences that I had had with my broader understanding of the city, collating different varieties of knowledge.

I went to Berlin to study the fantastical, improbable life that grows in the cracks of that city: clubs in bunkers and in factories, bars in basements, on roofs, in ruins, in parks. Parks where the Berlin wall once ran, ad hoc beaches on the banks of the River Spree, a swimming pool floating within it. Artists and architects making free with spaces freely found, and an entire ecosystem of temporary, interim and alternative uses of urban space. These were the things that I came to see, and I saw them all, in time. But when I first set out on a *dérive*, it took less than a minute—less than a block—before I found my subject matter, one at once deeply related and inherently opposed to the weird vibrancy of Berlin's spatial culture.

Four doors down from my apartment, there was a gap in the line of buildings: a vacant lot, recently repurposed as a playground. As I walked past, it struck me that for all of its dizzying activity, the gaps in Berlin are far from filled. They abound, in fact. The numbers are telling: Berlin's population peaked at four and a half million people in the 1940's, and it has only three million residents today, though that is more than at



any time since its partition. It has more ground than it needs; it is a city whose skin fits it loosely. In certain moments, it still has the aspect of a beast all shambly and full of holes. Even as so many spatial opportunities are seized upon, as parties are earnestly thrown in the cracks of the city, many more are left to lie fallow, and it was these vacant and ignored spaces that commanded my attention. Empty in a certain sense, empty according to a map, they were nevertheless compelling. Bits and pieces of history could be seen in them, chunks of buildings or the scars left on walls by their neighbors, now vanished. Suggestions that they had been places like any other, that they had been full, of stuff and people and life.

Looking upon these gaps in the city was like staring out at an ocean: always the same thing, never the same twice. During my summer in Berlin, I went on fourteen *dérives*. I covered seventy-one miles by foot, never planning my route, but shying away from streets I had walked before. Many of the spaces I found were banal, though in a gloaming or a steady rain, in the midst of a great grey city full of graffiti and broken and beautiful things, they were also sublime. Moving through a seemingly endless East German housing block, there might come the sudden shock of a verdant corner of mature trees, covered in creeping vines. In the center of a tableau of rotted wood and cement and earth, the blue of a chain lock could take on an uncanny gravity.

Others spaces were suggestive, enigmatic. Where had these pieces of a life come from, that I found in a pile? How long vanished were the people that these clothes, these dolls and books and sneakers, belonged to? Was I trespassing on history, or someone's shelter? These windows, these doors, where are the spaces they contained and made safe, and how did they come to land in a heap? If I waded through this high grass and beyond that wall, what would I find? I composed long lists of questions without answers as I walked, which I couldn't help but

then imagine answers to. In the absence of an official history, each site became an exercise in interpolation, the filling in of the gaps in what I could see with stories I would never know the truth of.

This piece is prefaced by a diagram outlining the methodology of my *dérives* in Berlin, and accompanied by a handful of the images that I captured while I walked. Both are flawed representations of the experiences they depict—though you might follow my directions, and even should you manage to tread in my footsteps exactly, you would see Berlin differently than I did. You would draw a different map than mine, of a different city. My photographs evoke memories in me, but they can do no more than set a tone for you, if they manage even that much. They are rendered into souvenirs, static tokens that refer back to an irrecoverable time and place.

I found and took photographic portraits of eighty-one lots, scattered primarily through the northeastern quadrant of the city, almost exclusively in former East Berlin. It became a kind of hunt, and I hoped that each turn would reveal some new old broke-down place. I projected my mind into these spaces, imagined what might be made of them: never anything so dull as a building, but devices, contrivances, evidence of love and lust and a longing for something.

In the end, these lots became my Berlin. Though I moved daily through the city that I had journeyed so determinedly to find, drinking coffee in scenes of pure white paint and pale wood and perfectly imperfect concrete, meeting people—how many architects can one city hold—who chased the same enthusiasms as I did, and though we chased those enthusiasms through nights and into dawns, in my memory it is a city with a stillness to it. I remember so much quiet, so much sun-warmed asphalt and stray corners of neighborhoods and leaves and vines and creepers, and so many fences. I remember walking, and walking, and walking, alone.

Nathan John is a designer, writer and visual artist based in Oakland, California. His current work leverages the ethos and techniques of the hacker/maker movement and the material palette of the architectural avant-garde in testing the potential of small, temporary interventions to reorient our perceptions of urban environments.

[Chapter figures provided by author.]