

Exploring Sensory-Based Walking Tours

By: John Kamp, Prairieform and James Rojas, Place It!

In the conversation about walkability and the growing knowledge of how walking is good for you, we can sometimes overlook another added benefit: walking can stimulate creativity—even in those who say they aren't creative at all.

In the work we do to engage diverse audiences in urban planning, design, transportation, landscape, we always have people working with their hands and tapping into their senses. Through our hands and senses, we can be more creative than we otherwise would if we simply talked about changes we want to see in the world around us. Walking can be an ideal way of getting into this sensing state.

“We're all phenomenologists in some way or another. We're responding to and observing phenomena constantly, even if we aren't consciously thinking about it,” said Roché Wadehra, a San Francisco-based psychotherapist who uses art-making and non-talk-based modes of expression in her practice.

These phenomena she is describing could be the wind on our face, the temperature, sounds, smells, whether a street feels comfortable to walk down or not, etc. Our brain takes in these sensory inputs whether we know it or not. The aggregation of these inputs creates a sensory knowledge that can be tapped into through walking.

Although, oftentimes when we walk, we are walking with a purpose in mind. We are walking the dog, walking to the store, or walking to get exercise. It's less common for us to walk to simply enjoy our surroundings. This, however, is precisely what James Rojas of Place It! and John Kamp of Prairieform do with groups around the country—they engage them in reimagining the spaces and places they inhabit. Known as sensory-based walking tours, participants explore a street, a neighborhood, or a parking lot, with their senses as the tour guides of their walk. Along the way, participants are encouraged to explore the space freely, whether it's watching the leaves of a tree reflect the light from the sun or marveling at an architectural detail on a nearby building. By allowing our senses to take the reins, suddenly we see the world anew and sink into a sensing state.

A sensing state is one in which you feel comfortable enough to absorb what is going on around you. Once participants are in this sensing state, we have them shift into a creative exercise in which they work with others to redesign the street or space. In our case, we have participants use found objects to build models of that redesigned space. Your senses do the talking, allowing you to come up with creative ideas you couldn't have otherwise. If you would like to explore the method of walking as a creative tool further, you may come to one of the numerous public events Place It! and Prairieform host around the country or pick up a copy of Dream Play Build and learn the method yourself.