

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences  
Spring Semester, 2013  
9.68 – “Affect ...”  
“A Walk Around the Block”

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Another field trip.

Once again, our destination is across the river in Boston.

Once again, everyone is asked to follow the same prescribed path.

This time, however, you may make the trip solo or in the company of a few classmates/groupmates. This time, we remain pretty much outdoors – walking around a particular block in the Back Bay.

The "mission"? Consider it a search for criteria (grounds; a basis) on which to evaluate the "quality of life" prevailing in this particular part of the local urban environment.

FIRST: Study the foregoing images. Think about their meaning to you.

Focusing down: At what level of awareness do you register the form and function of the city's streets and sidewalks and parks and buildings and pavements?

Monitor and record your thoughts and feelings about being in this environment at this moment. What draws your attention? Do you take note of weather, temperature, sounds, sights, smells? people, places, things? vehicles, pedestrians, commercial, residences, office blocks, and other buildings (apartment houses, hotels, cafes, restaurants, churches; storefronts, shops and government offices)?

In what respects and to what extent are you and the people around you "all in the same world"? or "each in his/her own world" -- strolling, running errands, doing chores, taking in the sights, shopping, walking, resting, on the job, taking it easy? with the possible exception of your classmates, let's assume that the only one seeing and thinking and feeling as you do about your environment is yourself. What are you feeling?

How do you feel? Are you more comfortable walking along broad public thoroughfares and sidewalks? How do you feel when entering and traversing narrow urban alleys? What is your "state of mind" when crossing the big city's busy streets? Do you find it easy or hard to negotiate your way through the helter-skelter of fast-moving vehicular and pedestrian traffic? Do you feel "at home" in this neighborhood?

Are you familiar with the city's civic amenities (e.g. parklands and public reservations?) How about the availability of and ease of access to public toilets and other sanitary conveniences? How good are local and regional transportation systems? Trolleys and Subways and Buses? Do you hear emergency noises? Notice cops on the beat? See security guards on duty? Can you spot other workers doing their jobs? Bikers and joggers and skaters? Skateboarders? Limousines? Taxis? Cars and Vans and Trucks? "Tourist Ducks" and "Sightseeing Trolleys, Horse-drawn Carriages"? Scooters, Motorcycles, Ambulances, Police cars, Fire engines; Where are parking lots and garages? Its metered/unmetered parking spaces? (and the relative number and cost thereof) ...

In its original MIT trial, this walk was taken in the early Spring of 1958 by some 27 subjects -- all of them enrolled in an urban studies class. The weather was cold, sometimes sunny, the trees were still bare and there were patches of old snow on the ground here and there. The walkers -- students in an MIT class on city planning -- were instructed to focus their attention on the forms and functions of the urban environment, with a view toward helping them to sharpen their perceptual and critical abilities, and in the hope of heightening their sensitivity to the natural and architectural characteristics of the urban surroundings.

We invite you to take these factors into account. But, the main aim here continues to be to help you to become still more aware of and more comfortable with the concepts of "quality" and "good" that we have been exploring and see whether (or in what ways) your observations relate to questions that occur to you about human adaptability and the sustainability of human/ecological relations as you walk.

SECOND: Take the walk.

The exercise begins at the southeast corner of Boylston and Berkeley Streets in the Back Bay.

It ends near the intersection of Arlington and Boylston Streets, on a grassy spot in the southwest corner of the Boston Public Garden,. The spot is directly across the street from the Arlington Street Church and opposite the stairway down to the outbound underground T stop on the Green Line.

To get there from the MIT-Kendall Square T stop take Red Line, inbound 2 stops to Park Street. Follow signs to Green Line Westbound, go upstairs and take any trolley two stops outbound to Arlington Street. Exit at front (west) end of platform; there is a stairway/escalator leading up to street level. The block we are about to walk around is not an extraordinary one, except perhaps in the sense that it hasn't really changed all that much since Lynch and Rivkin described it as follows more than 4 decades ago:

"It has many typical features of an American shopping street, but with some touches of Boston tradition and much physical contrast in small compass. (On the Boylston Street side, the block) has a wide range of offices and middle-income specialty stores, while (the Newbury street side) caters to a wealthier class, with its elegant dress shops, decorators, beauticians, and haberdashers. The Newbury Street shops occupy the ground floors of old, narrow-fronted retail and wholesale business buildings, which vary markedly in height. Traffic on both streets is one-way and that on Boylston is quite heavy. Between Boylston and Newbury streets is a narrow alley, neither meaner nor dirtier than most."

START: by pausing, for a moment, at the corner of Boylston and Berkeley Street.

Until recently, the red brick building across Berkeley Street has been occupied by an upscale men's clothier. It was previously home to the Bonwit Teller Department Store. The building was originally built in 1864 to house a Museum of Natural History. A very similar building of comparable style and scale was erected on another site nearby and became the first home of MIT when first founded as "Boston Tech."

Proceed east on Boylston Street to Arlington Street.

At the first corner, turn left.

You are now proceeding north along the west sidewalk of Arlington Street.

The first structure on your left is the old brownstone Arlington Street Church (completed 1861). It is one of the first buildings to occupy the newly-filled-in Back Bay lands. Continue walking northwards, past Alley 438 and then turn left again at the next corner.

You are now proceeding west along the south sidewalk of Newbury Street. Continue walking west to Berkeley Street; turn left; walk along the east sidewalk of Berkeley Street, past Alley 438, and back to the starting point. Now retrace your steps halfway along Berkeley Street until you come back to Alley 438. Turn right and follow the alley to its end (beginning?) at Arlington Street.

In this alley, we encounter the "backsides" of the "upscale" facades of the fashionable Bolston and Newbury Street establishments. Here you are – as an earlier participant put it: "behind the scenes" amid the physical "infrastructure of a system that puts relatively toney sales assistants and wealthy shoppers out front; homeless people, service workers and poorer people way back". Is that description consistent with your own impressions? Explain.

After passing through the alley you are back on Arlington Street; Carefully cross Arlington Street and enter the Public Gardens. Find a place to sit and reflect on your "walk around the block."

THIRD: Reflect.

"The Boston Public Gardens," note Lynch and Rivkin, was "planted in the romantic style"

What is the meaning to you of this denotation?

Review the experience. Pause and take note of relevant details.

Note the time and date of your excursion. Comment as appropriate on weather and other relevant environmental conditions.

Here are some other questions to stimulate and guide your reflections:

How are you feeling? (Recall what's been said about the influence of attitudes on outcomes.)

Has the walk added anything to your pre-existing mental model of the city?

Can you describe the Metropolitan area (or this single one of its urban blocks) as a human/ecological system?

When this exercise was originally done, nobody had ever seen any of the striking satellite images of "the whole earth" that have become commonplace among us since then. Today, our capacity to visualize our "homes" is vastly augmented by the accessibility to all of the many programs like "Google Earth" and by myriad GPS programs.

Now that it is so easy to visualize our surroundings as if "in overview" it has become possible for us to ask: Which images best exemplify your idea of "home" in the sense of an actual place?

What sorts of things about yourself; about the environment; about yourself in the environment; have you been finding yourself paying particular attention to?

What is the city as described in terms of major spatial and temporal dimensions? What are its main component systems and subsystems (e.g.) topographical coordinates (latitude and longitude), geopolitical boundaries and relation to local and regional watersheds?

What are Greater Boston's major watershed units?

In which watershed(s) do we find the MFA? MIT? the block we walked around?

Why are water and water supplies and watersheds important?

Water is primal. Water quality is constantly threatened by anthropogenic factors. Fresh water represents only 6% of the volume of the earth's water; the other 94% is salt water. A fraction of the earth's fresh water is constantly being recycled. (see "The Water Cycle") Potable water is an endangered resource.

Of available potable terrestrial water supplies for human consumption, most (get data) is either on the surface or in underground aquifers;

It makes sense for human social, geopolitical, and economic activities to be organized in terms of shared involvements with local and regional watershed units and underground aquifers.

We are water, (70 per cent) with a bit of gristle and stardust.

What do you know about the source of the water supplies of Greater Boston?  
What do you know about the fate of our urban wastewater?  
What do you know about the location and condition of our urban wastewater systems?

In which County is MIT located?  
What do you know about Boston's weather, and climate, about its civic and cultural amenities?

What do you know about Boston's neighborhoods and suburbs? Its local, regional, county, state, national and global modes of governance? its educational, scientific, medical, religious, legal and social service institutions; its schools and colleges, dormitories, private residences, public housing projects, churches, farms, manufacturing industries, fraternities, sororities, zoos, aquariums, museums, movie houses, theatres and concert halls; its clubs, teams, gangs, labor unions, for profit and not for profit corporations, community centers, fitness facilities, clinics, hospitals, health centers) etc. etc.?

What do you know about the natural history, topography and development of the city?

Why is one neighborhood called the "Back Bay"?  
What was "Trimount"? How about "Boston Neck"? and "Gallows Island"?  
How extensive is "Greater Boston"?  
Can you identify: The Charles River Watershed? Muddy River Watershed? Neponset River? Mystic River? Chelsea River? Boston Harbor? Massachusetts Bay? The Gulf of Maine International Watershed Area? How do these boundaries relate to present geopolitical borders (e.g. national, state/provincial, regional, county, local)?

What about demographic trends past and present? Who were Boston's "original inhabitants" and who were its subsequent settlers; how about the city's people and neighborhoods yesterday and today?

What are your own home terrestrial coordinates:  
What do you know about home water affairs?

By hypothesis: people quite generally and commonly seek to minimize "cognitive dissonance" and to create and maintain an optimal modicum of coherence, order, consistency and continuity in their/our everyday lives; in the process, each of us may be said to somehow manage to create for ourselves (whether self-consciously or otherwise) a more or less comprehensive, coherent, orderly, useful and continuous "cognitive map" of our surroundings and our own place therein.

Has the shape and texture of your cognitive map been influenced by the field trip experience?

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