

The Word-Collector: Urban Narratives and ‘Word-Designs’

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Asking students of architecture to walk the staggeringly cold streets of Montreal during the winter months of January and February is not a request received with the utmost enthusiasm. Assigning to these walks the task of *collecting words* can actually transform the lack of excitement into genuine bewilderment. Indeed, both times I introduced the ‘Word-Collector’ – topic of an experimental studio project I taught in the Post-Professional Master’s at the School of Architecture, McGill University, during the winters of 2013 and 2014 – the students’ initial awkwardness was manifested in questions like ‘what do you mean by words?’ The familiar word seemed incomprehensible in its new context, ‘collecting words’, and the task nonsensical. Architecture students are used to roam urban environments drawing diagrams and maps, making quick sketches, capturing sounds, textures, images and motions with pencils, watercolours, video recordings, and mostly photographs. Words on their own are not something to be examined and even less ‘collected’ in a city.

No one would deny though that the public space of the cities all over the

world is saturated with words. Commercial signs, street names, posters or announcement boards, advertisements, city newspapers, graffiti inscriptions, bus schedules and mottos on car plates are just some of the most common writings we encounter in an everyday urban experience. Although usually unnoticed, our appropriation of each city's environment is significantly based on our reading of these words, not just in terms of functional circulation. If philosopher Michel de Certeau is right, some of these writings and their meanings or symbolic dimensions insinuate other routes into the functionalistic and historical order of movement in a city. They articulate a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal or permitted meaning, and thus influence our paths unexpectedly.¹

Word-Collections

With Michel de Certeau's seminal essay 'Walking in the City', Walter Benjamin's 'One Way Street', Guy Debord's 'Theory of the *Dérive*', and excerpts from James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* inspiring the initial classes, the students were encouraged to walk the city and collect words;² words that impressed them, motivated them or triggered their imagination. With this premise in mind, and the pedagogical intention to explore the possibilities of language as a tool of architectural representation, we gradually built a theoretical basis on related bibliography. We explored the impact of writing on our consciousness through the philosophical works *Does Writing Have a Future?* by Vilém Flusser and *Orality and Literacy* by Walter Ong.³ We discussed the metaphorical capacity of language through writings by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson as well as the poet Jorge Luis Borges.⁴ We looked into the effect of the written word on our imagination through the work of professor of literature and language Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book*, and of philosopher Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination*.⁵ We questioned the predominance of vision in our encounter with the world through texts by philosopher Michael Levin and architect Juhani Pallasmaa.⁶ Furthermore, relevant precedents from art, literature and cinema helped the students grasp the poetic potential of their

work and slowly create their own word-collections.

Alongside the collected words the students were also asked to write a short paragraph for every one of the words, *narrating* the reasons for choosing them. These short narratives were explicitly meant to be of a personal nature. As expressed by philosophers in the phenomenological hermeneutic tradition like Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Paul Ricoeur but also poets like Octavio Paz and Anne Carson, language is the vehicle to articulate our primary experiences of emotional and cognitive meaning, as given already to perception, in our embodied active engagement with the world.⁷ Thus the students' collected words and relevant paragraphs foregrounded connections between language architecture and the city beyond a simplistic semiotic model that sees language as a system of neutral signs void of emotional content. They specifically revealed the fullness of meaning they may carry for the students as inhabitants of the city.

Moreover, given that words do not necessarily have a physical presence of their own and are hard to actually collect, the students had to decide on the means of their own collection. They also had to define parameters and rules as to how the items of their collections would be classified and exhibited – rules appropriate to the character of the collection they were creating. Carefully contemplating the different factors of the project, international Palestinian student Rana Abughannam set off on her city explorations. Emerged in a distinctively different climate, while both missing home and trying to understand and connect to her new environment, she ended up collecting words expressing these very intense emotions. This kind of engagement with the urban envelopment is a characteristic example of how emotions are ways of-being-in-the-world. As sociologist Nick Crossley explains in his study *The Social Body*, emotions are 'ways of making sense of and acting in the world and that to be in a particular emotional state entails perceiving the world in a particular way; noticing things that one might not usually notice'.⁸

As her words accumulated Rana decided to find a way to preserve all her findings for the years to come; her collection thus became one of preserved



“Canada Post”

As I pass by the Canada Post office I dream of a package from back home, Palestine. I wonder in my thoughts fantasizing about all the food that I could be getting from my mom, all the delicious meals and sweets that she makes for me. I dream about the scent of my bed oozing comfort and soothe. I long for a hug and a kiss from my parents confirming that everything will be alright. I remember my Mom's sweet black coffee and piece of her Zaatar Manakeesh. I start missing all these days on the balcony during the summer nights with the cold breeze and a hot cup of tea with green mint. I wish Canada post could deliver a conversation or two with my dad. I close my eyes and I picture my friends and I sitting around the backyard of my house eating some watermelon with white cheese, the taste of the sweet and salty blending into perfection. And then I realize, no package could ever deliver what I need. It is not the material which I urge for, but the actual experiences and events that I need. Maybe a package with a plane ticket might be nice.

Ingredients:

- 1 paper bag from Canada Post
- 2 cups of Arabic Coffee
- A great love for your Mom

Preparation:

- Fold the paper bag and place in the jar. Make sure that the words are visible.
- Add 2 cups of Arabic Coffee and let it cool as you remember your Mom

Fig. 1. ‘Word-Collector’ project by Rana Abughannam, Handbook, McGill University, 2013.

words. She focused on how to physically compile and maintain this collection. Inspired by the Palestinian tradition of preserving food in jars (pickles), she decided to put each one of her words in a separate jar and ‘pickle’ it. She conceived three distinct word categories for her collection, each of which required a particular method of ‘pickling’. The first category consisted of city-words that reminded her of family and friends in Palestine. These were ‘pickled’ in Arabic coffee – its colour and smell being connected with many personal memories. The second category consisted of words from food products she consumed while in Montreal trying to bear the winter (comfort food, like chocolates and coffee). She preserved them using the traditional Arabic recipe for vegetable pickling: hot water, vinegar, sugar, salt and lemon juice. The third category consisted of words that were supposed to remind her of Montreal in the future and did not yet carry very strong emotional content. They were ‘pickled’ in transparent gelatin, resembling the scientific way of preserving research samples, thus alluding to the possibility for her to re-examine them at some point later on. More than 40 glass jars made up her collection, and while contemplating the practical difficulties of carrying them Rana decided to create a small handbook that would include photographs of each one of her jars, the narratives that accompany her ‘pickled words, along with instructions on how the ‘word pickling’ should be done, almost like a surreal cookbook.

Word-Designs

For the project’s second part, the students were asked to ‘design with words’ the appropriate space to exhibit their collection along with a small-scale dwelling for the collector. Building upon the characteristics of the word-collection they had already created, the nature of words they collected, the places where the words were found in the city, the physical presence of the words themselves (some students collected only recordings of words, for example) or even the meaning and form of the collected words (some students collected only verbs) they had, as designers, to create the appropriate space for this very collection.

To do that they had to put their ideas in writing right away and abstain from drawing sketches or resorting to any other method they would usually follow for a design project. Their writings, their 'word-designs' as we called them, had to explore thoroughly the interior of the spaces as well as the spatial connections with the external urban environment (views, sounds, position in the city) but not on the external form of the proposed space. The emphasis was placed deliberately on issues of atmosphere: how the space is lived and experienced from the inside, how the collection is exhibited and encountered, how the collector's private space is differentiated from the exhibition space. Geometry, materiality, lighting and furnishings of the different spaces had to respond to the particularities of the collections and the characters of the collectors themselves.

The students were guided towards their final 'word-design', experimenting each week with different modalities of writing (first- or third-person narrative, etc.) and different or even complementary temporalities (describing the space during the morning or the night hours, as a thick present or in the distant future). The premise was to experiment with language and allow for it to provide new possible architectural representations that speak to the embodied dweller, play with metaphors and personifications, describe elements of spatial character and mood, and explore the emotional engagement with architecture. To further develop the students' experimentations with language as a design tool, the process was also informed by excerpts from selected novels. These were novels that foreground Montreal as their plots' main protagonist, providing examples of how the urban environment of the city or Montreal's interior spaces are captured through language and how space is described as experienced.⁹

Sonya Kohut, whose collection consisted of words inscribed in the city's glass windows and experimented with issues of reflections and transparency, designed a small museum in one of downtown's walk-ups. Given the character of her collection her design focused on the creation of atmospheres informed by different degrees of transparency and translucency. She actually conceived of her 'word-design' as a compilation of notes which, like



Fig. 2. 'Word-Collector' project by Sonya Kohut, McGill University, 2013.

instructions, could guide the construction. Here is a small sample of her design for the space's entrance:

A glass wall will separate the interior entry, transparently dividing my living-space from the space where the visitor arrives. All will be silent and dim upon their first footsteps into the space. A beam of light will shine, but it should be impossible to detect if it is emitted from outside the wall or inside it as it will be forming circles upon its surface. A sound of breath will also appear from nowhere. A stream of warm air, emitted from across the room, will come to life like an exhalation, and a word will appear on the glass, hovering in mid-air, and then vanishing as the condensation evaporates. The visitor must decide what to do next. Do they wait for a repeat performance? Do they breathe on the glass highlighted by the light to see if further words appear?

The unceremonious and narrow landing in which they find themselves will be followed by a single flight of stairs upwards. The original stairs will be stripped away and replaced with engineered treads with open stringers cantilevered off brick wall. The volumes of the apartment below, faintly visible through translucent glass encasements, will shine yellow with incandescent light. The partition wall between the old stair and my apartment will be cut away rudely to the baseboards, revealing the layers of lathing and the cut sections of dimensional lumber inside.¹⁰

Imagining spatial qualities like a stream of warm air that fills the room as an exhalation, an unceremonious landing, a wall cut off rudely, to mention some of the images and metaphors drawn from Sonya's 'word-design', is an approach based upon and bound by language; an approach that speaks to our feelings of place and is interested in creating specific atmospheres way before creating forms and shapes. As Paul Ricoeur eloquently argues, the human imagination is primarily linguistic; only the emergence of new meanings in the sphere of language can generate new images that can be both

original and culturally significant.¹¹ This position is paramount for architecture and architectural education.

When the design process was completed, the students had a final assignment. They were exhorted to 'visit' each other's spaces, to read each other's 'word-designs' and narrate in class how they imagined their colleagues' spaces through these readings. This very last part, being an oral assignment unlike the previous ones, was an attempt to engage language in its spontaneous unedited everyday manifestation. It was a way to further examine issues of linguistic imagination but also understand how our own intentionality and pre-conceived expectations always colour our impressions and experience of a place.

Conclusion

This linguistic architectural design process developed thus in three stages. Through their word-collections and the related narratives, the students engaged in a unique understanding of the city. Deliberately framing perception and forcing a personal, emotional engagement, the city revealed deeper inter-subjective meanings. Through the different forms and modes of writing, engaged during the project's second part, the students attempted to envision an appropriate architectural space responding to both the city and the program. Lastly, oral language and narrative forms became a way to speak about the experience in the imagined new places on behalf of its potential future users.

Unlike the English idiom 'a picture is worth a thousand words' that seems to have dominated architectural education around the world, the project challenged one of the most basic architectural educational strategies: the almost exclusive use of pictorial means (sketches, diagrams, plans, facades, renderings) in imagining and designing space. It implemented a process in which language would work as architectural representation by bringing together Paul Ricoeur's insights with an understanding of the status of the work of architecture discussed by contemporary architectural theoreticians Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier in their historical

study on representation. As they have argued, ever since the eighteenth century reductive modes of architectural representation (unfortunately still dominant today) have been contested through ‘theoretical projects’. These were projects like Piranesi’s *Carceri* etchings, Ledoux’s institutions for a new city, or more recently Hejduk’s masques: creations understood fully as autonomous ‘models’ of architectural work in variable scales, modes and representations. Elaborating on the notion of architectural theoretical projects, they explain that they have always been poetic images inhabitable by the imagination, similar to metaphors in fiction, deliberately questioning any prosaic transcription into building.¹² In these terms the ‘Word-Collector’ put forward a ‘theoretical project,’ a fully autonomous architectural design vision constructed solely of words.

The project hardly exhausts, of course, the study of an active and creative use of language and literary means in architectural education. The development and implementation of language-based design is a vast field of increasingly growing interest and thus a fascinating one to investigate further. The issue of space appropriation by the inhabitant, for example, an aspect that was only broached briefly by my exercise, is one that can greatly benefit from the possibilities offered by language – oral (as engaged in my course) but also written.

- 1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 105.
- 2 The readings were chosen for their compelling connection to walking and how the city and its writings can influence it. (Certeau, ‘Walking in the City’, *ibid.*, 91-110; Walter Benjamin, ‘One Way Street’, in Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings, Volume 1, 1913-1926* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1996), 444-88; Guy Debord, ‘Theory of the *Dérive*’, in Tom McDonough (ed.), *The Situationists and the City* (London: Verso, 2009), 77-85; James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 1992).
- 3 Vilem Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, Nancy Ann Roth (transl.)

- (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1988).
- 4 We looked into Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, Robert Czerny (transl.) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse*, Calin-Andrei Mihailescu (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).
 - 5 Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
 - 6 David Michael Levin, *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation* (London: Routledge, 1988); Juhani Pallasmaa, *Encounters*, Peter MacKeith (ed.) (Helsinki: Rakennustieto Oy, 2005).
 - 7 For more see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, op. cit. (note 4); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language,' in Alden Fisher (ed.), *The Essential Writings of Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Harcourt, 1969), 214-230; Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, Rachel Phillips (transl.) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Anne Carson, *Eros, the Bittersweet: An Essay* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
 - 8 Nick Crossley, *The Social Body: Habit, Identity and Desire* (London: SAGE, 2001), 85.
 - 9 Lance Blomgren, *Walkups* (Montreal: Conundrum Press, 2009); Nicolas Dickner, *Nikolski, a Novel* (Toronto: Knopf, 2008).
 - 10 Sonya Kohut, 'Word-design' (Montreal: McGill University, April 2013).
 - 12 Paul Ricoeur, 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality', *Man and World*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1979), 123-141.
 - 13 Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 77-87.