

## Work on the Move

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### Keyword

Place, Nomadic, Collaboration, International

### Abstract

'Work on the move' is a design, process-driven methodology, which uses multiple locations within an outdoors setting and movement between locations, all of which function as learning places, confined to a specified time period.

Between 2012 and 2015, a team of international Higher Education product design educators (all members of Carousel, a co-operation of Erasmus members in Zwolle, Edinburgh, Nantes, Rome, Kortrijk and Oslo), industry professionals and product design students developed and tested four case studies. Each case study was conducted in a different international location and was constructed with a different focus, to help define and refine a definitive working methodology.

'Work on the move' explores the influence of 'place' upon design, in terms of the impact it has on productivity and creative problem-solving, when working away from the traditional studio/office-based environment. It also explores the significance of shared place, when working directly with a client *in situ*, and experiencing the place-based influences upon their businesses. While identifying location as part of the design process, the study also seeks to understand the effects of time restriction and working in transit upon creativity and productivity, within the context of specific projects.

### Introduction

The designer, as the traveling figure whose "making" and "belonging" are embedded in the traditions of artisanal cultures, is brought to the fore in Sennett's *The Craftsman* (2009); wherein he presents a description of the craftsman as someone that fuses cultural production with social values. Sennett (2009) tells us that "learning becomes local" (p.179) and involves improvisation where microenvironments inspire and produce experiences and forms. Sennett's craftsman moves through society responding to hidden and complex orders and materials. Sennett's work is useful to the study that follows, because it reminds us that relations between place, making and materials are fluid and provide design research with a set of tools through which we might "approach the world in order to discern the preconditions of a design" (Nelson and Stolterman 2012, p.120).

It is interesting to consider how, as globally-influenced and highly-mobile professionals, designers continue to respond to places as our nomadic craft forefathers did. However, whether the designer's interaction 'with and through place' is as rich and generative as Sennett's craftsman is less clear. Certainly, there are shifts made possible by the flows of goods and networks of finance, through exploiting digital communication technologies and tools, where present-day design teams often work remotely, in multiple locations.

Crary (2014) compellingly argues not only that technology has vastly changed how we think and how we do but also that the immediacy and veracity of digital information can relegate some real-life activities, which do not have an online correlate, to a lesser relevance or even allow them to be robbed of meaning. “Indeed, it seems that there is always something online that is more informative, surprising, funny, diverting or impressive than anything in one’s immediate actual circumstances” (p.59). It is now a given that the limitless availability of information or images can override any human-scale communication or exploration of ideas. ‘Work on the move’ is a response to those shifts in mobility, place, time and informational networks that not only influence how and where we conduct research but also acknowledge their transformative influence on the self-narration of the designer’s experience. ‘Work on the move’ explores how a slower, peripatetic design relationship with the world brings the designer closer to the social world and informs design research, collaboration and creative outputs.

Solnit’s (2001) reflections upon the cultural history of walking reveals the significance of walking and transitional, nomadic experiences in many professions across time and culture. Referring to the sometimes transitory status of musicians to medics, she comments on how they can possess a type of diplomatic immunity from communities that keeps its participants local: “a solitary walker is in the world, but apart from it, with the detachment of the traveller rather than the ties of the worker, dweller and member of a group” (Solnit 2001, p. 21). Solnit’s treatise on “Wanderlust” reflects upon thinking through walking as an embodied creative rhythm; thoughts and places according to this line of reason are symbolically charged. She refers both to Rousseau’s (1712 – 1778) confession, “I can only meditate when I am walking. When I stop, I cease to think my mind only works with my legs” (2001, p.14), and to Thomas Hobbs’ (1588-1679) personally-modified walking stick, built with an inkhorn, to allow him to jot down his ideas as he strolled through the streets of London and Paris. (2001).

### **International beginnings: Aims, place, time and movement**

The initial idea for “work on the move” was developed through co-operation with product design academics from Edinburgh Napier University in Scotland, and Windesheim University of Applied Science in Zwolle, Netherlands, and was tested with design lecturers from Sapienza Università in Rome, Italy, and from Howest University College West Flanders, in Kortrijk, Belgium. The group, called Carousel, these universities form, which also includes the L’École de Design Nantes Atlantique in France and the Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Norway, is the main vehicle for further exploration and development of this innovative methodology. Within Carousel, there is a significant opportunity to test and develop the methodology with lecturers, students and external clients. Using this international stage also makes the results more relevant for both design educators and those whose work demands inter-cultural competences in design and research.

According to Nelson and Stolterman (2012), design is adaptive, connective and compositional and is always part of a creative, generative relational process. As a designer:

. . . you participate in the creation of a real world. To do that, you need the world to make sense to you. To design is not to create things that make the world more reflective of the true. It is rather to create a world that has more meaning, that makes more sense (Nelson and Stolterman 2012, p.122).

Our research explores and develops design innovation methodologies in relation to processes involved in idea generation and problem solving. In particular, the study explores how working away from the traditional studio-based environments—in multiple locations—impacts creativity and the group dynamic among students, co-workers and clients. Time restrictions and the experiences of journeying between places relates to ‘embodied cognition’ (Barsalou 1999; Schwartz and Black 1999) in terms of the influences on movement and thought. The research results may be used to inform student projects, to develop HE design curricula, and to create a methodology for industry application.

The research team developed four case studies, each with a different location and design brief, to explore the impacts on collaboration, place, movement and time. Within each case study, multiple venues were identified, each used to mark a different stage of the design process. Routes between venues were planned to encourage shared experiences of traveling temporally, geographically and collectively; being in between design processes allowed for reflection and discussion, before consolidation at the next location. Through the constant flow and transition of working around a city, this activity sought to create the opportunity for random acts and experiences that could potentially influence the design process. These shared experiences challenge the traditional studio-based work flow, and the internal relationship hierarchies within a design team. In addition, such a work process

expands the external relationships between client, designer and user. In other words, this mobile workshop allowed participants to be both tour guide and tourist.

## Methodology

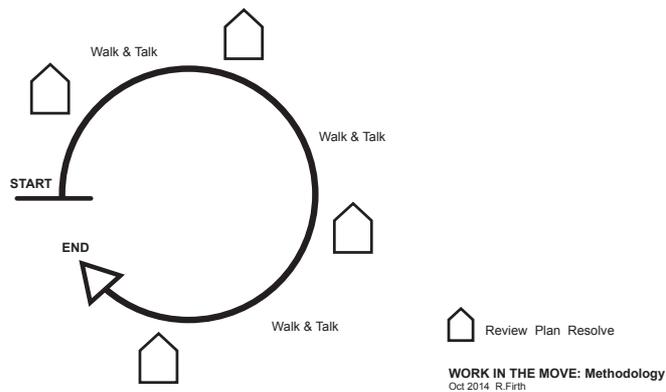


Fig 1: Diagram of Basic Project Structure

The host participants set a design brief, then prepared a specific brief-related itinerary, containing locations and routes around a city. Careful consideration was required to allocate appropriate time at and in-between venues. Time was allocated at venues for more focussed reflection, and to collate and visualise discussions. Time spent moving between places was used to encourage more casual discussion and reflection. Participants' relation to time and space was organised to make them feel confident to embrace and discuss random experiences, and to respond to the larger group's collective knowledge. The methodology proposes an important emphasis between travel and the development of knowledge, which is supported by studies such as that of Oppezzo and Schwartz (2014), where walking is identified as having had a strong influence on the expression of associative memory: "The act of working and experiencing a variety of external stimuli increased, talkativeness between participants. We hypothesised that when walking, people generated more ideas, and more of those ideas were novel and site-sensitive". (2014 p.1148).

All participants had complete, non-prescribed freedom to record and express their ideas, using their preferred method to capture data. Our aim was to mitigate issues of restriction, potential conflict, or of authority by not imposing a specific method. It was interesting to observe the variety of methods used: from a phone/camera, a sketchbook, a napkin, the back of a hand, or a tablet, to using pencil or charcoal with which to write.

Four case studies were conducted to explore the effects on the design process, through engaging with different places and routes, plus different team collaborations and time restrictions, within "a real world setting" (Bromlry 1986, p. 23), focusing on contemporary, as opposed to historical, phenomena (Yin 2003). The research findings were refined over each consecutive workshop, with the aim of creating a definitive, working methodology.

## Case study one: Project: 'Tea' — Edinburgh, March 2014



Fig 2: Route taken for Tea Brief

The first of the case studies was conducted by four members of academic staff—two from the BDes(hons) Product Design programme at Edinburgh Napier University, and two from the Product Design Engineering programme at Windesheim University of Applied Science, Zwolle:

Our brief was designed to be very open, using the simple title, “Tea”:

- Tea represents: object, service, ceremony, habit, ritual.
- It allows us to stop, reflect and down tools.
- It provides an opportunity to talk, council, gossip and listen.
- Tea evokes multiple meanings and experiences, such as tea lady, tea trolley, greasy spoon, café, builders tea, high tea, flask, and “more tea, vicar!”

Observation and reflection was our starting point. Over the course of a day, during a twelve-hour period, we visited a variety of places where tea is served and people interact: 1) the Social Bite—a social cause-driven business, tea and sandwich shop, which trained and employed homeless members of the community; 2) a repurposed police box/coffee station, of which many are located around the city; 3) a bike store/café hybrid business; 4) a community arts centre; 5) a hotel for high tea; and 6) a city centre bar, for a themed tea and cocktails event. Each venue was chosen to provide an experience with a diverse user group, a unique social experience, and a separate context for taking tea.



FIG 3: Observation of an additional role of a tea pot.

A key finding of the day was how the group dynamic worked during each walking phase of the study. In particular, we observed how random encounters impacted conversations within the group and influenced the direction of the design brief. For example, while walking, a team member from the Netherlands noticed and enquired about ‘tenement living’, which is common in Scotland; this quickly escalated into a lively group discussion about other examples of domestic living from both historical and literary references. These conversations lead us to agree upon our first design direction: our solution should address both community and

social interaction. Walking freed us to think in tangents and contradictions without fear of being judged, and the use of anecdotes from historical literary references became a common practice to draw people into the conversation.

#### **Case study two: Project: 'Eat in the City'— Edinburgh, March 2014**



Fig 4: Using portable data projector to brief students in the city centre.

This workshop was run over four days within the Edinburgh City Centre. Participants were organised into teams from an international student cohort of forty year two product design students from Edinburgh Napier University and Windershiem University of Applied Science, Zwolle.

Using the experiences and examples from case study one, students were encouraged to actively use the city's various locations as studio, research and user testing places, and to exploit their personal digital devices and social media platforms to record, gather and manipulate information. The four-day project structure allowed students to focus and commit to the project without interruptions. The activities outlined for each day were as follows:

- Day one: Observe, record, and develop concept.
- Day two: Present in studio, build full-size models.
- Day three: Take models back into the city, test and create a one minute film presentation.
- Day four: Present your film, in location to your year group.

The students commented that the immediacy of working in different places created a quick turn-around of ideas and consolidated decision-making. The variety of locations and tasks, and the time-restrictions we imposed, challenged the more traditional linear learning structure to which the students had been accustomed. We also observed students' stamina and endurance greatly increased, due to the variety of tasks and changes in learning places. It was commented on that the transitions between places gave students downtime to reflect, refresh, and plan for their next tasks.

Students worked in teams mixed from the different international design schools, with the host students taking responsibility to act as tour guides for their visitors. The host students enjoyed the autonomy and responsibility to show 'their city' outside the boundaries of their regular university surroundings, time tables and structure. We observed students building relationships quickly, taking pride in their city, and taking ownership of their projects.

Students worked in a variety of places including bars, cafes, art galleries, libraries, parks, and on public transport. Of particular value to this study was observing the visiting students integrating their studies with their experience of a new city, as opposed to being based in a design studio during the day, and only engaging in outside social activities in the evening. One comment from a student participant reveals this unique experience: "We got to see parts of a city that a tourist might not, you got to feel like you were part of the city and lived here a little, it made me feel confident to apply for longer (international) student exchanges." (*3<sup>rd</sup> year product design exchange student*).

#### **Case study three: Project: 'A Greener Town' — Zwolle, March 2014**

Case study three was devised to observe how the methodology responded to the participation of a larger, academic design team. The group increased to include Carousel members from Italy and Belgium, for a total of seven participants, and some members had not met before. We conducted the case study using the one-day time format developed in case study one.

It was noticeable that the interaction between participants in the larger group was not as effective as it was within the smaller group used in case study one; we were mindful that this might be due to personality and cultural differences. It was reasonable to conclude that teams with larger participant numbers would benefit from the introduction of a team leader role to organise and pace the day.

The Netherlands hosts had planned in advance to spend most of the day traveling on foot and by bicycle. Poor weather conditions made this unworkable, so alternative travel methods, routes and places were improvised on the day. This proved to validate the flexible nature of the 'work on the move' philosophy, by working with and responding to changes in the environment. However, we felt the reduced opportunities to 'walk and talk' did impact the ease and flow of interactions between some group members. It was also observed, when we sat around tables in different venues that it was not always easy to find adequate spaces to accommodate the group, and inevitably there would be some participants seated at opposite ends of the group.

During this case study, one of the participants made an active choice to be the 'group scribe', documenting each conversation and milestone through illustrations in a sketchbook. This proved to be an extremely effective approach for capturing, organising, and distilling conversations and data. Sketching, in the moment, gave a linear, working account of the day, which meant that that content for the final presentation was being produced as the project developed. As a result, there was very little additional work to do at the end of the workshop regarding collating, organising and presenting the findings. This meant more time could be allocated to design development and refinement, rather than spending time working up additional presentation content.

#### **Case study four: Project: 'Baggee' — London, May 2015**

Case study four explored the 'work on the move' methodology through collaboration between academic staff and an industry partner. Our client, Baggee, Ltd., required some initial R&D on one of their existing product ranges, with regard to developing product and market diversification opportunities. We organised the workshop around a smaller number of participants, using the results from the previous case studies that found smaller groups to be more effective for this work: one client, and two academics from Edinburgh Napier University. The smaller group size was less intimidating for the client, while moving around a city, working peer-to-peer, broke down some of the traditional client/consultant hierarchies. As our client became more familiar and confident with the methodology, he suggested alternative venues to the day's original agenda; this helped the client shape his thinking, take ownership of the project and, in turn, stimulated the design team. Our client commented that there was "just enough organising and loose outline structure to the day to not be threatening."

At venues, we used hand-sketching to provide visual feedback to the client and to plan the objectives for the next location. This structure kept the momentum and focus of the day moving forward, while acting as a softer approach to traditional project management and organisation. Indeed, it was due to this less formal discourse that inspiration and innovation occurred with regard to the project outcome. For example, we randomly encountered a party of co-workers celebrating at a lunchtime venue. We observed the exchange of gifts and the reactions to them, which then inspired us to think about our own brief to design 'themed party event' products. This was an extreme shift in the focus of the day's thinking. As a result, we quickly reorganised the rest of the day to research this specific market sector and user group. Through this collaboration, we experienced inspiration, primary research and site-specific observation in a rapid, two-hour time frame, with both client and consultants sharing real-time experiences, discussing possibilities and creating concepts.

## **Discussion**

'Work on the move' responds to shifts in mobility, place and informational networks, bringing the designer closer to the social world. When reflecting upon the research throughout the case studies, we noticed similar behaviour trends in relation to: controlling time on specific tasks; reacting to random encounters; using multiple venues to inform the brief; and using physical movement. These behaviours all contributed to facilitating more informal communications between participants, which encouraged the sharing of more diverse and abstract thinking.

Limiting the time spent at venues meant decision-making was physically framed within defined short chunks of time. This encouraged participants to focus on specific tasks, limited 'mission creep', and helped to clarify new deliverables when planning for future locations.

The variety of workshop structures, and the introduction of random stimuli, helped prevent project fatigue and allowed participants to let their minds wander and refresh, particularly in the phases of walking between venues.

Solnit (2001) refers to “the time in between”, the time spent walking and meandering, as important to facilitating “uncluttered time” and to providing relief from screens, earphones and mobiles, which we found a positive influence in the design process.

When observing students’ participation, we witnessed a shift in their use of mobile technologies. Students engaged more with their physical surroundings, and spoke with the public and with each other. Digital devices were used primarily as a working tool, rather than as a form of physical, social distraction. This observation is particularly revealing and offers a more positive view of technology’s influence on social interaction than that offered by Crary (2014), who comments: “Instead of a formulaic sequence of places and events associated with family, work and relationships, the main thread of life stories now is the electronic commodities and media services through which all experience has been filtered, recorded or constructed” (p.58). Observations and experiences that are offline begin to atrophy, or cease to be relevant” (p.59).

By keeping results in a constant state of movement and working in the moment, there seemed to be a spontaneity and freshness to ideas and to presentations, which might otherwise be compromised by the expectation to use studio resources to complete more finished, polished project presentations.

## Conclusion

Crary (2014) describes a framework, through which the world can be understood to be depleted of complexity and drained of whatever is unplanned or unforeseen, with many forms of social exchange remade “into habitual sequences of solicitation and response” (p.59). Responses, Crary argues, “become formulaic and reduced to a small inventory of possible gestures or choices” (p.59). ‘Work on the move’ allowed its participants to experience a revised relationship to the work experience as informed by place and interaction between collaborators.

The major contribution to innovation provided by ‘work on the move’ is the methodology’s use of time, place and movement between multiple locations. In all of the case studies, participants used familiar problem-solving processes, engaged with common accessible technologies, and communicated through talking, sketching, note taking and moving images. However, it was the impact of place and time on these familiar working methodologies, which influenced how they were implemented and the effect they had on the various projects’ creative outcomes.

‘Work on the move’ kept processes fluid, limited the time to dwell on decisions, physically changed environments and facilitated random unplanned stimuli. An important cumulative effect of these conditions was the impact it had on the group dynamic. Through the nomadic engagement with place and project, participants were more willing to share ideas, and were not paralyzed by the pressure of having to conform to a prescribed presentation format, or by a standard most associated with studio culture (Clayton, Thomas and Smothers 2015). As Clayton et al. (2015) comment, “Walking meetings act as micro versions of the bonding that can be experienced when co-workers travel together on business trips” (p. 2). Complementing this statement is the conclusion that ‘work on the move’ helps to dissolve some organizational hierarchies, a finding that also agrees with the work of Clayton et al. (2015), who state: “The fact that we are walking side-by-side means the conversation is more peer-to-peer than when I am in my office and they are across a desk from me, which reinforces the organizational hierarchy” (p.2).

Despite the importance of place, and more specifically, movement through place, it can be argued that design can all too easily be satisfied by technology and platforms that dissolve distances and time, while only allowing for a mediated understanding of culture. ‘Work on the move’ offers social and cultural experiences in a contemporary real-world setting with a broad stage on which to explore, play and contribute. ‘Work on the move’ is also structured to provide closure at the end of the day. We noticed that implementing short timescales, and reassuring participants that all contributions were acceptable, created more relaxed, energized and enthusiastic outcomes.

Thinking about ‘work on the move’ as an educational methodology, could using place and mobile learning within our cities be integrated into the HE Product Design curriculum; what would be the impact on teaching costs and resources? To further explore these questions, both the Norwegian and Scottish design school participants have incorporated this methodology into some of their module structures, using site specific out door learning spaces to deliver learning and teaching experiences.

Finally, we return to Sennett, who makes a case for such “lost spaces of freedom” (p.114): spaces in which craftsmen can experiment with ideas and techniques, risk mistakes and lose themselves to find themselves. This notion echoes the principles of ‘work on the move’, wherein its participants were offered an environment in which to escape, think, discuss and create, without the traditional protocols of an office, or studio, setting.

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