

# WALKING RHYTHMS AND WALKABILITY IN INTERMEDIATE CITIES<sup>1</sup>

RITMOS DEL CAMINAR Y CAMINABILIDAD EN LAS CIUDADES INTERMEDIAS

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Las ciudades intermedias, caracterizadas por sus distancias más cortas, podrían proyectarse como espacios propicios para la adopción de modos de movilidad activa como la caminata. Sin embargo, la tendencia parece ser otra. Las más recientes encuestas de movilidad muestran una disminución de los viajes a pie y un aumento del uso del automóvil en varias ciudades intermedias chilenas. Este fenómeno plantea interrogantes sobre las experiencias que viven quienes caminan en ciudades intermedias para comprender por qué en estas ciudades que por sus distancias podrían ser evaluadas como caminables, caminar deja de ser una opción de movilidad cotidiana para la mayoría de las personas. Este artículo aborda esta pregunta con base en una investigación etnográfica realizada entre los años 2021 y 2022 en la ciudad de Osorno, región de Los Lagos, en la que se analizaron las experiencias pedestres de veinte habitantes de la ciudad. Un hallazgo relevante son las frecuentes disrupciones en los ritmos y en la sensación de continuidad que los participantes experimentan en sus trayectos y su impacto para la práctica cotidiana de caminar. A partir de esta observación se propone incorporar la noción de ritmo en el debate sobre la caminabilidad de las ciudades intermedias como un elemento valioso que permite poner el foco en las experiencias que tienen las personas al caminar y avanzar en la comprensión sobre qué hace que una ciudad sea caminable, pero también qué hace que quienes la habitan quieran caminarla. De esta manera, este artículo aporta al conocimiento de las experiencias pedestres en contextos no metropolitanos, a menudo ignorados dentro de los estudios del caminar urbano, enriqueciendo nuestra comprensión de la movilidad cotidiana en ciudades intermedias.

**Palabras clave:** movilidad pedestre, prácticas cotidianas, disrupciones, sensación de continuidad, Osorno

Intermediate cities, characterized by their shorter distances, could be projected as favorable spaces for adopting active means of mobility such as walking. However, the trend seems to be moving in another direction. The most recent mobility surveys show a decrease in people going for walks and an increase in car use in several intermediate Chilean cities. This phenomenon raises questions about the experiences of those who walk in intermediate cities to understand why these cities could be evaluated as walkable, as walking is no longer a daily mobility option for most people. This article addresses this question based on ethnographic research conducted between 2021 and 2022 in the city of Osorno, in the Los Lagos region, where pedestrian experiences of twenty inhabitants were analyzed. A relevant finding is the frequent disruptions in the rhythms and sense of continuity that participants experience in their trips and their impact on the daily walk. Based on this observation, the proposal is made to incorporate the notion of rhythm into the debate on the walkability of intermediate cities as a valuable element that allows focusing on the experiences that people have while walking and to make progress in the understanding of what makes a city walkable, and what makes its inhabitants want to walk it. In this way, this article contributes to knowledge of pedestrian experiences in non-metropolitan contexts, often ignored in urban walking studies, enriching our understanding of everyday mobility in intermediate cities.

**Keywords:** pedestrian mobility, daily practices, disruptions, sense of continuity, Osorno.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Walking is considered a sustainable means of mobility with almost universal access that does not generate negative externalities, benefits people's health, and contributes to having safer spaces (Ministry of Transport and Telecommunications of Chile, 2023). The concept of "walkability" has allowed areas such as urban planning, transportation studies, or urban design to consider "the extent to which characteristics of the built environment and land use may or may not be conducive to residents in the area walking for either leisure, exercise or recreation, to access services, or to travel to work" (Leslie et al., 2007, p.113). However, there is no consensus on the elements that ensure improved walkability (Forsyth, 2015), and measuring them requires a multidisciplinary approach (Hutabarat Lo, 2009). Although access to sidewalks, connectivity, density, and land use diversity are essential to encourage walking (Hutabarat Lo, 2009), they are not universal. Moreover, Arellana et al. (2019) have shown that road and public safety in Latin America are more relevant to walkability than conditions of the sidewalks and the attractiveness of spaces, which tend to stand out in North American and European cities.

In Chile, walkability studies have focused mainly on Santiago. In one of the studies, Berríos Álvarez and Greene Zúñiga (2020) identified that there are barriers that reduce the potentially walkable area, whether natural (rivers and hills), artificial (roads, underpasses/overpasses), or intangible (road safety or crime). For their part, Herrmann-Lunecke, Mora, and Véjares (2020) noted that broad sidewalks, trees, and mixed land use facilitate walking, while narrow sidewalks in poor conditions, intersections, motorized traffic, and vehicle noise inhibit it. Finally, when researching the relevance of walking for older people, Herrmann-Lunecke, Figueroa Martínez, and Parra Huerta (2022) revealed the obstacles that this group faces, such as sidewalks in poor conditions, dangerous intersections, and unattractive landscapes.

These studies show how walkability is useful for evaluating the built space's conditions. However, they consider walking as a behavior that responds to spatial attributes with a degree of independence from the social and psychological relationships between people and their environment (Battista & Manaugh, 2018), and even though there are places with spatial conditions for walking, people prefer not to do so. This problem is seen in intermediate cities<sup>3</sup> in Chile. It was thought

intermediate cities, characterized by shorter distances, would encourage everyday walking. However, a different trend is seen, and although walking is an important mode of mobility for medium-low-income groups, especially for women working as caregivers (Herrmann-Lunecke, Mora & Sagaris, 2020), recent studies show car use trending up in intermediate cities and walking and public transport use heading in the opposite direction, where it is not districts with less poverty that have the highest rise (Maturana et al., 2022).

Why are cities whose built space has elements that encourage walkability, in practice, not walked? This article answers this question by considering the lived experience of walkers through ethnographic research carried out between 2021 and 2022 in the intermediate city of Osorno, where daily walking fell from 37% to 20% between 2003 and 2013, and car use increased from 20% to 43% (Road and Urban Transport Program: SECTRA, 2015). After analyzing the experiences of twenty people living in the city, the results show that the participants experience different disruptions in their walking rhythms that generate the feeling that walking is an outdated practice in several areas of Osorno. Based on this finding, a reflection is made on the uniqueness of walking in intermediate cities and the role of rhythm in encouraging its daily practice. Thus, it contributes to the understanding that walkability is not synonymous with walking and that the affective and sensory experiences of those who walk need to be considered if walking is to be promoted as a means of everyday mobility.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Rhythm as an expressive element of walking

To explore people's experiences when walking through the city on a daily basis, walking is understood not as a behavior but rather as an embodied social practice that is materially and socially co-constructed (Lee & Ingold, 2006; Middleton, 2010; Middleton, 2022). Walking is "a permanent relational achievement of entities that are social (meanings, emotions, affections) and material (human and non-human bodies, things, weather, sunlight)" (Waitt, Stratford & Harada, 2019, p. 2). To understand the experience of walking, it is necessary to consider the relationships that emerge among those who walk, the materiality of the places, the emotions, the feelings, and the meanings of those journeys.

<sup>3</sup> The debate on how to refer to cities that are not metropolises or small towns is a topic under discussion. In Chile, these are usually regional or provincial capitals, excluding Santiago, Valparaíso, and Concepción (Maturana et al. 2017).

In Chile, a line of work has been dedicated to exploring pedestrian experiences through qualitative research strategies. These studies mainly focus on the city of Santiago, exploring its aesthetic dimension (Avilés Arias, 2020), the influence of socio-spatial inequality (Martínez, 2022), gender (Adame Castillo, 2019; Pumarino, 2020), the attachment that emerges in the routes (Sandoval Luna, Greene & Di Masso, 2023), and how it is broken down into spaces for parenting and learning (Mora, 2018). Fewer works were found in other cities, which usually address the experience of walking as part of more extensive research on everyday mobility. These investigated and revealed the experiences of older people walking in the city of Valparaíso (Olivi, Fadda & Reyes, 2016), that walking implies increasingly less sociability in encounters with neighbors and proximity in Talca (Errázuriz Infante & Valdés de la Fuente, 2017) or that it allows creating meanings about the urban experience in the Coquimbo-La Serena conurbation (Vergara Álvarez & Concha Méndez, 2023).

This work focuses on rhythm, a constituent element of the walking experience that allows observing the relationships created between people and places. Ingold (2011) explains that a rhythmic activity is generated in tune with the environment. Without this, there is only a mechanical act, like that of the metronome, which marks the same pulse regardless of what is happening around it. When walking, the same step is never repeated; each step responds to the ever-changing conditions of places and one's body. Arguing in the same line, Lefebvre (2013) says that an essential aspect of rhythm is not just the repetition but the difference it contains. Rhythm, understood in this way, is a sensitive element (that can be perceived) that expresses the relationship of walkers with their environment (Martínez Rodríguez, 2019). The rhythm of those who walk feels like a flow when the body accompanies the traveled space. However, it becomes friction when facing an obstacle: the rhythm is broken, and walking becomes a test of physical and emotional endurance.

While other works have described how rhythms vary according to the purpose of the walks (Matos Wunderlich, 2008), this work explores how disruptions in walking rhythms say something about the experience of walking in an intermediate city. Vergunst (2010) says that "when walking, the body brings together material and social relationships and generates a rhythm that those who work on ethnography can listen to" (p.376). Through an ethnographic strategy, the experiences of those who walk are sought by participating in them, thus complementing the knowledge generated by the literature on walkability by exploring how the experiences lived in the spaces influence people to walk every day.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This article presents the results of a broader ethnographic study on the changes in everyday walking practices in Osorno in response to its urban transformation in recent decades. The fieldwork was carried out in 2021 and 2022 when the researcher lived in Osorno for a year and a half to experience first-hand what it is like to move around the city on foot on a daily basis.

The ethnographic methodology consisted of proposing to people who lived in different parts of the city to walk with them on a route that they usually walk today and another that they would have walked every day in the past, 10 to 20 years ago. A call for participants was made using social networks, the University of Los Lagos communication channels, and social organizations. The routes were then recorded on video with a small bodycam. Each person was spoken to at least once before taking their routes (sometimes more) to build trust and understand their mobility practices and relationship with the city. 7 men and 13 women between 20 and 84 years old, whose names have been anonymized (pseudonyms are used), took part, exploring 10 current and 18 past routes. As this is an ethnographic research project, 20 people were considered sufficient. This was because the walks and conversations with participants from all the city's neighborhoods helped reach an information saturation point. The conversations while walking, interviews, and records of the field diaries provided the data that were analyzed thematically.

The fieldwork was carried out when quarantines were still being decreed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This made it difficult to walk in person with people and required adapting the methodology. First of all, due to the initial difficulty in convening participants, the criterion of residing in Osorno was relaxed, and two people who grew up in Osorno, who no longer lived in the city but usually returned to visit their family, were included. Anthropologist Consuelo Robledo was hired as a field assistant to compensate for the delay; she collaborated by conducting interviews and walking the routes. Also, when people could not do the walks in person, they were done virtually. In these cases (7 of the 28 routes), people described their present and past routes in an online interview. The researchers then walked, recorded them, and reviewed the records with the people in a second online interview.

### IV. RESULTS

Disruptions to the rhythm mark the walking experiences of the different people who participated in this research. These disruptions are combined analytically into the topics presented below.



**Figure 1.** Rhythmic disruption by evoking traumatic events on the route from Ovejería to downtown Osorno along the train tracks. Source: Photograph from Consuelo Robledo's recording. Map taken from Google Maps. Preparation by the author.

**Feeling of insecurity**

The feeling of insecurity generates affective disruptions in people's journeys. Walking, feeling afraid, assessing whether or not someone approaching is a threat, and being aware of any noise or movement interrupts the pace of those walking. This is the case of a 28-year-old woman who lived in the Ovejería sector as a teenager. She used to go to and from the city center along the train tracks. It only took fifteen minutes, and she enjoyed the walk: "It was quieter, fresh... I don't know, the air felt fresher." She stopped taking that section after experiencing harassment. The woman still lives in Ovejería, but walking downtown is no longer an option for her. The harassment she suffered while walking, and then also on public transport, restricted her daily mobility options:

Ovejería is about ten to fifteen minutes from the center. It's really close, so I used to walk a lot. But I had, I started having... well, since high school, I started experiencing a lot of attacks in the street from men. If not there, on the bus. After that, it was practically just public transport, nothing else, collective taxis more than anything. And then I started driving, just using the car, nothing else, to avoid meeting people I didn't know. Because, as I told you, I had so much sexual harassment on the street (A 28-year-old woman who lives in Ovejería).

The experiences of harassment ended this walking route for her. She now avoids that place because when she walks there, this experience resonates with past events, making her feel distressed and interrupting her rhythm. This happened the day she was accompanied to walk her old route downtown from Ovejería along the train tracks

(Figure 1). The two were walking and talking when a man walked by in the opposite direction. The woman suddenly fell silent, and once the man had moved away, she said: "Oh, it gives me chills when someone passes me here." These traumatic experiences have left marks on the routes that affect her rhythm when walking there again. Memories remain in the spaces and generate a feeling of being somewhere that feels dangerous and unwelcoming, and walking ceases to take place.

For other participants, insecurity is not a consequence of an experience but rather their interpretation of the places' atmospheres. Some participants admitted to feeling unsafe walking through downtown Osorno. Stories of robberies and the crowds caused by street trade create an atmosphere that makes them uneasy. A couple (aged close to 60) living in a central neighborhood for three decades stopped walking around it because they no longer felt relaxed. Younger people reported similar experiences. A 20-year-old woman who lived in Rahue Alto talked about her nervousness as she walked through the town center.

"But the constant feeling I always have when I go out, most of the time, is like... the truth is that I always have to be attentive, anxious that something might happen. And I don't feel like I could do anything to stop it from happening. I just feel that constant fear."

People avoid these roads or walk along them quickly in response to these atmospheres. The walkable routes are reduced as people look for alternative paths or stop walking. A distance of fifteen minutes, considered walkable on the map, can be unwalkable in practice





**Figure 2.** Relationship between walkers and large vehicles on Inés de Suárez Av./San Pablo Bridge. Source: Still obtained from recording a daily walk of the author. Map taken from Google Maps. Preparation by the author.

because the sensations people have there make them adjust their rhythm, making them walk fast, paying attention, and often no longer walking there.

### Rhythmic regimes

The rhythms of those who walk become part of the “complex amalgam of rhythmicities” (Edensor, 2010, p. 71), which is the urban space where some rhythms predominate over others and define how a place is perceived. This is seen when walking along Osorno’s main avenues, which connect to the city’s access roads where large vehicles pass by, often carrying cargo at high speeds. This is the case of Inés de Suárez Avenue, part of the author’s daily route to Bellavista Park. It is just a 15-minute walk that felt much longer because of the disruptive sensation that the vehicles’ speed and dimensions caused for the body (Figure 2).

This experience shows that the rhythms of those walking are hard to keep in step with vehicles that introduce a scale of size and rhythm that overwhelms that of the walkers. Another 32-year-old woman who lives in the Rahue Alto area, tells of a similar experience when recalling the path she took from the Maximiliano Kolbe neighborhood to the Chuyaca Campus of the University of Los Lagos, located at the eastern exit of Osorno. The route passes along Julio Buschmann Avenue, an access road to the highway for high-speed vehicles. The woman talks about how her attention and rhythm changed in that section. “Of course, the other side was much calmer, more peaceful, more pleasant. This part [of the avenue] is where you have to move like a hare. As I said, you have to be aware of everything; you are jumper.”

In these cases, vehicular traffic rhythmically and sensorially dominates the space, generating feelings of vulnerability and distress for walkers. Walking then feels like an out-of-place practice, even if there is a sidewalk. If the sidewalk does not protect the walking bodies from the vehicles’ speed, noise, and sizes, a rhythmic hierarchy is generated where the walkers are relegated to a second plane.

### Disruptive materialities

The sidewalk and road materiality are also sources of breaks in pedestrian rhythms. A sidewalk in a poor or uneven state, or the lack of sidewalks, generates problematic disruptions, especially if the different physical abilities of those who walk are considered. In these cases, keeping a rhythm is achieved thanks to the walkers’ efforts.

In Osorno, a city with short distances, one moves from one area to another in a few paces, which implies that the existence and quality of the sidewalks vary qualitatively, as the photograph shows in a stretch of less than 300 m (Figure 3).

Changes in the sidewalks require adapting the pace of the walk. They even limit the city that can be covered by people with walking difficulties or who need the assistance of some device. This is the case of an older man who was usually seen walking around the same block in the city center. The pavement of that section had been recently renewed; it was even and stable (Figure 4). His route was limited to that space. Although the surrounding sidewalks were paved, their texture did not give good support to his walker-assisted walking. He could not walk without great effort and risk on the narrow sidewalks with uneven



Figure 3. Change in the sidewalk quality in less than 300 m on Av. Inés de Suárez (Ovejera sector). Source: Stills obtained from recording the author's daily walk. Map taken from Google Maps. Preparation by the author.

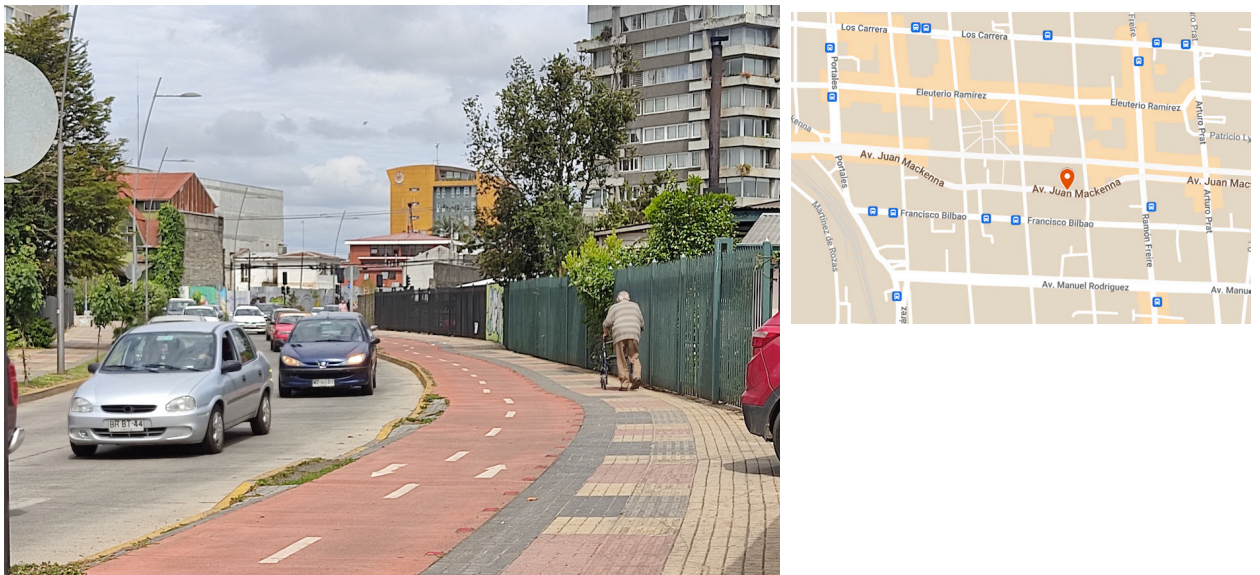


Figure 4. Seniors' walking is restricted to sidewalks that allow them to use a walker. Location: Av. Juan Mackenna between Lord Cochrane and Manuel Antonio Matta. Source: Photograph taken by the author on one of her daily walks. Map taken from Google Maps. Preparation by the author.





**Figure 5.** The woman and her son, walking in a line along the verge from Las Quemadas to Av. Diego de Almagro. Source: Still obtained from a recording made by Consuelo Robledo. Map made on Google Maps by the author where the participants' route is shown in blue and the location of the stills in red.

surfaces. For him, the walkable city was restricted to these few blocks, even though the city center can be considered "walkable" due to its density, land use diversity, and pedestrian access.

Another materiality that interferes with pedestrian rhythms is the absence of sidewalks. This is the case for the teenage son of a 47-year-old woman who lives in the Las Quemadas area, who has to walk a section along the verge of the U-496 highway to access public transport. Walking along a verge is not unusual in intermediate cities where the city's edges are close to the most consolidated area. However, due to increased vehicular traffic in recent years, these situations increasingly require that the rhythm of those who walk is one of awareness. They are usually accelerated rhythms. If people walk with others, they have to walk in a row because there is no space to walk next to them. They are also paths that exclude, as they require optimal physical abilities to negotiate the vulnerability to which bodies are exposed (Figure 5).

## V. DISCUSSION

As the literature on walkability indicates, whether people walk every day depends on elements of the built environment. However, this does not tell the whole story regarding what leads a city to be effectively walked by its inhabitants. This research suggests that walkers also need to feel continuity in their walks, i.e., that their rhythms can occur without significant disruptions. Rhythms are the coordinates "whereby inhabitants and visitors frame and organize the urban experience" (Amin & Thrift, 2002, p. 17). If continuity is not maintained, the walk becomes difficult because those who walk cannot organize their experiences and lose confidence in a path

when it does not allow them to maintain their rhythms. The stories presented show situations where the environment is decoupled from the rhythms of those who walk. The daily repetition of these decoupling experiences has, as shown, the effect of closing routes even if they are evaluated as walkable from the perspective of the built space. People avoid them by moving around other places or stopping walking. The walkable city is reduced in the former, and in the latter, the city ceases to be walked.

An attraction of any bodily practice is fluidity, i.e., the ability to perform an activity while maintaining continuity. When the rhythm is broken, extra energy is mobilized to regain fluency. That effort is physical and also emotional. The cases above show that disruptions in walking rhythms generate sensations of not having anywhere to walk, which discourages people from usually taking these routes, i.e., they impact daily walking for those who learn that these routes stop them from keeping a rhythm. This finding corroborates what Middleton (2010) says in his research of walking practices in London: "(...) an area can be considered more walkable if pedestrians can walk on 'autopilot' and the fluidity of their movement is not interrupted by awareness of the bodily planes of their experience" (p. 591). Having the experience of fluency means that the awareness of the effort required to walk is a background thought, which helps to consolidate the habit of walking; therefore, places are walked more.

These findings allow us to better understand the role of building a rhythm in daily walking practice. Rhythm is a kind of score for the body that is learned and used depending on what happens in the space. Having the chance to use a known rhythm fluently, without major shocks, creates a repertoire where the body recognizes itself and creates a feeling of having a place to walk. Walking finds its place in



space and can become an everyday practice. However, building a feeling of everyday life that allows people to walk again is more challenging in spaces where walkers' rhythms are constantly interrupted.

Maintaining a rhythm in any city, large or small, involves an effort and a negotiation with the rest of the rhythms that are complexly blended. However, in the intermediate city, the space changes in quality over short distances, which seems to generate more disruptions for pedestrian rhythms, and it is difficult to achieve an experience of walking in "autopilot" mode. In Osorno, within a few meters, those who walk find large access roads to the city, narrow bridges, train tracks, roads, large infrastructures such as silos and warehouses associated with productive activities, wastelands, and sidewalks that run out, among others. These elements make up a broken city for those walking:

Yes, there are places to walk; there are beautiful places, but maybe we need to connect them more because Osorno is not that big. When you go to Santiago, Concepción, and maybe Valparaíso, you walk many blocks, and you don't realize how much you walk because everything seems more together. But here, I hear people say, "I walked a lot" because they walked from O'Higgins to Prat! And that was a lot, and that's not true; that's really little, right? (A 42-year-old woman from the Maximiliano Kolbe neighborhood).

This woman appreciates how the lack of regular experience gives the feeling that distances are greater and exemplifies this by contrasting her experience of walking in Osorno with that of walking in metropolitan cities. As she says, when "everything seems more together," you do not realize how much you walk, i.e., in "autopilot" mode, which helps cement a daily walking practice. Achieving a continuity of walking rhythms is an element to be considered to create cities where people want to walk and get used to walking. This is one of the challenges to making intermediate cities, besides being walkable, walked.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

This work contributes to the debate on walkability by arguing, based on ethnographic work, that everyday walking not only depends on the built space's conditions but also on the social, affective, and sensory experiences that are experienced when walking. Thus, it opens a conversation for research traditions on walking that do not usually dialog: one that seeks to define and measure the walkability of urban spaces and the one that explores walking as a social practice. In addition, it shows how walking in an intermediate city faces specific challenges, which opens the door to investigating whether the situations recorded in Osorno can be considered in other intermediate cities.

In particular, this work contributes to knowing more about the role of rhythm in the construction of daily walking practices. It suggests its consideration when evaluating the walkability of spaces, especially in intermediate cities, where pedestrian rhythms can be interrupted more frequently due to their size and morphological characteristics. It is emphasized that to make walking an everyday practice, it is essential that people can use a known rhythm that feels like walking in "autopilot" mode. When they do not have to pay special attention to the physical act of walking, people can devote themselves to other things during their walk, such as thinking, listening to music, talking on a phone, enjoying the environment, chatting with those accompanying them, etc. This reinforces the practice of walking and allows it to become daily once more.

## VII. CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS CRediT:

Conceptualization, S.M.; Data curation, S.M.; Formal analysis, S.M.; Acquisition of financing, S.M.; Research, S.M.; Methodology, S.M.; Project management, S.M.; Resources, S.M.; Software; Supervision; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft, S.M.; Writing – revision and editing, S.M.

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