

Urban Drifts: Psychogeography of New York City
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PGTE 5200 / 4518
12/18/09

I. Abstract

Urban Drifts is a series of research-driven bicycle rides through New York City that make use of the Situationist International concept of the *dérive* and tracks the course of the rides using GPS technology. The reason for the project is my interest in exploring the connection between urban landscapes and the emotions and actions of the inhabitants of that urban space. I am also looking to see what new insights technology (primarily GPS tracking) and psychogeographic maps can shed on this relationship. The challenge was to provide a map that provided a more visceral representation of the experience, so to those ends, the psychogeographic maps I created are in sound. I considered my various latitude and longitude positions (or intersecting points) as chords, assigning a note to each value. The speed at which I was moving during these rides affects the rate notes (or chords of latitude/longitude) are played in succession, and the length of time I was in an area of space alters how long the notes are held. Future iterations will continue to address the perceived differences and ongoing realignment of scientific and artistic representations of the urban situation and mapping.

II. Keywords

Psychogeography, Urban Studies, Social Research, Data Visualization, Mobile and Wireless Technology, Urban Intervention, Participation, Sound Design, *Dérive*

III. Introduction

Urban Drifts is a series of research-driven bicycle rides through New York City that make use of the Situationist International concept of the *dérive* and tracks the course of the rides using GPS technology. Through the use of GPS tracking and traversing urban landscapes on a bicycle, Urban Drifts is an experiment in physical intervention and participation to see the affects of the city on an individual or group in movement. The goal of

the project is to use the series of dérives as a probe and information gathering technique as well as a data source for creating psychogeographic maps of New York City.

The reason for the project is my interest in exploring the connection between urban landscapes and the emotions and actions of the inhabitants of that space. I am also looking to see what new insights technology (primarily GPS tracking) and psychogeographic maps can shed on this relationship. My intention is to provide an approach to studying urban spaces as well as suggest a new method of representing the results or findings.

IV. Domains of design concept

This work resides in the areas of psychogeography, mapping, urban study and research, social research, urban intervention, mobile and wireless technology studies, fine art and sound design (Figure 1).

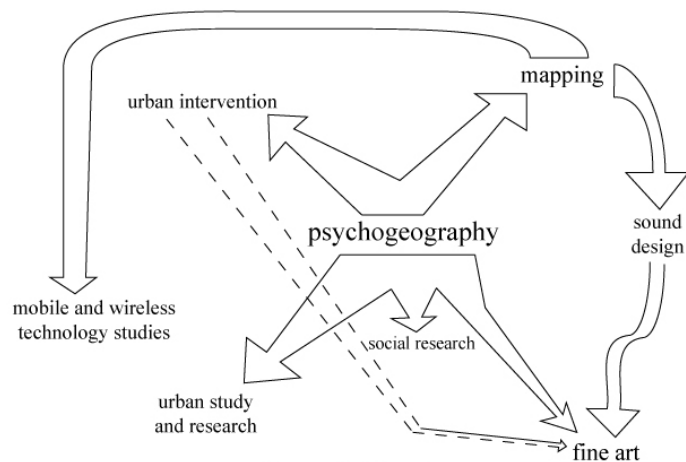


Figure 1 - Domains

V. Research and Design Questions

After reading the book *the consul*, which is a collection of interviews with Ralph Rumney, a founding member of the Situationist International (SI), I was pleasantly surprised to read Rumney and SI had a strong belief in realigning technology with the arts.¹ Earlier this semester, we learned about some of SI's approaches, such as the *dérive*, which is "the practice of a passionate uprooting through the hurried change of environments,"² but I was unaware of their firm belief in allowing the arts to be the praxis of philosophy.³ After discovering this, I decided to incorporate some of their practices in my work.

Growing up in a physically active household, I was constantly outside, running and cycling in high school, college, and beyond. Instead of being in a gymnasium or confined to a particular practice field, the streets were my workout facility; the surrounding neighborhoods were my field of play. This led to my interest in physical environments and how they affect people's feelings and actions. Often times on a run, I would wonder why I

had chosen to make a left turn instead of a right. What was it about certain neighborhoods that attracted me to do my runs there, and why did I never explore others?

These types of thoughts and questions were very similar to the one's the SI were asking 40 years before in Paris. Through early development of urban theories by the *Internationale Lettriste*, the SI crystallized their approach and study of urban environments through the term “psychogeography”. In the *Internationale situationniste*, psychogeography was described as “[t]he study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals.”⁴ A active method and study of psychogeography is the *dérive*.⁵

Guy Debord, the most prolific writer of Situationist theory and practices, wrote, “From the *dérive* point of view cities have a psychological relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.”⁶ Coupled with the idea of “transient passage”⁷, this approach helps explain the feelings I had through the many neighborhoods and spaces I traveled through while running. In light of Debord’s observations, this transitory movement made me aware of many different ambiances that exist, and these spaces propelled me in particular directions.

According to Asger Jorn, “The practice of *dérive* is more than just an urban walkabout.”⁸ McKenzie Wark further discussed Jorn’s position of the *dérive* and wrote, “As Jorn proposes, it is a practice connected to the discovery of the qualities of any block of space and time.”⁹

My design questions going into the project were:

- What insights will GPS tracking of a *dérive* have on the formation of psychogeographic maps?
- What positive/negative aspects of my surroundings will I discover while on a *dérive*?
- What aspects are common and what elements are different among the 5 boroughs of New York City? How will these differences be reflected in a psychogeographic map?

In terms of psychogeographic map precedence, I looked to Guy Debord’s *The Naked City* and Constant’s *New Babylon Paris* (Figure 2). I also reviewed other modern psychogeographic projects,

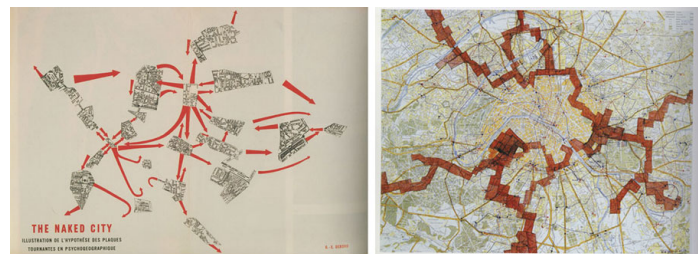


Figure 2 - Precedence

such as the Conflux Festival, Pete Baldes and Marc Horowitz's *Google Map Road Trip* and the *ReMap Project*, to get a better understanding of how new technologies and experimental techniques are being applied to the study and depiction of urban spaces.

VI. Prototyping Process

For each *dérive*, I would choose an initial direction and then allow the local surroundings, such as the architecture, the sounds, the smells and the overall feel of the space to guide where I went next. I would drop my usual motives for movement and action (such as heading to school) and let myself "be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters"¹⁰ I found on my ride.

I took photographs of buildings that caught my eye (Figure 3) or had some emotional affect on me, positive or negative. My initial intention was to use these photographs as material for the psychogeographic maps, and in a way they were the source for the most rich information gathered in the GPS data. Because I was taking photographs, I would stay in certain locations longer than if I had just been riding my bike, and this change in speed exaggerated a lot of my movements.

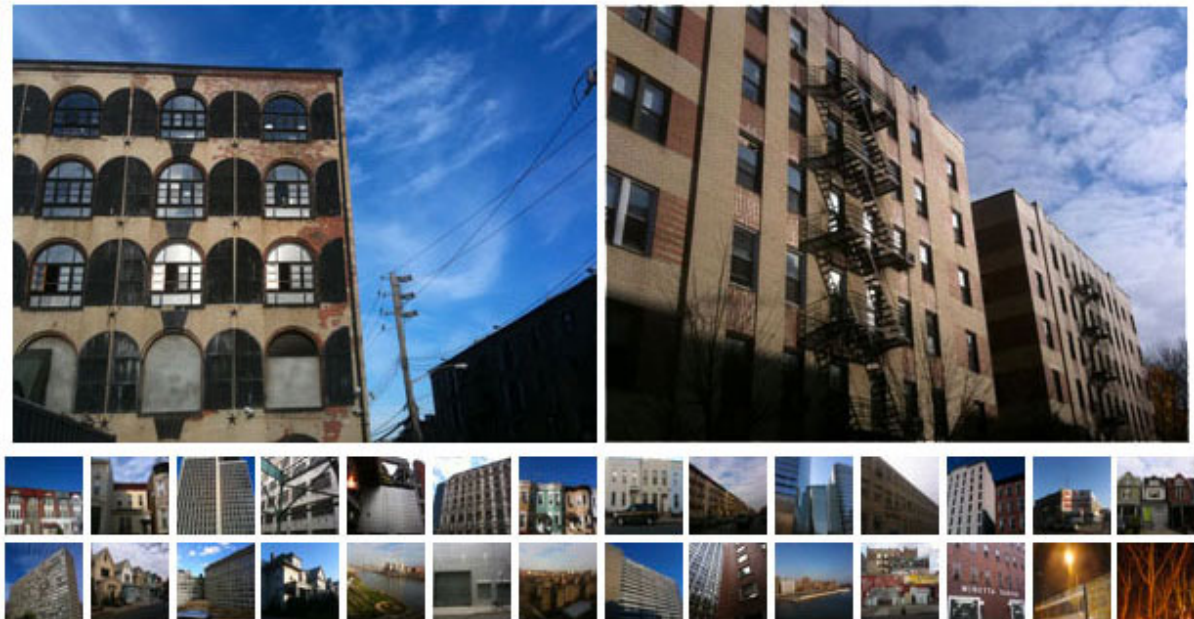


Figure 3 - Examples of Photography Taken on *Dérive*

After the *dérive*, I would write a blog post about the ride that included GPS maps of my *dérive*, photos I had taken, and descriptions of my experiences. I also uploaded my GPS

tracking points to a GPS map sharing site. Some statistical information about the dérives in this series are:

- Visited all 5 boroughs of New York City
- 18 rides in total
- Covered 103.6 miles (321.2 km)
- 44 hours and 12 minutes on the bike
- 1217 photos taken
- 3 flat tires
- 3 falls (2 in Staten Island)
- Temperatures ranged from 72 degrees and sunny to 22 degrees and windy

When I had completed a number of rides, I made 3 rounds of sketches and prototypes of possible psychogeographic maps of my dérives using the photographs I had taken as well as the specific course I had followed, but none of them captured both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the ride. I was looking to provide what Debord called the “psychological relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes” of New York City, and I was not finding the right perspective. I had many amazing encounters that described the kinds of environments I was passing through, but it was challenging to express those emotional aspects in a way that matched my experiences. For instance, how could I express a chance meeting with an independent film maker on the Staten Island Ferry while also expressing the transient nature of the Ferry ride?

After getting feedback from fellow students during my Major Studio presentation, I began honing in on a key feature of the rides, which was time. Throughout my travels, I was aware of my different speeds, durations, and locations, and I wanted the maps to represent these experiences in a condensed fashion. Since I was dealing with the features of space and time, I felt sound would be the best way for me to express these rides psychogeographically and illustrate them in an embodied and visceral way.

I built a patch in Max MSP that applies the GPS data I collected during these rides to sound; making use of the latitude, longitude, elevation, speed, and duration, the midi output program I created expresses these many elements in successive tones. I considered my various latitude and longitude positions (or intersecting points) as chords, assigning a note to each value. The speed at which I was moving alters how quickly the notes (or chords of

latitude/longitude) are played in succession, and the length of time I was in an area of space affects how long the notes are held.

The patch also provides a visual accompaniment to assist with perceiving what the listener is hearing (Figure 4). In early testing, I received feedback that the listener needed a visual cue to better understand what they were hearing, so I included 3 distinct panels: the first illustrates the various latitude and longitude values over time, the second illustrates the direction I was facing (ex. N, S, E, or W) as the ride progresses, and the third illustrates the longitude/latitude position of each note on a map of New York City. Each of these visual elements are timed with the progression of the sound pieces.

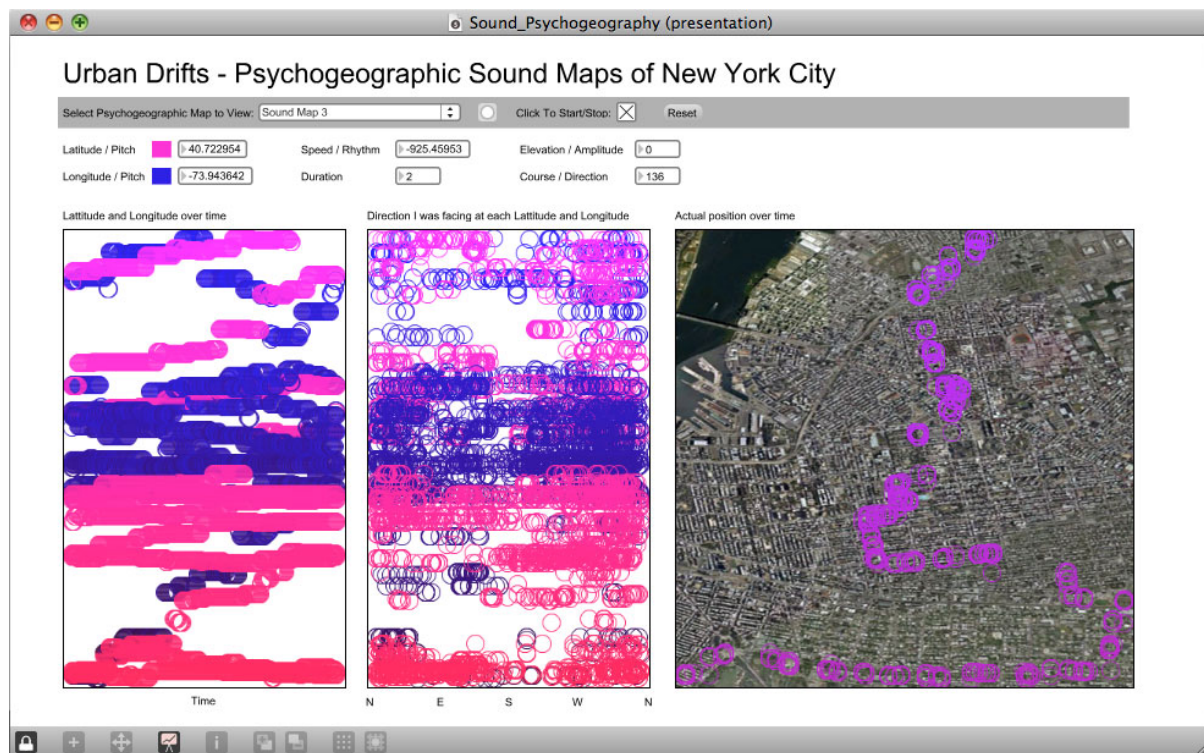


Figure 4 - Visual Accompaniment to Sound Maps

VII. Conclusion

I found that my sound psychogeographic maps revealed the many different paces and ambiances of the urban spaces I traveled through. Some of these differences were apparent during the ride, such as the hills during my trip to Staten Island; however I was unaware of the duration and the magnitude of these differences at the time. The GPS tracking and sound maps allowed me to review and reflect on the rides, and this shed new light on my dérives and the many currents, vortexes, and urban magnets that affected them. As it relates

to my design questions, I feel this addressed my inquiry of what insight GPS tracking will provide in the formation of psychogeographic maps.

By scaling the hours of riding down to a few minutes, the sound maps also gave me a better perspective of the *dérive* in its entirety. I listened for clustered tones that moved slowly, indicating areas of stillness, such as the docks in Red Hook, while areas of quick, rapid-fire notes illustrated the fast moving currents that exist in the city, such as Broadway north of Central Park.

Important personal and emotional elements that I experienced are still missing from the current sound pieces and including this type of information is very important to the success of this ongoing project. Instead of mapping the experience of the ride only as an ordered data set, I want the sounds to be more representative of the personal aspects of the experience. I was able to establish the transitory elements of the ride, or what I would call the statistical and scientific elements, and these will be the foundation for additional layers of emotional information.

I also plan to use different GPS tracking software or find an alternative device (other than the iPhone) to capture more accurate readings while I am on a ride. After reviewing the data used for this project, there were a few anomalies that existed (such as speeds of 573.18 km/h or -168.7km/h).

I also investigated John Cage's work in notation, and I found "Concert for Piano and Orchestra" which Cage created by outlining the imperfections of the paper he was writing on. I feel further investigation into the aspects of experimental notation to see what styles and approaches might inform this project and the creation of sound maps would be beneficial.

In addition to my original set of questions, I now have additional inquiries, which are:

- What other information besides GPS data can be captured to inform the creation of psychogeographic maps?
- What do other cities illustrate using sound maps? How will those compare with the maps I've just completed?
- Are there trends within the data I have gathered, and do these trends exist in different urban settings?
- By riding a bike, am I more susceptible to the waves and motions of traffic? How does that differ from walking *dérives* in the city?

- What new information can I realize by adding new aspects to the sound maps?
- How does my work apply to what is being done by other current psychogeographers?

I am encouraged by my findings, and I am looking forward to continuing additional rides in other cities. I am also planning on submitting an application for the Mobile Context Modeling Fellowship (offered by Nokia Research Center and Parsons Center for Mobile Creativity). The mobile device sensor data that was collected for this project deals with the scientific (GPS and GSM) and the emotional (SMS and voicelog) aspects of today's mobile urban environment, and I am very interested in working with a data set with those attributes and seeing (and hearing) what that may reveal.

When Ralph Rumney started a project called *The International Institute for Arts and Technology* in 1964, he stated, "My idea was to create a center for work and study where artists and scientists would collaborate on the conception and realization of innovative projects."¹¹ I feel my exploration into the concept of the *dérive* through tracking bicycle rides in urban settings and expressing the experiences in a psychogeographic way continues this investigation into the perceived humanist/scientist dichotomy.

VIII. Acknowledgments

I want to thank Colleen Macklin for introducing me to the Situationist International through the class readings, recommending McKenzie Wark, and for encouraging me to go outside of my comfort zone. I'd also like to thank Joe Saavedra and Antoninus Niemiec for their feedback as well as David Carroll, Jamer Hunt, and Cynthia Lawson for their critique. Their comments helped improve areas that will make this a better project. Thank you to Emily Sekine at the University Writing Center for the assistance.

¹ Ralph Rumney, *The Consul*, 80.

² Guy Debord, "Towards a Situationist International," 98.

³ Rumney, 80.

⁴ Anon, "Definitions", Ford, Simon, *The Situationist International*, 34.

⁵ Debord, 98.

⁶ Ford, 34.

⁷ Ford, 35.

⁸ McKenzie Wark, *Fifty Years of Recuperation*, 44.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," 34.

¹¹ Rumney, 84.

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