

The Way Already There

On Movement, Instruction, and What Still Has to Be Decided

I follow a sign and, a few metres later, find that the way is closed.

The instruction itself was clear. The arrow pointed in one direction, the path existed, and nothing suggested that I had misunderstood it. Yet the route no longer leads where it says it leads. A temporary barrier now matters more than the permanent arrangement beneath it.

For a moment, several versions of the same place exist at once. There is the route that was built to last. There is the temporary order that has interrupted it. And there is the immediate condition in front of me.

To continue, I have to decide which of them applies.

Most movement through a city does not feel like this. We walk along pavements, take escalators, wait at lights, enter through doors, stand on platforms. These actions feel ordinary partly because so much has already been settled before we arrive. A crossing has been placed here rather than there. One movement has been separated from another. An entrance faces a particular direction. A train will stop at one platform and not the next. Lines on the ground distinguish where a bicycle, a car or a pedestrian is expected to move.

This does not make our movement less our own.

A city in which every person had to negotiate every movement from the beginning would hardly be freer. It would scarcely move at all. Shared space depends on arrangements that allow people who do not know one another to anticipate what others are likely to do.

A path restricts movement, but it also gives movement somewhere to go.

The difficulty begins when we assume that because a route has been prepared, its use has already been decided.

An instruction is never addressed to movement in general. It assumes someone arriving from somewhere.

A directional arrow can be perfectly clear from the position for which it was intended and strange from another. Two arrows near a bicycle station may make sense to a cyclist approaching along the designated route and appear to contradict one another to a pedestrian crossing the same space from the side. Neither sign has changed. What has changed is the position from which it is encountered.

The problem is no longer what the instruction means. It is whether that meaning applies to me here.

When orientation works well, this distinction almost disappears. The arrow points where I need to go. The gate opens for the person meant to enter. The pavement continues. The platform corresponds to the train. I do not experience myself as interpreting an order. I simply move.

Only when the fit breaks do I notice how much judgement ordinary movement already contains.

A route may remain physically present while no longer being permitted. An escalator can still carry someone towards a continuation that has temporarily ceased to exist. A permanent entrance can be overruled by a provisional one. A construction site can leave architecture and instruction belonging to different moments of the same place.

Neither order has to be meaningless. One belongs to a more durable arrangement. The other belongs to now.

This makes passage partly a question of time.

A red light does not say that crossing is impossible. It says not yet. A platform organises movement through a period of waiting. A temporary closure may last an hour, a season or several years. The route can still be visible long after its practical validity has been suspended.

We tend to think of urban order spatially: roads, paths, entrances, tracks. But we move through overlapping durations as well. Some instructions are built into stone, steel or concrete. Others remain only as long as a repair, an event or a temporary change requires them. The person moving through the city has to bring those different times into the same present.

The route does not complete the decision. It leaves something for the person using it.

That becomes even clearer when no written instruction is present.

A staircase does not need to tell us explicitly that it leads upward or downward. A tunnel concentrates possible directions simply by removing others. Even a river, which may appear open from the bank, gives a large vessel only certain passages through depth, clearance, signals and other traffic.

Movement does not need a visible barrier in order to be channelled.

Nor does every spatial order operate by telling us where to go.

A civic square may offer several directions at once and still give movement a strong form. Its edges, distances, entrances and axes determine how a body appears in relation to what surrounds it. A gate is both an opening and a frame. A parliament, a museum or another public institution establishes an approach, a threshold, a front and a zone of proximity even when nobody tells a passer-by what to do there.

Here the order is less explicit.

Someone walking past a museum may have no intention of entering it. Someone crossing a political square may simply be taking the shortest route home. A person passing through a monumental gate may be thinking about a delayed train or the next appointment.

The existing significance of a place does not determine the significance of every movement through it.

But the movement does not occur on empty ground either.

For a moment, the body occupies relations that existed before it arrived: centre and edge, approach and departure, entrance and exclusion, institution and passer-by. A place can give someone a position without determining what that position will mean to them.

This is different from a sign. A sign addresses an action directly. A spatial or institutional arrangement can shape the field in which action occurs without specifying the action itself.

We move through both kinds of order continually. And both contain assumptions about who is expected to move through them.

A staircase is an obvious route for someone who can use stairs and a barrier for someone who cannot. A transfer of five minutes between two platforms may be comfortable for one traveller

and almost impossible for another. A sign that seems immediately understandable to someone familiar with a transport system may require much more effort from a person encountering it for the first time.

The existence of a route therefore says less than it first appears to say.

A possibility is always a possibility for someone.

And not everyone has the same room to interpret an unclear instruction.

For one person, taking a wrong turn may mean walking back a few metres. For another, the same mistake may mean a difficult detour, a missed connection or an entrance that cannot be used at all. In some spaces, improvisation costs almost nothing. In others, misunderstanding a boundary can have consequences.

The need for judgement may be shared. The cost of getting it wrong is not.

Shared systems still have to distinguish between movements. Pedestrians and vehicles cannot occupy every part of a road simultaneously. A train cannot wait until every passenger is ready. An entrance has to be somewhere.

Necessity does not erase the consequences of those distinctions.

Every arrangement makes some movements easier, quicker or more likely to succeed. Others demand more time, another entrance, a detour, assistance or permission. A route does not have to prohibit an alternative in order to make one direction more probable than another.

There is a difference between being told what to do and entering a situation in which one possibility has already been made easier to take.

Most of the time, we participate in this without difficulty. We follow the opening that presents itself. We stand where others are waiting. We choose the continuation that does not require explanation. This is not necessarily submission to an external order. It is often simply what competent participation in a shared world looks like.

But competence also includes knowing when following is no longer enough.

If two signs seem to conflict, I look again. Perhaps one is meant for bicycles and the other for pedestrians. Perhaps one regulates entry and the other exit. Perhaps one belongs to a temporary arrangement. Perhaps I am seeing an instruction from a direction from which it was never meant to be read.

Sometimes the contradiction disappears once I understand my position. Sometimes it does not.

Then movement requires judgement—something that could not be prepared fully in advance.

A rule can be written before a situation occurs. A path can be built before anyone walks along it. A route can be planned before a traveller arrives. But the exact relation between an existing order and the situation in which it is encountered cannot always be settled beforehand.

Cities depend on this more than their surfaces suggest.

No plan can anticipate every obstruction or every way a person will approach a place. No architect can determine every later use of a threshold. No system of signs can prevent every moment in which somebody has to slow down, look again and decide whether the formal route still corresponds to what is actually possible.

The system does not fail every time judgement becomes necessary. Often judgement is one of the ways the system continues to work.

Following an instruction does not mean surrendering judgement. To follow well can require attention.

Many contemporary systems are designed to reduce the amount of uncertainty that remains. Navigation tells us not only where to go but when to turn and which lane to enter. Interfaces anticipate the next action. Doors open when we approach. Tickets identify permissions. Signals divide movement into moments of passage and waiting.

Much of this is useful. Removing unnecessary uncertainty can make unfamiliar places easier to use and movements easier to coordinate.

But anticipation has a limit.

The more completely a system prepares a route, the more revealing the small moments become in which reality no longer corresponds to what the route expected: the continuation that has closed, the sign encountered from the wrong side, the temporary path that conflicts with the permanent one, the entrance that exists but cannot presently be used.

These moments are more than errors at the edge of an otherwise coherent order. They reveal something that coherence usually allows us to overlook.

A route can be designed in advance.

Its application cannot be completed in advance.

Someone still has to arrive.

From somewhere.

With a particular body, purpose, direction and amount of time.

Someone still has to encounter the place that exists now rather than the place anticipated by the plan.

This is why I find the familiar opposition between freedom and control increasingly unhelpful here. It suggests that what belongs to the individual begins only where organisation ends: that fewer instructions would necessarily leave more room for freedom, and that a prepared path diminishes the action of the person who takes it.

But I do not become more independent if every sign disappears. Nor do I cease to act for myself because someone else decided where the pavement should be.

The more difficult question is what remains mine within an action whose conditions I did not choose.

Perhaps more remains than the visible order suggests.

I may not decide where the bridge, entrance or platform is, but I still have to understand whether it belongs to my route now. I may enter a square whose political or cultural meaning precedes me without allowing that meaning to exhaust what I am doing there. I may follow an instruction exactly and still have had to judge that it was the instruction that applied.

Individual action does not begin only when we disobey. It can begin in the act of application itself.

That is easy to miss because successful systems make the relation between rule and situation appear seamless. The path seems simply to be the path; the entrance, the entrance.

Yet every prepared order eventually meets a circumstance it did not create. A route closes. A body moves at another speed. Two instructions overlap. The physical world no longer corresponds exactly to the plan.

What happens next cannot be stored entirely in the sign, the map or the architecture. Someone has to make them meet.

Perhaps this is where a movement becomes our own—not because it begins outside all existing form, and not because we resist whatever was prepared for us, but because no prepared order can completely perform its own application.

We rarely begin from nothing.

The way is already there.

So are the threshold, the signal, the timetable, the gate, the square and the rule.

They can guide us, divide us, delay us and sometimes stop us.

What they cannot do is finish the judgement on our behalf.

The way may already be there.