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Strategies for Subverting the Tyranny of the Corporate Map: An Interview with Babak Fakhamzadeh

Babak Fakhamzadeh
with **Claudia Brazzale and Blake Morris**

Abstract

A discussion on using a range of solutions to subvert corporate control of our experience in understanding and relating to our urban environment.

Babak Fakhmzadeh started out by working in ICT4D (Information and Communications Technology for Development) before this had a name. He has worked on, and designed, digital solutions to facilitate the creation of artistic work, inspired by his experience in the Global South and the practices of Fluxus and the Situationist International. He uses digital collaborative tools to create applications for the general public that operate on the cusp of art and technology (often in opposition to the encroachment of late-stage capitalism into our daily lives).

Editors: Blake Morris and Claudia Brazzale (Eds.): You have created a series of applications for mobile phones, can you tell us about why you've chosen that medium?

Babak Fakhmzadeh (BF): I was initially reluctant to move towards mobile. Android and iOS are, still, in essence, “walled gardens” that give too much control to the manufacturers of the hardware and software at the expense of their users. That being said, mobiles are *the* media through which most of us, most of the time, consume information, particularly in relation to location-based content.

Eds.: Can you tell us more about how your work responds to this?

BF: Since the introduction of smartphones, we have come to rely on fewer and more unified tools to guide us in both familiar and new environments. These tools, also known as “apps”, are owned by a small number of corporate giants who present us with their version of the geographical maps, of reality. The maps in these apps offer the impression of freedom around geographical knowledge and access. However, they, and the companies that build them, actually serve as gatekeepers, imposing strict, often invisible, conditions on how we are able to discover what is around us. For the practicality of and promises offered by these apps, we have traded our agency for convenience, relying on outside forces that tell us what to see, what to do, and where to go. This control over our experience around geographical discovery is what I call the “tyranny of the corporate map”.

Over the last decade, I've been developing ideas, tools, and strategies that seek to resist and subvert this tyranny. These strategies are purposefully not designed to efficiently get you from point A to point B via the fastest or shortest route, but rather to get you to your destination in a less efficient manner, or not to get you there at all. They provide opportunities for exploration and discovery that are not available

through typical use of the corporate map. Sometimes I've used the very tools these corporations provide in order to undermine their objectives, and give some agency back to individual users.

Eds.: What is an example of this? What inspired it?

BF: In 2012, South African artist Eduardo Cachucho and I created [Dérive app](#), a collaborative digital platform for the creation and use of decks of task cards to be used in the style and spirit of the *dérive*, deployed through a mobile app. We were inspired by Guy Debord's "Theory of the Dérive" (1956), in which he defined the *dérive* as a period of time where one or more persons drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, "and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord 1956).

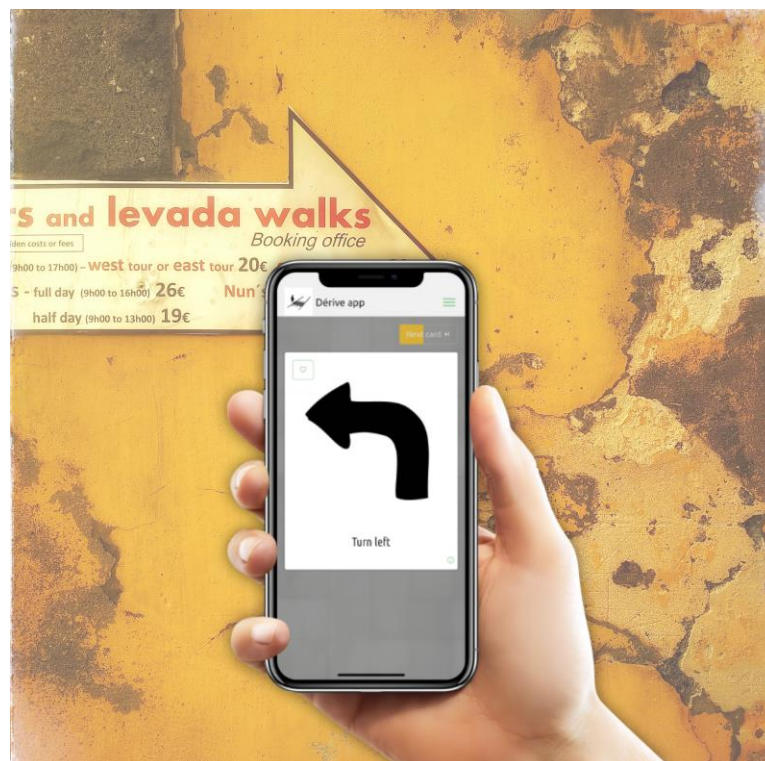


Figure 1. A wall showing a sign nudging visitors to participate in city walks during a Dérive app workshop in Funchal (2019, B. Fakhamzadeh).

Debord was one of the founders of the Situationist International (SI), which framed society as being in the service of the concept of the Spectacle, defined as "the autocratic reign of the market economy [...] and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanies this reign" (Debord 1988: 2). The spectacle creates antagonism due to the discrepancy between what is offered within this society, and what is

possible to take, accelerating commodification and consumption, and, in turn, increasing the alienation of the individual (Plant 1990).

Since Debord's time, a number of artists and practitioners, including myself, have been facilitating the experience of the *dérive* through the creation of decks of loosely directive task cards, somewhat connected to the locale of the individual. For example, Julian Bleecker's *The Near Future Laboratory* created an analogue Drift Deck for the now defunct New York Conflux Festival in 2008. In 2011, artist Mark Shepherd developed *Serendipitor*, an "alternative navigation app for the iPhone [. . .] inspired by Fluxus, Vito Acconci, and Yoko Ono, among others" (Shepherd 2011). More recently, Sonia Overall has expanded on this, outlining ambulant creative writing methods through the use of her, also analogue, *Drift Deck* (Overall 2019).

Dérive app, and similar implementations like *Serendipitor* and the two Drift Decks, promote a different perspective and engagement with the environment and try to break through the Spectacle and the onslaught of ubiquitous external control. For instance, *Dérive* app looks to actively engage individuals and communities through a device that makes the unpacking of urban space part of a game. The task cards ask users to search for specific architectural, urban or social points of interest in their vicinity, and explore them in a different light; the cards are intended to heighten the experience of the city and encourage new understandings of users' urban surroundings. Through these tasks cards, the app opens up channels of dialogue between individuals and groups.

Eds.: Can you provide some examples of how this works?

Initially the task cards were more generic, prompting people to "find a bright place", "turn left", or "cross the road"; they looked to facilitate a more open-ended interaction with the environment. Later additions to the collection of cards have become more directive, proposing prompts like:

- Write a poem about the next thing that you find beautiful and share it with a close friend;
- Ask what your friend thinks of your poem;
- Document a beautiful texture in an old street or floor;
- Walk down a block that is entirely original row-homes;
- Walk in the direction of the wind;

We started with the creation of decks that were designed for particular cities, taking into account typical features unique to these places. Through collaborative contribution this has now seen our collection of task cards grow to about 2000, spread out over about 300 decks, with contributors from all over the world.

Eds.: Can you tell us more about the strategies that propel your work and that your work seeks to implement?

BF: The Situationist *dérive* is not the only method attempting to put agency back in the hands of the individual. More recently, I've been looking at how to incorporate additional senses, particularly hearing, in the exploration of space through the growing practice of sound walking. Other strategies are to purposefully add friction to an experience, to "try and slow down", or to "travel like a reporter."

I am also interested in the concept of Guerrilla Tourism, expanded on by French travel writer Joel Henry. In 1990 Henry founded the *LABoratoire de TOURisme EXpérimental* (LATOUREX) in Strasbourg. Acknowledging connections to Debord, Dada and other historical experimental groupings, Henry developed the concept of experimental travel which he discussed in *The Lonely Planet Guide to Experimental Travel* (2005) and later in his *Everyday Adventures* (2018).

Eds.: What does Henry mean by experimental travel, and how has that translated to your work?

One of the examples Henry offers is asking walkers to take a (physical) map of a city and "conquer K2" (Antony and Henry 2005: 128). K2 is one of the most difficult mountains in the world to climb, but also a particular square on a conventional paper map. 'Conquering' K2 means investigating the contents of the square on the map in full: sample the bakeries' breads, drink from the water fountains, inspect its roads, until every aspect of the square is fully known. Although Henry's heavy curation and hand-holding almost feel rigid, and thus like the antithesis of experimental travel, he very much opens up new ways of thinking about travel and discovery, which exactly brings home the point of the concept of *experimental* travel.

I also draw from other artists that use unconventional and inexpensive means to generate interest in alternative forms of travel, and do not rely on the typical tools we associate with getting ourselves from A to B. This includes Phil Smith's ("Crab Man") *Counter Tourism* books (Smith 2012, 2013), and Wrights & Sites' *Mis-guides* (2003, 2018). Smith and Wrights &

Sites facilitate similar processes through instructions on how to make familiar places unfamiliar and to inspire the reader to subvert the city through walking.

Jason D. Luger conceptualises walking as guerrilla tourism, and offers the act of walking as a form of transgression/resistance that can chart new pathways within (and against) the hegemonic urban landscape (as devised and formed by state elites, planners and market forces) (Luger 2016). Luger specifically frames his discussion within the more authoritarian aspects of Singapore, a city some have called outright authoritarian. In many ways, however, the modern city is increasingly authoritarian and the acts of guerrilla tourism he documents in Singapore are more and more relevant in every city (Wazir 2019).

The German collective Happy Tourists, who do not manage “destinations” but create “distractions,” describe their mission in a more playful manner, namely to bring serendipity, chaos and disorder into tourism in order to trigger critical thinking and power shifts in the tourism industry.

Eds.: How does your work promote this sort of guerrilla tourism?

Even interests that might appear mainstream can lend themselves to unique discoveries. My platform [the places I have been](#) (2015) allows users to keep track of some mainstream, and many less-mainstream, destinations they visited or experienced, including World Heritage Sites, locations featured on Atlas Obscura, Brutalist architecture, and audio guides from the crowdsourced online resource izi.travel. Specifically, in the long tail – the portion of a statistical distribution far from the “head”, or central part, of the distribution – even mainstream objects of interest can provide infrequently accessed, non-mainstream, but worthwhile destinations, which can be explored in-depth, without referencing an established collective narrative. In this context the long tail is the large number of comparatively unknown places, offset against a few excessively popular destinations.



Figure 2. A cat saying “Miau!” next to the statue of Tomboli, wearing earmuffs, in Istanbul (2016, B. Fakhmzadeh).

Eds: You mentioned travelling like a reporter. What does that mean exactly? How does it relate to this?

In an article for *Quartz*, Nikhil Sonnad suggests to the reader to travel like a reporter in order to get the most out of your next trip. Sonnad explains this as deeply focusing on one topic or theme: travellers should pick a “lens”, whether a subject or a topic, and focus on it as if they were “writing a thesis that is due as soon as they get back” (Sonnad 2019). Because you will see the things *you* want, go out of your way and not see the things everyone “must see”, this will more likely mean that there will be fewer, if any, tourists at your chosen destinations, while you are also more likely to visit places you otherwise would not have visited.

Connected to this type of discovery is *slow travel*, the rise of which is usually associated with the *slow food* movement established in Italy in the late 1980s. The slow traveller is principally driven by the travel *experience*, taking time to enjoy the journey, to engage with people, to share a journey, and to explore destinations in a less superficial way (Dickson, et. al. 2011). Instead of attempting to squeeze as many sights or cities as possible into each trip, the slow traveler takes time to explore each destination thoroughly, and to experience the local culture. Per the

slow travel philosophy, it's more important to get to know one small area well than it is to see only a little bit of many different areas (Schlichter 2019).

the places I have been is a source for identifying less well-traveled and harder to reach destinations requiring more agency to explore these niche locations. This creates a heightened sense of awareness within the traveler, and a deeper connection with the destination, as a consequence of not relying on prescribed, pre-defined, modes of interaction with these destinations.

Eds.: You've lived and worked across different continents, how has this affected the kinds of strategies you are proposing and the apps you have created?

BF: I was born in Iran, grew up in the Netherlands, and wrapped up my Master's in Hungary in the late 1990s, on the cusp of when the country started to become integrated into Europe. Since then, I've visited over 100 countries, lived in a good dozen on four continents (mostly in the Global South) and settled in Brazil seven years ago. But it appears I will be moving to the United States later this year (if American immigration services let me).

In terms of technology, everyone knows that a lot has changed in the last twenty-five years. But it's almost impossible to understand, without having experienced it firsthand, how much the internet and broad access to mobile technologies have levelled the global playing field for individuals in developed countries all over the world, and specifically for people in the Global South.

There's a famous scene in one of Michael Palin's travel programs. He is in Bangladesh, taking notes while standing on a cornice, surrounded by Bangladeshis amazed by his appearance and his every move being filmed by his crew from a distance. Globalisation prevents this scene from playing out today. However remote you find yourself, a mobile phone is never far away, with someone watching the same YouTube and TikTok videos as everyone else, building a shared understanding of the world on exactly the same memes and concepts.

This great democratisation of access and knowledge is a huge, immensely impressive, achievement of modern society. However, state and big-tech control of the narrative notwithstanding, it has also meant the loss of individual experience. This structure facilitates a winner-takes-all

mentality for everything it consumes. To me, this means that we need more radical disruption of content consumption in order to facilitate more individual experiences.

Eds.: So you've discussed some of your influences and strategies, but how does it all relate to maps, and particularly corporate maps?

Up to a few years ago, my now defunct app [Kompl](#) tried to achieve a sense of discovery by taking away information, instead of providing as much information as possible. The app showed you what was around you, but required you to find individual places yourself. In addition, it would not disclose an ordered listing of the 'best' restaurants, but just a few 'close enough', 'good enough' ones, based on platform-provided user-reviews and richness of available data, without explicitly indicating the actual popularity rating. This obfuscation of the indication of perceived quality, which meant users could not automatically choose the highest rated restaurant, created more diversity in their experience. The app would provide a distance and direction, but no map; more information about the destination would become available as the user moved closer to the destination. As a result, the user had to rely on their own decisions on where to go and how to get there, creating a more heightened awareness of their surroundings (Pells 2016).

In 2013, Google announced personalised maps, a move Evgeny Morozov was quick to point out could lead to 'the end of public space'. Morozov, whose work on the dark sides of digital technology led him to be named as one of the 28 most influential Europeans by Politico, argues that these developments risk diminishing our shared understanding of the public sphere (Morozov, 2013). In 2018, Google significantly expanded on this personalisation (Perez 2018). Google Maps, which dominates the end-user market, is able to present each of us with a map tailored to our individual context, creating individual silos of experience in the casual use of the platform (Ranko, 2018).



Figure 3. Statistics on South Africa mapped to visualise the map of South Africa superimposed on a composite photo of a red bench containing punched out words and phrases connected to the news industry (2007, B. Fakhamzadeh).

However, though limited research on the topic exists, personalisation in Google's particularly location-based search results seems small (Hannák et. al. 2013), to a degree that, according to some research, it appears negligible (Krafft et. al. 2019). In fact, research indicates that the primary drivers for search personalisation are *whether* the user is logged in (not *who* is logged in), and the (perceived) location of the user's IP address (Hannák et. al. 2017). This suggests that, independent of who is asking a location based service for, say, a nearby Thai restaurant, the list of results will be very similar if they are in a similar physical location. As the observable metrics (price range, popularity ranking, etc.) of the matching results will be the same for different users, each user will decide which restaurant to pick, based on the same values of these metrics. This means we are more likely to pick the same destinations; those that are ranked as "the best" or "most popular."

In my own work developing location-based interactive applications, I've found that location-based services that provide programmatic access to their data, like Google Maps and FourSquare, do not provide public-facing provisions for personalisation in the Application Programming Interfaces. That's not to say that, "behind closed doors" they do not personalise a user's experience, but indications, and the research mentioned above, suggest they might not.

Worse, the routing applications (Google Maps, Waze, etc.) we use to find our selected destinations and optimise the journey, which result in routes, when starting in a similar location, and based on similar enough data (traffic conditions, maximum speeds, etc.), are practically identical,

as the shortest, or fastest, path between two points is the same, irrespective of the algorithm used. Because the tools we use are designed to minimise friction, adding friction is a way to counter this trap of consuming a unified experience.

Do not use the digital map in your pocket, ask around. Do not use Uber, take public transport. Do not fly, go overland. Rely on less information, not more.

Eds: Can you give us an example of how one of your apps adds this friction?

Building on the ideas put forward through *Kompl*, my app [The Museum of Yesterday](#) allows the user to uncover Rio de Janeiro's hidden history, with a focus on corruption, slavery and historical inequality. The app provides the user with a hand-drawn map of their direct surroundings, but it cannot be panned or zoomed, or used to calculate routes to nearby destinations, which creates information scarcity in a similar way to my earlier app. In addition, the user can choose to navigate the city using a map from 1830, echoing Debord's idea of navigating one place with the map of another (Debord 1955).

Though the layout of the historical city is recognisably similar to the current one, there are essential differences. For example, much sea has been reclaimed, generating areas of "uncharted territory." This engenders a sense of discovery, and puts the agency for exploration again in the hands of the user. It asks them to rely on their own feelings as to why taking a left turn, instead of a right turn, might be the best course of action and, in doing so, it becomes a kind of Situationist discovery of the old port of Rio de Janeiro.

By taking away information, *Kompl* and *The Museum of Yesterday* create an engagement with the urban space which provokes new understandings and possibilities for dialogue. Purposefully, these implementations avoid conventional use of the corporate map and facilitate an experience that is unique to the user by putting the agency in their hands for their journey.

Eds.: Is this a completely audio-visual experience? How do your apps encourage fully embodied experiences?

One example, [where is the next . beer](#), presents the user with three new nearby places that serve beer, every thirty minutes. The only criteria for

including a venue is whether beer is served. As with *Kompl*, the app does not include indicators of reported quality or popularity, which provides a randomised, but directive, experience. By having the users pick their destination based on atypical criteria, or no criteria at all, the app nudges the user towards embracing discovery.



Figure 4. A glitched image of two sumo wrestlers, taken at the World Sumo Championships (2007, B. Fakhmzadeh).

More recently, I've started exploring the growing field of "sound walking", both in terms of listening to the environment, and listening to sounds superimposed onto the environment, in part founded on the pioneering work of Hildegard Westerkamp. Westerkamp uses sound as the primary driver for exploration, putting the focus on listening to the environment (Westerkamp 1974). Dynamic sound walks can easily be constructed through a range of modern tools, such as Echoes or Soundtrails, which can facilitate the creation of rich, non-linear experiences based on auditive input, and provide a more flexible and creative platform than conventional gridded maps, which use rectilinear coordinates to indicate location, destination and, often, sequentiality (Anderson 2015).

The yearly festival [Sound Walk September](#), of which I'm one of the co-producers, attempts to bring sound walking to a wider audience, to engender understanding that discovery can be facilitated through a broader use of an individual's senses. We expanded on this in 2020, inspired by global COVID restrictions, by offering two collaborative, but remote, projects, allowing participants to create sound walks, together. The first, 30 Days of Walking, had as its goal the collaborative construction of a continuous, 30 day, sound walk, with contributions from around the globe. The second, Shorelines, was a collaborative

exercise in location-based writing and reciting, with recitals being recordings of writings submitted by other participants, with the writings having a focus on the space where land meets water, both tied to individual locations.

We attempted to establish a low threshold for participation in the creation of sound walks, and introduce contributors to alternative methods for discovery of the environment. Our objective was to provide a channel for participants to cooperate and come together, even when having to do so remotely.

Many of the task cards in Dérive app suggest using the senses to discover and uncover place. Visual culture is becoming more standardized throughout the world, and how we visually interpret the world around us is becoming more and more uniform. But, how are we to interpret smell, sound or touch, which are mostly absent as aspects of our globalised culture? This is much more individual, and thus more unique. Observing the smell of a place, or the way it sounds, particularly when overlaid with sounds presented through the consumption of a sound walk, creates a unique experience which can not be repeated, while taking in a much broader scope of the sensory range of the individual.



Figure 5. The statue of a soldier in the National Museum of History of Great Patriotic War in Kiev receives one heart. (2009, B. Fakhamzadeh).

Eds.: That also resonates with your other work to connect a global community of walkers through walk · listen · create. Could you tell us a bit about that and how it came about?

Sound Walk September is organised by walk · listen · create, of which I'm one of the founders. We try to bring together artists who use walking as a part of their practice. Many of these are influenced or inspired by the ideas of the Situationists, and many use mobile technologies to create their own unique experiences through conventional, or sometimes homegrown applications. Because walking typically slows you down in comparison to more conventional forms of travel, many of our members advocate forms of slow travel, and a more heightened sensorial experience of your surroundings, including through audio, and the superposition of audio onto the walked experience.

The community of walking artists is a small niche, but strongly connects to my ideas on how I believe we, as individuals, should experience our environment. After my co-founders came together in 2017 to organise the original Sound Walk Sunday, we got in touch and, with my strong experience and expertise in mobile and web-based technologies, we saw a big opportunity to move this community forward.

Eds.: What connects all these strategies?

My tools, the strategies they build on, and walking art in general, nudge the user to take a step back. They engender mindfulness, and direct the individual to rely more on their own capacities, as opposed to handing over agency to digital tools at the mercy of conditions imposed by corporate players who design their tools to be used in limited, predefined, ways. These strategies bring the user more *into the moment*, by requiring the user to take responsibility, while making her more aware. Being more aware of the possibilities at your disposal as you move through public space and making more active decisions, means taking back agency over your own actions.

You don't necessarily need the particular tools described above but, more importantly, you really don't need the tyranny of the corporate map.

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About the Interviewee

Babak has been working in ICT4D since before it had a name, and never really left it. He brought photomarathons to Africa, has won multiple international awards for his work, and, as an artist, has been working in the fields of technology, mapping, and, more recently, walking. He's the co-founder of **walk · listen · create**. Website: <https://babakfakhamzadeh.com>

About the Interviewers

Blake Morris is a walking artist, independent scholar and research impact specialist based in New York City. His artistic work and scholarly research focus on inviting people to walk together, often at a distance through the use of digital tools. Projects have included *British Summer Time*, an ongoing series of global sunrise walks and the Arts Council England funded project *This is not a Slog*, for which he created three site-specific walks for Ovalhouse Theatre (London). His recent book, *Walking Networks: The Development of an Artistic Medium* (London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020) offers an overview of the current field of walking art in the United Kingdom and a definition for the medium. His writing can also be found in journals such as *Green Letters: Studies in Eco-Criticism*, *the International Journal of Tourism Cities*, and Claire Hind and Clare Qualmann's *Ways to Wander* publications (Axminster: Triarchy Press). Blake holds a Ph.D. in Drama, Applied Theatre and Performance from the University of East London.

Claudia Brazzale, a scholar, choreographer, and performer, is a Senior Lecturer and a joint-Programme Leader for the MA in Contemporary Performance Practices at the University of East London. She has taught at Liverpool Hope University, Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance, Princeton University, Rutgers University, and the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) and has held positions as a Visiting Scholar at the Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Analysis at London South Bank University and the Institute for Research on Women, Rutgers University (IRW). In 2010-11 Claudia was the recipient of a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the American Association University of Women to support her research at IRW (2010-11). Claudia's work focuses on the seduction and consequences of mobility. Centred on feminist ethnographic methodologies, her research engages with the body in relation to the global flows of traditional dance forms; cosmopolitanism and globalisation; fashion, the body, and consumer culture; space, place, and migration. Claudia holds a Ph.D. in Cultures and Performance from UCLA and an MA in in Performance Studies from NYU.