Spaces of Effort, Exploration of an Experience of Active Mobility

ABSTRACT

This article combines empirical, theoretical, and philosophical references to explore the notion of Effort as a central production term in a general urban experience, considering the increasing relevance of individual life styles, we challenge the general premise of transport planning that tends to reduce the effort required for mobility—particularly when providing alternatives to car use. Involved by interviewees we have conducted with inhabitants of major agglomerations in Switzerland, Zurich, Geneva and Lausanne, we identify a threshold approach to effort, and explore the spatial implications of them for urban spaces that contribute to the practice of active mobility. We introduce the notion of legislative effort as engaging and stimulating experience that improves the actor’s qualifications and results in the development of skills that facilitate making more effort. We take examples of existing urban spaces that effectively accommodate varied ‘effort’ potentials and encourage enthraining effort, containing three spaces’ temporary characteristics and that they are rarely part of the daily urban context. We conclude that in order to effectively move toward prevalence of active mobility, engaging and integrating the attractive effort in daily commutes, these spaces need to form an ensemble—providing accessibility throughout the city.

KEYWORDS: effort; Physical activity; Mobility; Active Mobility; Experience; Urban projects.

Minimizing Effort

“Man does not like to work—not even muscle work, nor brain work […] I am almost tempted to say that the habit of working is one of the most striking phenomena of human psychology.” (Ferrero 1894, 177)

Some authors of contemporary discourses on effort, both mental and physical (Ferrero 1894, Ziff 1977) state that effort always tends to be reduced by the individual: it is the ‘principle of least effort’ as formulated by Fermor (1894).

The principle of least effort informed the utility-based models that have been the dominant frameworks for understanding people’s mobility behaviors and model choices (Klaus et al. 2013). Since the car has for decades represented the ideal of ‘effort’s’ mobility, attempts to provide and promote alternative systems have had to compete with this ideal. Thus modal shift strategies were generally very much centered on the limits of acceptable effort, walkable distances, pedestrian policies [Calthorpe 1993], and provisions of the “last mile” problem in transit oriented development.

“Effort: three approaches

A second way to consider effort is to divert attention from it. This approach also tends to regard effort as a negative experience, and consists in making the individual forget the intrinsically difficult experience of effort. It accepts the principle of least effort and suggests balancing it with entertainment.

Leisure, or ‘entertainment of walking’ transforms the experience of walking by the provision of new affinities and distractions.

As we see in the evidence from interviews, the fastest and the most direct roads are sometimes considered less in terms of more attractive activities.

Within mobility studies and urban projects this approach to effort is the most common one, especially in terms of creating favorable environments. The least effort and distraction effort postulate effort as a negative experience that inhibits the active mobility that is to be induced or constrained.

Distracting Effort

“A mile is 2.640 steps to go. Slogging through it, counting each step might seem a long mile, but if the person is interested in what he is seeing, thinking, or talking about with a companion, a mile will be hardly a distance at all.” (Sussmann and Goode 1980, 80)

A third perspective, that seems more fruitful in the context of active mobility, links effort to stimulation. The required effort in previous approaches is taken as an obstacle to achievement of a goal. In this case, in a trip from point A to point B, however, effort can be also considered as a rewarding experience, even perceived as positively stimulating. This type of effort results in the further development of skills that facilitate making more effort, what Pierre Bédard calls ‘excitement’ or ‘pratice’

“Ent raining’ Effort

“The effort is tui sole, but also it is precious, more precious even than the work it produces, because thanks to it, one has drawn out from the self more than it had already. We are raised above ourselves. This effort was impossible without matter, by the resistance matter offer and by the docility with which we endow it. It is at one and the same time obstacle, instrument and stimulus. It experiences our force, keeps the imprint of it, and calls for its intensification.” (Bergson 1920, 28)

The outcomes of our interviews confirm the positive attitudes for physical effort, namely coming from people’s intrinsic motivations for watching and fitness. However, as interviewees show that there is also a certain amount (budget) of effort, which, once spent (in the gym or daily jogging), people are less likely to invest further effort. Thus we question if it is possible integrate attractive sports effort into the inhabitants’ daily commutes.

Interviews

As part of our research on future of mobility (postautomobility) we have conducted 48 interviews with the inhabitants of the centers and peripheries of these agglomerations in 2015. The choice of having inhabitants from different “grades of urbanity” city centers, suburbs, peripheries, as well as small remote villages—was to reflect the related possible range of mobility practices in different urban conditions. These semi-directive interviews probe the mobility experiences of these individuals, their daily practices, their attitudes towards active mobility and their projections and aspirations for their future mobility. From the very first interviews the topic of effort emerged and demonstrated its relevance to the experiences of mobility—without any incentive from the interviewees. The analysis of inhabitants’ discussions revealed that effort is not always a negative experience, and we therefore propose a threshold approach, in which effort is also sought for its own sake in daily mobility practices.

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Tracked Running in Switzerland, 2014 vs. 2015

Daily physical activities today are measured, registered and even shared through social networks by individuals, using fitness trackers, smartphones, and other accessories (e.g. health applications, fitbit watch).