# Wayfaring, But Stranger: Activists, wanderers, and tourists find a common language through walking

By Tim Waterman

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Matthew Beaumont's beautiful book about London, *Nightwalking: A Nocturnal History of London*, begins with a quotation from Ford Madox Ford's *The Soul of London* (1905): "...little by little, the Londoner comes to forget that his London is built upon real earth: he forgets that under the pavements there are hills, forgotten water courses, springs, and marshlands." Beaumont shows wayfaring as an immersive and connective practice and proposes that cities can only truly be known through the practice of walking. Beaumont, however, is often writing of the solitary walker—Charles Dickens, for example, whose prodigious nocturnal restlessness propelled him to walk for hour upon hour, contributing to his very particular knowledge of place. What concerns the walkers in Marseille, France, and London is rather the *collective* experience of walking in groups and the way in which this forms not only common wisdom, but the possibility of dynamic transformation of the urban landscape through collaboration and activism.

In January, while planning a trip to Marseille, I posed a question on Twitter: What projects or sites should I visit? One of the most interesting responses came from the London-based academic and activist Clare Qualmann, who pointed me to a network of artists, walkers, and community activists who were in regular communication, sharing ideas and practices both virtually and at either end of the swift, easy, and attractive rail journey between the two cities. Qualmann organizes East End Jam, an urban foraging and jam-making walk, and she is not alone in her pursuit of walking as art and activism. John Bingham-Hall is exploring queer ecologies and urban fringes in Paris, Marseille, and London. Carole Wright engages in community walks with the organization Blak Outside in South London and Essex, excursions that connect the spatial politics of race and place with community gardening and housing. Charlie Fox works with a group called InspiralLondon, which casts broad loops across London, and in Marseille with his partner Julie De Muer, a representative of the Bureau des Guides (organizers of skiing, hiking, and climbing trips), on a grassroots Airbnb-style network called Hôtel du Nord.

In Qualmann's forthcoming essay on East End Jam, she details how walking in groups encourages people to use space differently, share knowledge, and change perceptions. Her foraging forays in and around the Olympic and Paralympic sites at Stratford in East London break down social stigmas about fruit-picking in public spaces and help people to see vegetation in the city differently. They culminate in

epic jam-making sessions that encourage togetherness and communication. Qualmann explains, on a walk along the Stratford Greenway, that at first the walks attracted a largely white and middle-class demographic, so it was necessary to reach out directly to a more diverse constituency and intentionally bring those people into the experience.

In Marseille, De Muer at the Bureau des Guides took similar groups, purposely from different classes, along the course of the Aygalades stream, a neglected urban waterway that flows into the harbor through a vast 1,200-acre urban renewal project called Euroméditerranée (Euromed for short). Sharing knowledge and changing perceptions in this case resulted not only in community participation, but in a profound shift in understanding of Marseille's governance and the core narratives of the Euromed regeneration effort. Treating the course of the Aygalades as a continuous landscape and dealing with the problems of urban stream syndrome—the familiar condition of urban waterways defined by such problems as ecological degradation, pollution, and impervious surfaces contributing to flash flooding—will now be the task of a dedicated municipal department. Euromed has engaged head-on with the question of landscape and stormwater management in its ever more flood-prone site through its support of this new department, increased investment in studying prior flooding events throughout the Mediterranean, voicing a commitment to "green city" principles, and the installation of rain gardens.

Wright's work in South London and Essex is more local but engages in similar ways to De Muer's. She says that when she creates a community garden as she did at the Brookwood House Council Estate, with the artist Fritz Haeg on a project called Edible Estates, walking the neighborhood is a crucial part of the process. "Almost everyone can walk," she says, "and walking is low-cost." A garden is never a discrete, bounded site but is always in a dialogue with its context—social, cultural, ecological, she says. In the 19th-century housing project where she lives, Blackfriars Estate, she used the same approach of focused walking to enlist local politicians in creating substantive change, bringing about necessary but long-stalled repairs and renovations to buildings.

De Muer and Fox point out a tranquil hilltop copse of stone pines (*Pinus pinea*) above North Marseille, once the *bastide* (country dwelling) of the sculptor Jules Cantini. When he died in 1916, he bequeathed the house and grounds in perpetuity to the people of Marseille. One of the last acts of the former conservative city government, however, was to sell the site for industrial development. The site, called Miramar, is not a formal park but is maintained for its biodiversity by volunteers. Through the Bureau des Guides, the residents of a nearby housing project, La Castellane, were introduced to Miramar. Though La Castellane has recently seen an escalation in drug gang activity—to the point that it is now barricaded and fortified by the gangs, making it impossible to host further walks in

the area—the residents and other locals showed up to defend the pines when crews with chain saws attempted to clear the site. “We don’t need a park,” De Muer says. “The park is the end and the beginning of the problem.” The city doesn’t need to maintain Miramar as a formal space, she says, but as a site for active participation and community engagement. A park in this neighborhood would never be properly maintained, and if formalized, its care would pass out of the hands of locals into the hands of politicians.

“Wayfaring,” the anthropologist Tim Ingold writes in his book *Lines: A Brief History,* “is neither placeless nor place-bound, but place-*making.*” These grassroots forms of place-making compel landscape architects to find ways to work locally and walk locally, collaboratively, and productively, to identify and develop sites with their communities rather than waiting for clients or competitions to spur action. Landscape architects can be leaders in treating cities and neighborhoods as whole, continuous, substantive landscapes and drawing people into active participation to learn about the places they inhabit, increasing cosmopolitanism and communication and creating mutual understanding. People find common points of reference even if they are from radically different back- grounds when they come together to understand their city as a landscape. People also find the political will and develop the language to speak of and for their landscapes through the practice of walking.

Changing perceptions also requires the eye of the outsider, and productive networks of communication such as those developed in London and Marseille help to ensure that there is a ready feedback mechanism, with critical distance and the ability to compare and contrast built in. London and Marseille are very different cities but share many of the same problems and opportunities. Not only is walking a useful collective practice, but it can also form a robust foundation for site analysis, evaluation, and the processes of critique and reflection. Walking can inform designers about local practices, local context, and any active management and maintenance taking place, and acquaint them with the preexisting, current, and future forces that may delay the seemingly inevitable decay after installation.

Part of this process is also the separation of sites and design from the profit motive, though this does not obviate the necessity of finding funds and organizing volunteers. Yet what is required is not so much the showy big-spend projects, but widely dispersed ones that take a lighter touch over longer terms so that green infrastructure can be developed effectively everywhere it is needed—which is everywhere in the city.