

short
cuts &
other
practices:
10 days in
a western
city

by Broken City Lab

to begin

It is worth noting that, in the largest sense, we are interested in understanding locality in both its reading and practice. As artists, we work collectively to develop a practice that can begin to unfold the complexities of a city and how the people, architecture, infrastructure, planning policies, and connections shape a city.

The work detailed in this publication was part of a residency hosted by TRUCK Contemporary Art entitled, the CAMPER 2011 Urban Discovery Project, through which we aimed to unfold the narratives around Calgary. Based on a research project we developed in Windsor, Ontario, our residency revolved around a curiosity about locality and the ways in which it becomes shaped through shared experience and interwoven narratives. “...and then the city” (hereafter *ATTC: Calgary*) was at once a starting point and the overarching framework upon which we worked.

Narratives around a place naturally vary widely depending on your perspective. Whether a long-time resident or temporary visitor, the ways in which you view and experience a city are built on a set of assumptions and understandings that you have come to value and trust through a range of

spatial, social, political, and economic experiences. Often, we can have deeply-invested frames around a given city that are created and reinforced through stories -- perhaps you enter a city as a visitor based on a friend's recommendation, or maybe you moved to a new city long ago based on an article about its employment opportunities. Regardless of their original citing, the narratives around a city move in a neverending cycle, some of which are felt across an entire region and others that are known on a much more intimate scale.

These cycles of narratives present opportunities to develop points of access into an understanding and enactment of locality. Simple gestures and tools for initiating conversations are starting points for generating a practice around exploring and exploding locality. This form of practice aims to open up a space for considering the possibility of actively being in a place -- engaging, playing, obfuscating, and ultimately changing the things you see in front of you for whatever small scale audience you may wish to touch.

shortcuts & other tactics

ATTC: Calgary aimed to read a city; though importantly not just read, but reread again and again to attempt to unfold the narratives that have (literally) been built into the city and negotiated through social, economic, and political exchange. However, attempting to read the narratives of space in the city through formal cues is only one part of our efforts; the negotiation of that space in both a physical and conceptual framing offers the idea of shortcuts as a productive frame for thinking about how these narratives of place are continuously flexed, interrupted, and tactically addressed in both active and passive capacities.

Shortcuts are understood to increase the efficiency of any given task: computer shortcuts make saving a document faster, spatial shortcuts create direct and often diagonal routes across distances, while shortcuts in work and labour aim to assist in meeting deadlines, while potentially shortcircuiting the entire effort. In any of these examples, we create shortcuts as small

instances of resistance to an accepted way of doing, and these instances of resistance can be read through any number of activities in an urban space. Pedestrians in the city find shortcuts through parking lots, but simultaneously subvert the use of that space; they reclaim the space, however momentarily and generate a productive misuse. When we begin to understand shortcuts as acts of resistance, we can pull the term away from purely temporal understandings and discuss shortcuts as a general tactical term.

As outlined in the following pages, we engaged in numerous drifting activities through the spatial and social complexities of Calgary. In the most direct reading of shortcuts, it is perhaps appropriate to example our observations from our algorithmic walk.

Walking provides a simple means for becoming acquainted with a city at a pace that offers a more nuanced readings of its spatial dynamics. Moving through a city algorithmically allows for a randomized view of these dynamics at play. Psychogeographic and algorithmic walks are often used to discover a new way through space and encourage those walking to pay more attention to their surroundings.

At a raised concrete terrace with well-tended planters, benches, and lighting, we imagined a lonely power outlet playing an integral role in guerilla movie projections, a shortcut to reactivating the space provided unknowingly by its developers, BMO. Further on our walk, we noted a piece of plywood leaning against a high-end retail outlet, an unintentional shortcut to disrupting a posh brand experience. These small details give way to innumerable opportunities for short-cutting and disrupting the prescribed design of a space, and in turn, changing the narrative we build around that space. A privately owned garden terrace and entrance to high-end shopping offer themselves as potential sites of resistance, shortcuts to a different experience of the city.

We are interested in looking at shortcuts of all kinds -- physical movements through space for the sake of efficiencies and shortcuts to different outcomes for the city. Shortcuts become small sites of resistance and provide a much deeper look at how a city can shift towards alternative narratives (and ultimately experiences).

a method for spatial confusion

As part of our earliest efforts in ATTC: Calgary, we engaged in a psychogeographic (or preferably, algorithmic) walk to research shortcuts in urban space. Our goal was to identify the ways in which architecture and infrastructure inform one's experience of a given space in the city. As with many large cities, Calgary has a number of both highly intentional and accidental spatial cues that dramatically frame one's existence within the city.

By beginning our exploration of Calgary using these methods, while simultaneously identifying and imagining shortcuts, we created a framework for reading two diverse narratives of place.

Our route was discovered in an ongoing and randomized way through the use of our handmade origami fortune-teller, a familiar relic from elementary school recesses. Our fortune-teller assisted us in establishing each sequential direction for our walk through a series of choices, ultimately resulting in a command such as 'turn left and

walk for 2 blocks.' Upon completing each step, we tasked ourselves with identifying some peculiar architectural or infrastructural form and a shortcut we either imagined or witnessed around, through, or intervening in that form.

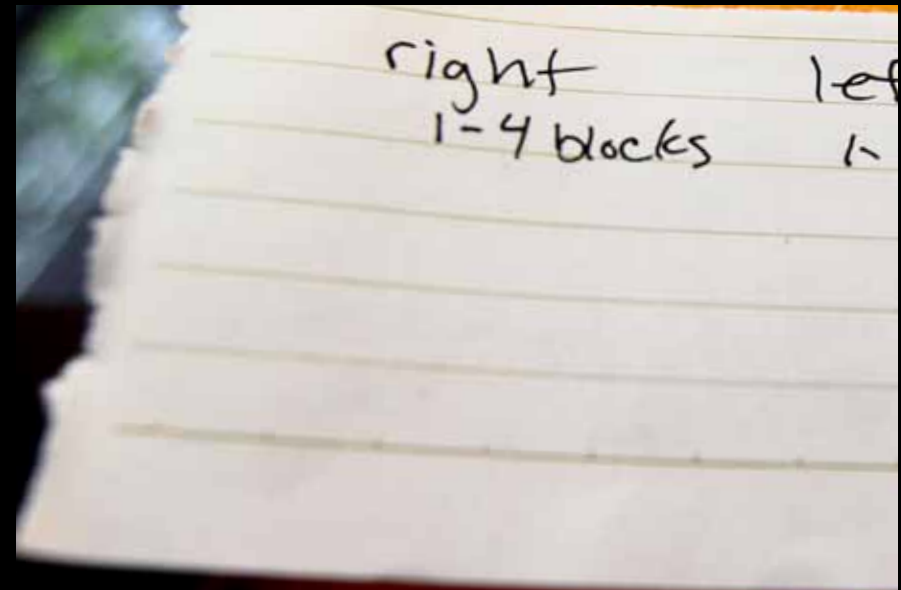
Our walk took us throughout the downtown core of Calgary, past oil and gas headquarters, under numerous overpasses, through concrete barriers – and on a single occasion, past a well-planned green lawn.

Throughout our exploration, we kept track of our stops through Twitter's current location feature, photo feature, and 140 characters capacity. We used this as both a public broadcast of our process and a multimedia archive for our own further research.

The narratives we started to render by examining the spatial realities of Calgary during our walk were based on



Handmade fortune-teller used to algorithmically move us through the city.



Instructions based on simple decisions -- turn right or left and walk one to four blocks.

resistance — shortcuts that we imagined or observed, some quite impossible, others already unfolding. Signs of resistance are perhaps truer markers the lived experience in a city. The distance between the lived experience and the experience we're told about as visitors (or as citizens) of a given city is where we're locating this research.



Tweet: BMO-owned raised concrete park offers free power for misuse with private property signs, mixed messages.



Tweet: Long forgotten corner, patchwork repairs, outdoor projection waiting to happen. Space says move, we say stay.



Tweet: Raggedy plywood demonstrates a shortcut to reality in a high class shopping district.



Tweet: Intersections of history and modern urbanism. Shortcuts through time, but buried in the now.



Tweet: Concrete water park, sign specifies no game playing, an easy shortcut is setting up a chess board.



Tweet: Life set back and above ground. Green edges for parking lot, raised sidewalk for buried retail. Plant on yer own.



Tweet: Plus15 walking path crosses the city, shortcuts for pedestrians leery of street interaction. City starts above.



Tweet: Possibly the only corner in the city not cordoned off feels new, learning from mistakes? Shortcuts premade, soccer?

tools of play & process

We understand and experience an urban environment in the immediate sense through the spatial cues we receive as we move about. Often, these cues are purposefully designed to encourage or distract pedestrian traffic or parking, so to speak. These cues also become reference points for a different reading of the city based on a history of design and planning decisions that reflect the priorities and desires of a given generation.

Throughout our walk, Calgary repeatedly demonstrated its disinterest in maintaining much of its pre-1960s architecture, with excessive concrete, raised entrances, and reflective glass, distancing interior spaces from everyday pedestrians. The values embedded in this reading are many, but the primary interpretation would seem to promote a continuous movement of capital through the streets and into

well-hidden offices. Architects and planners tasked with building Calgary surely understood the city to be built on big oil and big money and worked to reinforce this reading through their design practices.

Collecting numerous photographs, generating a series of annotations, and marking our geospatial location online became a starting point for a line of inquiry that we planned to have with a wide range of community members.

The set of questions we developed are, necessarily, incomplete and straight forward. We had no plans to conduct deep sociological or statistical research, but rather we hoped to tease

out a series of narratives that we know we had yet to hear about this city.

Over the course of an afternoon on Stephen Avenue, we heard about many parts of the city that are worth loving, and worth changing. Somehow, an impression was made upon us that aligned with what we felt during our algorithmic walk — that is, Calgary is a city that is not readily touchable. It feels distant even when it is right in front of you, and somehow the things we heard about the city from lifelong residents and people on holiday were the things that are legible from a distance, but in some instances, distanced from lived experience.

The questions we asked went something like this: “What do you love about Calgary?”, “What would you change about Calgary?”, and eventually, “What do you hope for Calgary?” They’re familiar questions, but useful nonetheless -- nuances of understanding came out of conversations, while the directness of what we asked provided a place of polarization from which to start those conversations.

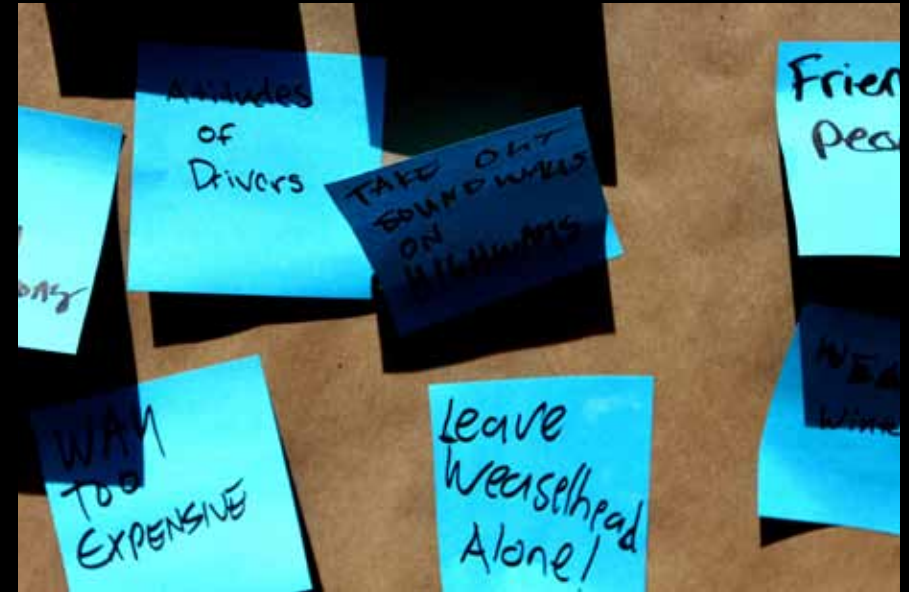
On another afternoon, we utilized a series of fill-in-the-blank statements and questionnaires to locate (un)specific sentiments about the city. Based on a range of leading statements, these pages became guages for the temperament of the city itself (and for the city as a friend, enemy, enabler, and father figure, among others). These statements and questionnaires were then dissected and pasted into a readymade construction paper booklet, colour-coded and ordered with a varying level of complexity in an attempt to generate our own rhythm and cycles of civic narratives.



Some of the things to change in Calgary, as collected on the side of CAMPER.



A small sample of the things that people love about Calgary.



A small sample of the things that people hate about Calgary.

Simple tools like stickies, fill-in-the-blank statements, timelines, and large modular chalkboards offer a level of accessibility for the participation upon which this residency is based. Interactions with community members simultaneously fed into our aim of developing a practice around unfolding the locality of the city, while giving curious opportunities to passersby for resistive or affirmative expression.

Working to understand Calgary through these participatory gestures, such as the chalkboard timeline, provides insights to a city in between many things -- a military fort and a sprawling urban centre, a longtime home and a temporary situation, the site of the first roadhouse and the place that Tim Hortons amalgamated with a small coffee shop to become a national chain, a celebrated Olympic site and the place of someone's first concert. All of these experiences, memories, and, at times, very much

invented histories create a space for dialogue around the narratives that create the physical and social shape of the city and not only how we interact with it, but how we interact with one another.

Our timeline created gaps that seem to draw on others to instinctively fill in. These gaps and the aesthetic of the timeline in general started to generate a narrative structure, a linear understanding of a place that can adjust existing historical boundaries.

In the second week of our residency, on one late evening, we launched a set of projections on the side of an apartment building near Central Memorial Park. These projections were an articulation of a set of narratives around Calgary originally based on the responses to our fill-in-the-blank statements and eventually moving on to real-time feedback and participation from those community members

in attendance.

We passed notebooks and pulled from our growing archive based on earlier research in our residency to cycle through the narratives that we had begun to hear and generate around the city. Using large-scale text in the projections, we interjected a set of narratives into (or rather, onto) the conversation of the city itself.

As a final trajectory of ATTC: Calgary, a series of seven billboards were installed around the city noting a series of cyclical narratives. Using the phrasing, "...and then the city..." each billboard featured a different statement that referenced an overarching narrative or perhaps a brief moment in time about the city, read either internally or externally. These billboards are aimed at creating a space for a momentary discussion around the possibilities in narratives themselves, which is centred on one's personal connection,

history, and knowledge on the city.

Documenting all of this participation alongside our own process is consciously accomplished to assist in preparing a way forward through the work. It also aids in locating the project, our practice, the art, along the entire process. At this residency as well in our ongoing practice, our focus is not about the events or the billboards or the questionnaires, but rather, about a process of discovery, or perhaps a practice of curiosity.

Over the course of the residency, we aimed to develop a practice, a series of tactics that work to unfold a way to get to know a place and the things that go about shaping the things we can know about a place. Cities are continually enacted through the narratives that we hear, create, and tear apart through daily practice, and we are continually interested in both the narratives and that daily practice.

My first memory of Calgary is the ride in from
the airport, traffic and fields of shingles.

One of 76 collected fill-in-the-blanks, as completed by a resident of Calgary.

I feel Indifferent about this city.

Calgary wants me to

Spend money.

Calgary is the best place to Pay too much for a house.

I hate this city because

it lacks affordable housing.

I wish for more understanding and less haste in
Calgary.

Move Everyone else out of
Calgary.

I need Calgary to
slow down.

Calgary keeps
holding itself back from what it could be.



The side of the CAMPER hosts a timeline created by passersby -- invented and undocumented historical claims sit alongside very real moments in time that have shaped this city.



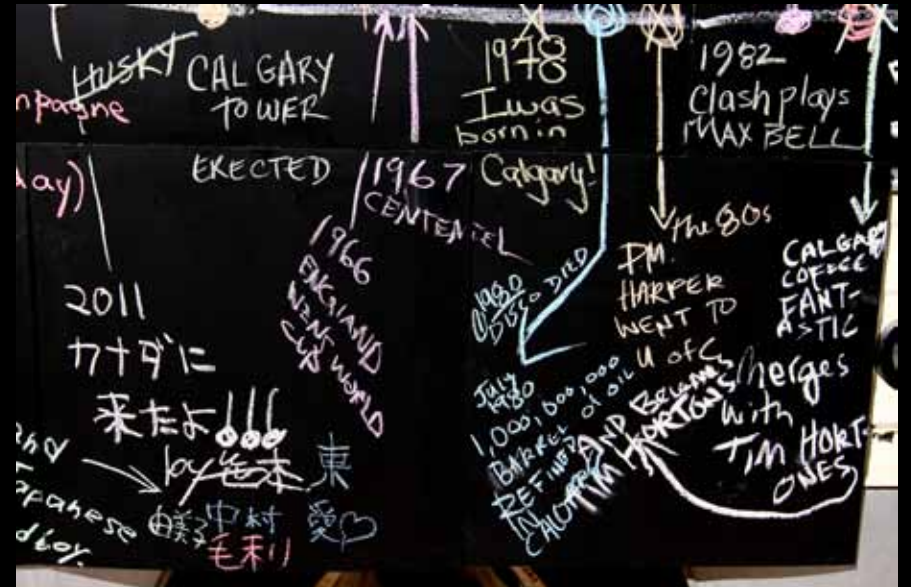
A timeline of a city as imagined and remembered by those who are and have been here (however, momentarily).



Large spans of time are compressed and are given equal billing to birthdays and memories of first concerts.



Things that have happened to the City of Calgary, even if its documenters were not here to witness them.



Marking space and time and invented logic around the city's current state.



Notes from Calgarians projected onto the side of an apartment building near Central Memorial Park in Calgary.



Messages collected from earlier research and fill-in-the-blank forms.



Short entries from locals joining us for the evening.



The rigged projector connected to 500 feet of extension cords.



Transitions between two notes collected from passersby late into the night.

imagined disrup- tions

It seems unavoidable that we would begin to imagine ways around the city that we encounter --that is, ways around the way it is, the stories that get told and the people that in turn enact those stories, all of which comes to actualize this place in all of its intricacies.

These shortcuts, these imagined urban disruptions, these recipes for tactical and impossible gestures provide an endpoint of sorts for this practice. These articulations are not findings nor are they the results of our research, but are instead another set of narratives around this city.

If we can suggest that there are narratives of resistance in our everyday actions with a city, then certainly, we must offer larger narratives that expand beyond a recognizable everyday practice into an imaginary and productive set of proposals for generating new narratives for Calgary.

+14 PEDESTRIAN WALKWAYS

Downtown Calgary's infrastructure is built on layers of grids, forming streets, avenues, and architectural spaces. Four-lane roads in the downtown core are standard fare, as are large corporate buildings lining nearly every corner. In the space between these infrastructural and architectural bookends and raised 15 feet above street level are interior walkways easing pedestrian travel between a variety of commercial spaces. Though weather protection and efficiency in pedestrian travel is an obvious design component of the +15 system, these covered walkways are also lending themselves to other narratives. +15 walkways connecting a mall and a corporate office, for instance, provide

a very specific user-base of power executives and roaming shoppers with access to this elevated space and become of little use to anyone else. It is through these infrastructural realities that the +15's narrative becomes evident: moving people who make money and spend money quickly and with ease through commercial spaces.

In the interest of proposing alternative narratives for Calgary, we offer the idea of an alternative covered walkway system -- the +14.

This sub-15 walkway will connect people to sites and places deemed unimportant by the current +15 system. As well, the +14 will be created using readily accessible materials like scrap wood and gently-used barn windows. Choices around materials are democratized much like the choices around destinations for the +14. Unlike the +15, pedestrians' use of the +14 will not require patronage to a business, monetary exchange or corporate employment, which privileges those with purchasing power. Examples of +14 destinations include public parks, riverfronts, alleys, single-story rooftops, personal living spaces, under-utilized urban spaces, and more.

STAMPEDING CALGARY, TOGETHER

Calgary is suffering from a personality crisis. Once a city rich in small-town rural values and practices, Calgary now attempts to juggle its rural past with its present existence as a wealthy

city of big business and big decisions. The problem lies in the non-existence of any large-scale event that can grasp both ends of the cultural and economic spectrum and reconcile them in a meaningful way. We propose to merge these somewhat dissonant cultural images of the city into one large community-wide effort.

Situating Calgary at the forefront of cowboy culture has done little to enhance the everyday experience of the city for its residents. For too long, the city has come to life for one week a year, only to miss the possibility for citywide collective activity. In an effort to address this underutilized organizational capacity and community spirit, *Stampeding Calgary, Together* will carve out a new practice of the everyday for community members in the city's downtown core.

Daily parades, rotating recreational reuse of parking lots, and the opening up of underground infrastructures for new and unimagined activities will create a new set of shared and novel experiences that connect all user-groups of the spaces -- from oil executives to street vendors, from condo owners to the self-identified homeless population. All residents and users of the downtown core will be encouraged to get into the spirit of *Stampeding Calgary, Together* through a new bylaw outlining the minimum levels of participation.

However, civic activation through *Stampeding Calgary, Together* will perhaps be most highlighted through the "After 6 Shift," a nightly project that rotates throughout downtown neighbourhoods insisting upon the use and activation of city streets and public spaces after 6pm.

credits & thanks

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sophis-
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