

Gebrauchsspur - traces of usage - signs of usage

introduction

They say you have to step seven times on a piece of heather (Erika) for it to die, and as more and more steps are taken across a patch of heather a path forms. People for the most part tend to follow paths, thereby reinforcing their appearance over time. Sometimes people just take the shortest route, that being a straight line, if there are no obstacles. We find traces of use everywhere humans fare, it's almost a natural phenomenon. We see them everyday in the environments we navigate in, in our home, at school or work, or in between.

definition trace (noun): a mark, object, or other indication of the existence or passing of something

synonym trace: vestige, sign, mark, indication, evidence, clue; trail, tracks, marks, prints, footprints, spoor; remains, remnant, relic

It is fascinating how these traces form, because often there is a certain predictability to them and trying to make sense of these traces, understanding them, could be of value to a designer. This short paper seeks to investigate and document a few traces found in public places through photography.

Through this *documentation*, I hope to be able to make a statement on how these traces could influence the design of objects in the public domain.

scope

Many books can be found on the subject of signage, urban planning and public space, but little is written on the impact that traces have. Very often traces left by users are associated with wear and tear, naturally lead to a need for upgrading and renewal, and therefore a different discussion than mine.

To make a reasonable deliberation within the scope of this essay I intend to limit the investigation to consider only those traces caused by human activity, effectively excluding the results of weather, i.e. wind and rain, UV-radiation, and oxidation. The main questions on the topic I chose to investigate are:

- a) How do traces of use *manifest* themselves in public places?
- b) How do traces of use *impact* the objects in public spaces?
- c) How can the designer take traces of use into account when *conceiving* objects bound for public places?

syn public places: open to the public, communal, accessible to all, available, free, unrestricted

manifestation

The public space is a peculiar place. In it people of all classes, abilities and moral standards move about in a daily cycle spanning 24 hours a day, every day of the year. Still I think it is fair to say that objects in public spaces are mostly not in use, relative to time. A seat on a tram is mostly empty, a bench in the park is usually vacated, the handle of an entrance door is on balance left alone. The same goes for objects like a car, your sofa and the path through the forest. Still, over time, a substantial wear affects objects, and traces are left indicating to the modern day anthropologist the way the object has been used.

To make a distinction between the different types of manifestation I have made a three-fold approach to the subject. One is by way of *aesthetics*, studying how the change in appearance through wear and tear leads to a change in material superficial qualities. Any object, regardless of material, is subjected to decay as soon as it is produced. Rust on iron is the sign that it is reverting to its original state. It is perhaps plausible to view such a state as a gradual state of decay or deem the object in need of a replacement, but that depends on its use of course. A wooden bench at a bus-stop or in a park is new for maybe a day before it also is patinated by its users. There are scrapes from people's clothes or shoes (those are the intended ones) and tags sprayed on or carved in with a knife by a passing straddler (unintended ones). In planning for public space you always have to plan for the unintended ones.



def decay (noun): the process of declining in power, quality, or vigor

def patina (noun): an acquired change in the appearance of a surface

Another way is of an *instructional* nature; traces upon an object through use leave hints as to how it is intended to be used. A subway ticket-machine serves as a good example. Looking at the coin entry slot it is easy to notice the rather subtle wear on the face of the slot and quickly be instructed that something hard, such as a coin, is to be inserted. On my example below I assume this was anticipated by the designer and the wear does not affect the function or form of the slot negatively. Looking just below the slot a big patch of lacquer of the front panel is scraped clean off the facade leaving a mysterious patch of naked metal. I assume it arises from coins that are to be given a second chance if failing to be approved the first time around in the machine. A bit harder to anticipate that one and consequently a large scar is left over time, definitely unintended, but still a visible trace of a plausible use.



A third view can be to study how the *quality* of the material tells the user something about how it is to be used, or not to be used. A train seat must be constructed under the presumption that it will be frequently sat on. The typical traveller will also primarily use it for that, but the occasional passenger will also feel the need to put up their feet as well, which picture below displays the results of. The intended use leaves no visible trace, but unintended use slowly deteriorates the object as a whole since the quality of the material has not taken unintended use into a serious enough consideration. Chafing or abrasion from shoe-soles or other sharp objects can merely be reduced, although not totally obliterated.

def abrasion: the process of scraping or wearing away



From Thomas Jenni...

“Nebst Umweltfaktoren werden Dinge auch durch intensiven Gebrauch [...] verändert. Die Textilfasern von Sitzbezügen im Zug werden abgeschleuert und die oberste Lackschicht auf den Tasten im Lift löst sich immer mehr ab.”

impact

Paths

Traces form a path when people either are steered into a confined area because of physical enclosures, because the traces connect the endpoints of the shortest route or because other features make a different route more attractive. When people are steered into an enclosure, it is easy to foresee where the traces, and thus the wear, will occur. We



see signs of this everywhere, examples being the wear on the floor where people enter and exit an escalator, and other bottlenecks like doorways in general and along an airplane cabin aisle. When there are no enclosures or physical obstructions the shortest line is generally pursued. Accordingly, if there are only two nodes the path connecting these will resemble a straight line but in an area like a school campus or a square there are so many nodes that the traces form a multitude of paths. Looking at a ski-slope after a



night of fresh snow you see that everyone wants to make their own path, making the slope look quite shredded after only a few hours. Sometimes, we want to take the longer path because it is more exciting, like riding your snowboard over a snowed-in little hut. From the examples illustrated human behavior can be easily predicted, but in the same area you find other examples I think say something about unforeseen behavior.

Marks

In the same ski-area I found lots of stickers plastering sign ticket-turnstiles and wire-masts. It makes a more lasting trace than tracks in snow and most likely communicates something about the preferences of the perpetrator and maybe some innate need to leave a trace. Leaving a sticker is probably more socially acceptable than tagging with a marker or spray paint for the reason that it can be removed more easily.



One of my favorite marks found are the marks on the vertical poles by the entry doors of the Basel trams. I believe it is the quality of the material that allows such severe marks to be left upon the metal poles. The marks are quite indicative of the users action as the poles on the left side of the door have marks going down diagonally from left to right and vice versa. The left and middle pictures below illustrate the placement and degree of marks. The right picture shows a similar pole on a tram in Helsinki having none of the same marks, probably due to the use of a different material.



Evidence

Not all traces are permanent, but leave evidence of human activity. It can be in the form of posters on a wall, graffiti on the concrete base of a bridge, cigarette butts and old chewing gum on a sidewalk. I make no distinction between the societal value of the examples here but would like to make an argument that they certainly share a degree of conscious intent that can be of joy or irritation to other users of the same public space.



conception

Designing for public space should be considered an honor, because if you do it right you might be able to create joy for people for generations, let the Pantheon serve as an example. But it can certainly also be a headache because people might not treat it like you, the designer, intended. Or worse, you did not foresee how it would actually be used and as it is taken into use fails to uphold its standard and deteriorates quickly, doing the public a disservice. Longevity is not always desirable because changes in taste and style come about regularly, and therefore I find it a bit arrogant to use materials that cannot break down in constructions for the public. Somehow the public take ownership of objects and space by using them and leaving marks, so it is not entirely undesirable to allow this, on the contrary, it can have its advantages, like the paragraph on the instructional side of marks suggest. It is hard to conceptualize *exactly* how users will leave their mark but by studying such traces left behind on existing objects the designer can make his or her own predictions with a greater chance of being right with the next generation of objects.

References:

Jenni, Thomas, "Patina", Diplomaufgabe, FHNW, Aarau, 2005

All photos are the author's own. Pictures from Basel, Andermatt, Zermatt, Oslo, Helsinki and Roma.