

# Abbas > Re-Locating



**ABSTRACT:** Stress is an undesirable offshoot of any kind of travel, forced or voluntary. To soothe the stress of travel, today’s mobile individuals — neo-nomads — engage in tactics of re:location, the practice of re-assembling a familiar and cushioned personal space, an image of home. The spaces and objects we design with mobility in mind should focus on bringing comfort to these mobile individuals. We learn however that in today’s consumerist, “liquid” and hypermobile world, linkages between PIGS — People, Information, Goods and Spaces — matter more than PIGS themselves. The territories of neo-nomads relate to linkages and are dynamic as a result.

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**BIOGRAPHY:** Yasmine Abbas is a French DPLG architect (Paris Val-de-Marne / now Paris Val-de-Seine 1997) who graduated with a Master of Science in Architecture Studies from the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) with an [Aga Khan scholarship](#) (SMArchS 2001) and a Doctor of Design from [Harvard University Graduate School of Design](#) (DDes 2006). At MIT and Harvard, Abbas researched how mobile individuals — *neo-nomads* — Re:locate, i.e. construct and reclaim a sense of belonging to places through physical, mental and digital means. Abbas has traveled extensively and worked internationally in the fields of art and architecture, consumer research and social sustainability. This led her to develop a strong understanding of applied research and design innovation. She is the founding director of [neo-nomad](#) a research blog/consultancy which deliver [urban intelligence](#), people-informed research and design strategy for the built environment. Her latest publications include [Digital Technologies of the Self](#), a book co-edited with Fred Dervin (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009) and the chapter “Neo-nomads and the Practice of Re:location — Designing for Mobilities” in Tsigaridis, D. and Jungclaus J. (eds) *Tracing Mobilities — Designing Ubiquities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Graduate School of Design — Design and Technology Report Series, forthcoming publication 2010). She joined Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE as a Professorial Research Fellow and the Program Director of RURL, the Responsible Urbanism Research Lab, Zayed University’s transdisciplinary research platform dedicated to advance knowledge in the field of sustainable urbanism.

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## Re: locating

### Design and technology to soothe the stress of travel

“At the same time it moves thousands kilometers away, travel causes to climb or go down the social ladder. It moves and downgrades — for better or for worse [...]” Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>i</sup>  
“Most of us move around so much these days that we seldom achieve that comfortable stage that Jones [citizen of a “typical American farming community” in the first half of the twentieth century] has reached with his cronies — though there are always enough familiar landmarks around so that we are never at a total loss for orientation. Yet in many cases people who move from one part of the country to another require several years before they are really worked into the new area and feel completely at ease.” Edward T. Hall<sup>ii</sup>

Relocating happens at an accelerated pace and for various reasons, faster modes of transport, a number of travel channels, study or job opportunities, political unrest, and climate change to name a few. Relocating isn't however as easy as going from point A to point B. It comes at a cost. No matter the type or degree of travel — from daily commute to forced migration — travel entails the alteration of the traveler's identity, and incidentally the objects and the spaces s/he evolves with/in. The digital precipitates these identity shifts while at the same time empowers people to anchor to places. It in fact enables mobile individuals to *Re: locate*. *Re: location* in some ways is a personal answer to the price of relocation. In the digital age, the strategy of *Re: locating* implies various behavioral tactics such as sampling (selection and assemblage of culture), cloning (reproduction of rituals, objects and spaces), and self-storing (collection and inscription of memory). Although as a result, the identity of people, their objects and spaces are reconfigurable, we can argue that the logic of reconfiguration — patterns of usage and practice — settles over time. *Re: locating* also calls for the flexibility, the networking and management of objects and spaces.

Travel is stressful because of the many “losses” that travel entails: loss of time (when missing a connection), loss of integrity (at checkpoints, or when a suitcase has been “visited”), loss of a piece of belonging (an item forgotten in a train, a piece of luggage missing), loss of orientation (within terminals and upon arrival in the host country), loss of identity (endorsing the identity of a “wealthy” tourist when traveling in developing country), loss of family connections, loss of home (literally when fleeing a disaster zone), etc. Some types of stress aren't as major as others, but the stress of travel builds-up over time. Related to the consequences of stress, Lehrer reports that:

“While stress doesn't cause any single disease — in fact, the causal link between stress and ulcers has been largely disproved — it makes more diseases significantly worse. [...] In fact numerous studies in developed countries have found that psychosocial factors such as stress are the single most important variable in determining the length of a life. [...] The emergence of stress as a major risk factor is [also] largely a testament to scientific progress: the deadliest diseases of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are those in which damage also accumulates steadily over time. (Sapolsky refers to this as “luxury of slowly falling apart.”) Unfortunately this is precisely the sort of damage that's exacerbated by emotional stress. [...] The power of this new view of stress — that our physical health is strongly linked to our emotional state — is that it connects a wide range of scientific observations, from the sociological to the molecular. On one hand, stress can be described as a cultural condition, a byproduct of a society that leaves some people in a permanent state of unease. But that feeling can also be measured in the blood and urine, quantified in terms of glucocorticoids and norepinephrine and adrenal hormones. And now we can see with scary precision, the devastating cascade unleashed by these chemicals. The end result is that stress is finally being recognized as a critical risk factor, predicting an even larger percentage of health outcomes.” (Lehrer, 2010: 132 – 133)<sup>iii</sup>

By highlighting that travel is a factor of stress (and that stress is harmful), I intend to call attention to the fact that design and technologies associated with travel are essentially meant to bring comfort, and to soothe anxieties due to mobility. While many design strategies soothe the physical discomfort of for example having to transport bulky items, others also tackle purposefully or not our emotions. As an answer to the needs for portability, flexibility and adaptability, designers have been creating objects that can be (dis)assembled, transported, (un)folded, combined, adapted, worn and carried (Vitra organized a traveling exhibit displaying a range of artifacts in the above order).<sup>iv</sup> Designers have also experimented with the flexibility of the architectural program. In retrospective, Touch·Sensitive, the experiment Vaucelle and I conducted in 2007 was an attempt at creating a wearable that would operate on the

mind by massaging the body while on the move, helping people to relax if not attain a state of bliss. (Vaucelle – Abbas, 2007).<sup>v</sup> We now design “experiences”. Making a hotel feel “like home” is a strategy well developed by hotel chains. For example, at the Hotel Concorde in Frankfurt, you can spatially appropriate your hotel room by changing the lighting scheme, thus the “mood” of your assigned (and paid-for) space. (You also participate in changing the hotel’s external appearance, because the variable lighting is visible through the window as the light fixture is located nearby.) On its website, the hotel even advertises along with the “Internet access” and the “Cable pay-TV” the “colour adjustable illumination.”<sup>vi</sup> As Judy A. Siguaw and Cathy A. Enz write: “What better way to welcome guests than by providing a physical environment in which they can feel comfortable, secure, and relaxed — in short, ‘at home.’”<sup>vii</sup> However, generally the frequent traveler claims to “be at home anywhere,” a slogan promoted by ads for portable devices. So why do we need all this artifice? To create the simulacrum of home, to sooth the stress related to traveling constantly (Abbas, 2006).

Stresses due to travel occur at all times, before, during and after a physical move, whether in the time spent going from airport to airport (Bellanger, xxxx), or even on the scale of a lifetime, when one moves from location to location. This is also because mobility is multiple, physical, mental (cultural displacements) and digital. The moments of transition, moments of adjustment, are those that design, technologies and services try to smooth out. Moreover, these moments of transition and adaptation exist because neo-nomads do not carry their entire living environment with them, just what they need to “survive,” a piece of the puzzle of “home” to connect to hosts along their way. Moving about appears like a continuous process made of discontinuities (almost like the digital).

### **Stress of belonging**

Hall’s idea is that the more one travels (or the less one stays in a place?) the harder it is to feel at home in the culture one lands in. The reality of a globalized world seems to be more complex. The more one travels, the more one develops personal tactics of understanding and adaptation to places (deciding not to mix can be one!). One may travel frequently but still, with time and repetition (arrivals/departures) one starts understanding how to incorporate to places. If globalization has shuffled (and maybe flattened) cultural and architectural referents around the world, signage and digital technologies also augment the pools of “familiar landmarks” one needs to recognize in order to belong (even momentarily). Is that to say that, since culture shape spaces, the more people travel, and the more insubstantial spaces become?

### **Stress and possession**

Author Dominique Loreau: *L’art de l’essentiel* who lives in Japan since the seventies highlights the fact that possessing is stressful. That by giving away stuff, by owning only what the essential we feel more free. She practices the essential. Neo-nomads collect spaces, as they collect objects and memories. But their collection is dynamic, shrinking and augmenting at the moments of transition. In our consumerist societies, simplicity is hardly achieved! While moving generate waste, keeping only what is necessary demands a tough discipline, especially in time of high consumerism.

### **Fragmented, distributed urbanism and consumption**

Part of the spatial experience is personal. In his delightful book *Espèces d’espaces* (the phonetic of the English title “*species of spaces*” doesn’t match that of the French one!) Perce wonders:

Inhabiting a room, what is it? Is inhabiting a place appropriating it? What does it mean appropriating a place? When does a place become really ours? Is it when we soaked our three pairs of socks in a pink plastic bowl? Is it when we warmed spaghettis over a camping gas? Is it when we used all of the mismatched hangers of the wardrobe? Is it when we tacked on the wall an old postcard depicting *The Dream of St. Ursula* by Carpaccio? Is it when we experienced the agony of expectation, the stimulation of passion, or the torment of a toothache? Is it when we stretched windows curtains at our convenience, and laid the wallpapers and sanded the floors? (Perce, 1974)<sup>viii</sup>

And then Perce asks about why can’t we live in many different rooms in the city, advocating for a distributed urbanism, very Situationist-like.

Why can’t we get past the Situationists? The practice of “*dérive*” (drift or aimless mobility) was put into practice by the World War II-era International Situationist movement. They imposed this form of “play,” even playing with elements produced by a society they envisioned as consumerist, as a way to subvert the Society of Spectacle.

The marking and personalization of the city happened not because of the adherence to or circumvention of rules [not a plug-in and plug-out or pick and choose action] [...] but rather through the technique of “détournements” [changing the meaning of a place, by adding (associating) incongruous element to it (collages/ (red) arrows); associating elements that means something only to the initiated] that were “*built out of the ruins of the Spectacle*,” and represented through visual collages warning against the lure of the Society of Spectacles. (Sadler: 1998, p. 17). By drifting, recording the places of interests, and cutting and pasting different maps together into what were called “psychogeographical” maps [And adding meaning to it with arrows... the equivalent of tagging?!], the Situationists created the representation of another sociology of space (elitist still, meant to disrupt... In French... Faire son cinema), based on their distaste for the Society of Spectacles — meaning the modern, functionalist and capitalist culture. (Sadler: 1998) In using the technique of the “détournements,” Guy Debord, the group’s leader, created another kind of spectacle, a play with and in the city. It is for this reason, the notion of PLAY, (but also the illusion of freedom the Situationist practice gives) that the Situationist International movement fascinates even more today, inspiring various games using digital technologies in the city.

For example “Yellow Arrow is a global public art project of local experiences. Combining stickers, mobile phones and an international community, Yellow Arrow transforms the urban landscape into a “deep map” *that expresses the personal histories and hidden secrets that live within our everyday spaces.*” But as with FourSquare, we are forced to consume spaces and try out services and consume more (see Wired article)

### **Surveillance and losing identity**

So the trouble with comfort, secure and relax when one travels and lives (now) digital traces everywhere he goes and that consumption goes up. With globalization, capitalism having prevailed, the notion of random encounter and chance seems paradoxical in a surveillance society where everything from bodies to mobile phones and building skins is tagged and traceable, or permits tracking. Serendipity is a word that has gained traction, for that it challenges the inevitability of life that is put in place through technology. Even as technology serendipity pushes you to “consume friends”.

### **Design and technology fixes / neo-vernacular architecture, dynamic collection**

When I wrote about the Obama Presidential Campaign, another mobilization (albeit of a different scale), I highlighted the link between physical and digital spaces:

What remains critical is both the importance of human scouting, and the database that structures sociality and spaces. In contemporary mobilizations, spaces and geographies exist because of the database organized and constructed with the help of the finest scouts, from technology developers to people on the ground. Although mediated by a form to fill, nothing yet can replace grassroots organizers’ feel of the terrain (physical or digital) and their drive to mobilize others. (Abbas, 2010)

Now spaces can be designed / put together through data entry... The digital also bring the possibility to build together something that could have been otherwise difficult to do and be more ambitious with the scale of projects undertaken. If vernacular architecture is the result of transmitted knowledge from generation to others and the specific answer (and deep connection to the ground) to a geographical/geological context – climate and local resources, neo-vernacular, is the peer-to-peer transmission of knowledge through Internet platforms, over a shorter period of time, and resulting in the situational design of spaces (Abbas, 2010).

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<sup>i</sup> My translation of: « [...] *En même temps qu’il transporte à des milliers de kilomètres, le voyage fait gravir ou descendre quelques degrés dans l’échelle des statuts. Il déplace mais aussi il déclasse — pour le meilleur et pour le pire [...]* » Lévi-Strauss, C. *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1955 – reprinted 2008) ; p. 93

<sup>ii</sup> Hall, E. T. *The Silent Language* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973 – reprinted 1990): p. 34 – 35

<sup>iii</sup> Lehrer, J. “Stress Doesn’t Kill Us — but it makes everything that does kill us much worse. Inside the search for a cure” in *Wired*, August 2010: pp. 130 – 137 and 146.

<sup>iv</sup> Mathias Schwartz-Clauss and Alexander von Vegesack, eds., *Living in Motion: Design and Architecture for Flexible Dwelling* (Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Stiftung gGmbH, 2002)

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<sup>v</sup> Cati Vaucelle, Yasmine Abbas, Touch: sensitive apparel, CHI '07 extended abstracts on Human factors in computing systems, April 28-May 03, 2007, San Jose, CA, USA

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.hotelconcorde.de/>

<sup>vii</sup> Judy A. Siguaw and Cathy A. Enz, "Best Practices in Hotel Architecture," *Cornell Hotel Restaurant Administration Quarterly* (1999): 44-49; p. 44

<sup>viii</sup> My translation of: « *Habiter une chambre, qu'est-ce que c'est ? Habiter un lieu est-ce se l'approprier ? Qu'est-ce que s'approprier un lieu ? A partir de quand un lieu devient-il vraiment vôtre ? Est-ce quand on a mis à tremper ses trois paires de chaussettes dans une bassine en plastique rose ? Est-ce quand on s'est fait réchauffer des spaghettis au-dessus d'un camping-gaz ? Est-ce quand on a utilisé tous les cintres dépareillés de l'armoire-penderie ? Est-ce quand on a punaisé au mur une vieille carte postale représentant le Songe de sainte Ursule de Carpaccio ? Est-ce quand on a éprouvé les affres de l'attente, ou les exaltations de la passion, ou les tourments de la rage de dents ? Est-ce quand on a tendu les fenêtres de rideaux à sa convenance, et posé les papiers peints, et poncé les parquets ? » Perce, G. *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris : Galilée, 1974 – nouvelle édition 2000) : p. 50*