Walkability with the Use of Mobile Apps

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Abstract : This paper examines different ways of exploring a city by using smart phones' applications while walking, and the way this new attitude will change our perception of the urban environment. By referring to various examples of such applications we will consider options and possibilities that open up with new technologies, their advantages and disadvantages, as well as ways of experiencing and interpreting the urban environment. The widespread use of smart phones gave access to information, maps, knowledge, etc. at all times and places. The city tourism marketing takes advantage of this event and promotes the city's attractions through technology. Mobile mediated walking tours, provide new possibilities and modify the way we used to explore cities, for instance by giving directions proper to find easily destinations, by displaying our exact location on the map, by creating our own tours through picking points of interest and interconnecting them to create a route. These apps act as interactive ones, as they filter the user's interests, movements, etc. Discovering a city on foot and visiting interesting sites and landmarks, became very easy, and has been revolutionized through the help of navigational and other applications. In contrast to the re-invention of the city as suggested by the Baudelaire's Flâneur in the 19th century, or to the construction of situations by the Situationists in 60s, the new technological means do not allow people to "get lost", as these follow and record our moves. In the case of strolling or drifting around the city, the option of "getting lost" is desired, as the goal is not the "wayfinding" or the destination, but it is the experience of walking itself. Getting lost is not always about dislocation, but it is about getting a feeling, free of the urban environment while experiencing it. So, on the one hand, walking is considered to be a physical and embodied experience, as the observer becomes an actor and participates with all his senses in the city activities. On the other hand, the use of a screen turns out to become a disembodied experience of the urban environment, as we perceive it in a fragmented and distanced way. Relations with the city are similar to Alberti's isolated viewer, detached from any urban stage. The smartphone, even if we are present, acts as a mediator: we interact directly with it and indirectly with the environment. Contrary to the Flaneur and to the Situationists, who discovered the city with their own bodies, today the body itself is being detached from that experience. While contemporary cities turn out to become more walkable, the new technological applications tend to open out all possibilities in order to explore them by suggesting multiple routes. Exploration becomes easier, but Perception changes.
Keywords : body, experience, mobile apps, walking