

# *Tracing Spatial Values through Poem-Drawing*

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In this article, poem-drawing is proposed as an emotive tool to interweave observations of place, the subjective perception of the architect and imagined spatial interventions. A composite of two artistic instruments, it allows the subjective and the objective dimension in architecture to re-establish their dialogue. In this paper, we aim to exhibit how poem-drawing can 1.) bring urban history into presence by verse-image storytelling, 2.) discern how emotions (memories, desires, fears, dreams) related to a place build the urban collective memory, and 3.) encourage a design approach that is sensitive to the site's inherent beauty.

Taking the old city core of Ohrid as a case study, we examined its reflection in/through the eyes of three (imaginary) interlocutors: a young pregnant woman in 1944, an eight-year-old girl in 2018 and an old lady in 2084. Through a process of poem-drawing/discussing, we endeavoured to inhabit their personae by writing and drawing our imagined experiences of their storylines. Each cycle of poem-drawings was followed by comparison and evaluation of the written and drawn results according to their relevance for a future spatial intervention. By comparing poem-drawings from three time

periods, we aimed at questioning whether it is possible to reveal which spatial qualities remain absolute, timeless, derived from the specificity of a particular site.

With this experimental process, we tried to find ways to trace urban history and to capture site-specific qualities difficult to measure by conventional means. By using our own embodied experience, our imagination and through discussions on our findings, our investigation brought into play stories of the ancestors and the descendants of the citizens of Ohrid. Further, we explored the idea of memory as a transformable quality, created not just from the re-interpreted past but also through imagination. As Alberto Perez Gomez put it, 'whereas history recounts real facts from the past, poetry (fiction or drama) opens up the future by transcending the first order of reference to reality. In other words, fiction reveals what is essential for humans in recognition of our mortality and transcendence, and thus opens up potential realities for culture'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in our poem-drawing process, the reading of urban memory makes it possible to develop spatial designs accordingly. Through these extended connotations of history and memory, we exhibit our own lessons regarding the awareness of the emotional dimension of urban space.

### **Embodied Memories of the City of Ohrid**

Ohrid is the largest city on Lake Ohrid, the southwest 'water' corner between the Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Greece. Rising along the lake, the old city core is characterized by a traditional urban fabric: organically displaced individual houses over a hilly topography, anthropomorphic streets framed by plants, flowers and verandas, a forest embracing the ascending ground and punctually scattered 'focal' points (churches, squares, maple trees, an ancient amphitheatre) where the lifelines of citizens and tourists unfold and interweave. Often dubbed the 'Jerusalem of the Balkans', Ohrid exudes an otherworldly air of spiritual serenity; the presence of the lake softens one's soul and flows into each urban fragment: 'if some house does

not touch a church then it looks towards a church, as each urban fragment – if it does not touch the lake, then it surely looks towards the lake'.<sup>2</sup>

Ohrid's urban atmosphere changes every season: the city is awash with the clamour of tourists during the summer; it is pleasantly peaceful in spring and autumn, and terribly meditative in winter. Thus, the urban site-specific 'laws' of the urban life transform during the year: three quarters of the year, citizens are pursuing their routines in a quiet spatial organism, whereas in summer their lifelines are pressed upon by foreigners, and their public space becomes 'narrower', invaded by foreign living differences. A certain aversion toward the overwhelming tourism is present in the anecdotes of Ohrid's (lack of) hospitality, as if the citizens are afraid of any change in the old city core: 'a creationally inspiring, historically abundant, outwardly calm, inwardly capricious, naturally innocent' urban island.<sup>3</sup>

Since Ohrid is a node where our own storylines interweave, we initiated its close reading by immersing ourselves into an inner dialogue: evoking personal thoughts and feelings related to the city. By revisiting our memories, we tried to discover and express our personal knowledge of Ohrid through verses and drawings. We shared and discussed our personal experiences within a common mental palimpsest: a crossroad of intimate urban sentiments. As we compared these experiences, a question emerged: what if we tried to see these places through the senses of another person, from a different time, at a different age? What if we tried to read the city's being not only in its current appearance, but also as it was or as it *might be*? These are actually *design-related* questions: how to create a new spatial structure sensitive to *existing* site-specific values. How to establish a dialogue with (and reinforcement of) the spatial qualities from the past. How to recognize them and make them endure. How to predict their relevance years after our passing. Addressing these questions, we tried to experience, draw and write through the minds and bodies of three interlocutors from different time frames: 1944 (wartime period), 2018 (present day) and 2084 (66 years

hence). In our stories, the child living in 2018 is the old lady living in 2084. In doing this, we attempted to extend the significance of our investigation beyond our own emotional urban biographies.

Important threads interweaving the poem-drawings in this phase were spontaneous discussions with interviewees: permanent inhabitants of or temporary visitors to Ohrid. Their stories provided information that was fragmentarily included in the imagined persona storylines as *borrowed dreams and memories*. Each story tried to address the question: how to reveal and preserve site-specific spatial values.

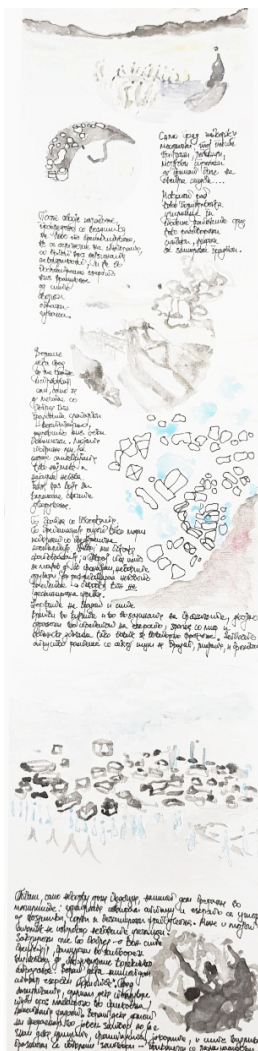
**Storyline of 1944:** A young woman is writing and drawing her love story through an emotive description of the urban environment. She gives names and character traits to houses, to streets, to trees, to neighbourhoods and squares. In her written and drawn world, the urban objects become personalities she can relate to. In her vulnerable condition of pregnancy, she contemplates Ohrid's suffering: the unpredictable conflict between the German-Bulgarian forces and the partisans' anti-Nazi resistance. Her writings and drawings tell us about her condition a week and a day before and a week and a day after the conflict. The transformation of the urban atmosphere through time is exhibited through her emotions. A week before the conflict, while walking in the forest and meditating near the lake, she tries to establish a dialogue with her unborn child. She develops an awareness of the movements of her transforming body and simultaneously she discerns fragments of Ohrid's beauty. Responding to these fragments, she attempts to *roll the sun made of wind and warmth* toward her inner 'island-star'.<sup>5</sup> A day after the conflict, she expresses the turmoil in her descriptions of the city after the departure of her husband, a teacher and partisan. She tries to survive the absence of her husband and the violence gripping the city, to protect her inner spark, to keep alive the everyday ritual of 'self-creation, self-expression and self-immersion' through the loving dialogue with her child.<sup>6</sup> The meaning of streets, squares, human discussions is being trans-

formed: the public space becomes wounded, dangerous, nostalgic, dispirited. Her written and drawn urban contemplations are ways of adapting to the transformed (and historically dense) environment, through a development of '*poiesis* ... always aimed at *more* than preserving life'.<sup>7</sup>

The poem-drawing of this first story (Fig. 1) exhibits graphically how a creative re-thinking of an author's memories (Bogdanova), interviewees' words and anonymous urban photographs are intertwined in a written-drawn narrative. Imagining Ohrid's breath in 1944, she finds its beauty endangered: *the peaceful silence on the edge of the lake, the spontaneous gatherings around the maple-tree, the freedom to float freely in (and to gaze at the city and the stars from) the lake*. These site-specific spatial values are also mentioned in the writings of Macedonian architect Zivko Popovski and in the vivid verbalized stories of the interviewees.

The memories of the first interviewee (Bosilkov, 28 years old, a temporary citizen) were translated in the story through characterization of an imaginary husband. A historically relevant event for detecting spatial values was the transformation, during the war, of his childhood summer house on the small port into a prison. This event was used in the poem-drawings. By limiting the approach from water, the prison became a physical and metaphorical urban boundary – choking a point where the city flows into the lake. Writings by and discussions with the second interviewee (Shekutkovska, 34 years old, a temporary citizen) helped in understanding and translating pregnancy as condition of intensified joy and precaution, leading to a heightened perception of the environment.

Re-reading and immersing into their embodied knowledge, the story represents a translation, aiming to 'enter/understand' Ohrid through others, through critical empathy with their personal and historical experience.<sup>8</sup> The spatial values brought to the fore in the poem-drawing may have slightly changed over the years, but they are strongly present today as recognizable interweaving of local *life* and urban *content*.



The wet edge  
as a semi-floating classroom  
melted the children's hearts  
as sponges-dissolved,  
thirsty for watered cities.

We are locked in a panorama  
- view towards each disruption,  
forced to suffer passively  
the collective hardship  
from an isolated viewpoint.

After each lesson,  
followed by a sigh of  
an inner breach,  
he would have leant on the poplar,  
with his back upon her  
invisibility,  
he would have observed the lake  
through an amorphous framing  
of the surrounding limitations.

Before he met me  
he was sailing alone,  
to dream inside the Water,  
gazing towards the urban  
puzzles-through  
interlaced axes.

My warmth took away  
his loneliness  
as the highest vine  
upon which he cherished  
his beliefs.

(...)  
His departure:  
an immersion into  
undefined sacrifice.

The nerves of the city  
and all the cells in the houses  
and behind the mountains  
(doubly reflected in  
lake's trembling)  
were shimmering a hopeful peace  
and an organic beauty  
as cry for the Return.

(...)

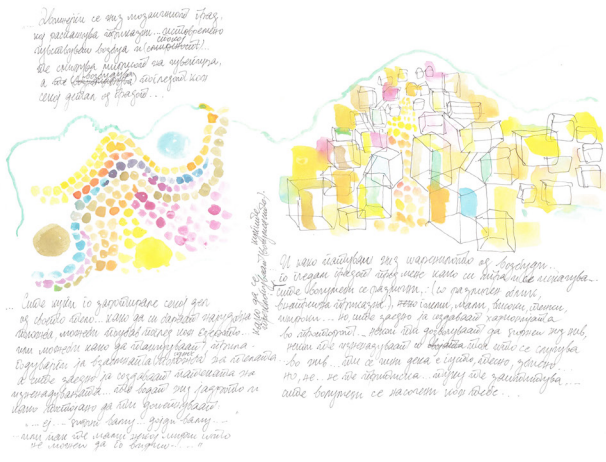
Our Home has grown  
into a martyrdom:  
dark is springing from the parcel,

and the lake is tired  
of sighs, tears,  
and meaningless sacrifices.  
Me and my stomach  
were evacuated  
by his disciples.

Fig. 1. 1944, A different city after a day (Bogdanova).

**Storyline of 2018:** An eight-year-old girl is vigilantly daydreaming along the city. With innocent senses and curious heart, she experiences an urban wayfaring with her parents. She writes about dancing houses and paths of surprises whispering to her, about balconies with ‘blossoms hanging above’ her eyes, protecting her – overtaking the parents’ role when she slips out of their hands. While her writing exhibits a hybrid of her own embodied experience of the city and her father’s interpretations of the observed, her drawings (Fig. 2) clearly exhibit her own mental map of Ohrid: a green edge (the forest – a blue line), a mosaic of colourful circles embracing the forest and a topography of dwelling units of organic diversity. Here, the imaginary ‘reading’ of the place exhibits these urban qualities as site-specific treasures: the streets exude a protective atmosphere because of their human scale; they humbly invite the observer to discern their layered beauty.

The story brings together two threads of evoked memories: an author’s (Nikova) embodied childhood inscriptions and the words of the interviewee (Mateska, 23 years old, permanent inhabitant) – ‘each time I walk through the old city, I always discern some touching detail that I’ve never seen before’. As foreign visitors, we tried to understand the emotions of the native inhabitants. When asked how and where the old city core could be modified, Mateska rebelliously replied: ‘Nothing can be added, nothing can be transformed!’ This emotional outburst was a result of her fear, based on previous wrongs done to the city. She said that many buildings already had grown into urban walls, imprisonments, violations of the essential right of each house – to look towards the lake. However, we tried to interpret her concern critically: too much protection can lead to a fanatic spatial inactivity, leading to a mortification and disappearance of the urban entity. As Popovski has said, in historically and culturally dense places, ‘in order to survive – at a certain moment – some things need to be removed’, since ‘each contemporaneity brings two accessories: one innovative and one restorative.’<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is the architect’s responsibility to *re-create* site-specific values of the place while controlling the degree of change, of what is ‘removed’.



The houses have rotated every part of their body. It looks like they are looking for a comfortable position, a more beautiful view of the lake... or maybe they are dancing, adjusting the mutual position of the bodies ... together they build the path of surprises ... they guide you and they whisper constantly: '... hey ... look there ... come here ...'

Fig. 2. 2018, Wayfaring of a child – shifting between her parent’s hands and her lonely daydreaming (Nikova).



**Storyline of 2084:** Like Orwell's 1984, the third storyline in 2084 is a critique of the existing spatial crimes occurring in Ohrid, an illustrative warning against the disrespect displayed toward the city's site-specific spatial values.<sup>10</sup> We took the existing negative attitudes in Ohrid (growing urban walls) and we re-thought the prison metaphor from 1944 (obstructed dialogue between the lake and the city): Ohrid 2084 is an aggressive fictional opposite extreme of inactivity, questioning what would happen to citizen's lifelines if the core value is physically imprisoned and separated from the lake.

The girl from 2018 writes her urban contemplations as an old lady in 2084, traveling inside the wall between the lake and the city. She recalls her childhood memories with a nostalgic lament, while experiencing the wall as an aggressive research laboratory, built to 'protect' the old city core as an archaeological site. Her body and soul are wounded, offended – physically and metaphorically she is arduously 'bridging above' and *suffering between* the dystopian, suffocated city and her inner city from before the wall. The exaggerated 'protection' suffocates the beauty. The author's (Spasevska) memories of Ohrid as an urban embodiment of freedom, diversity and dialogue between the city and the lake 'murmuring secrets to each other' are contrasted with the imprisonment of 2084: the lake is 'alienated, abandoned, left on the bottom'. The wall is a metaphor of aggressive 'restoration', violent toward site-specific values.

**Bringing the Stories Together:** From Recognizing Site-Specific Values to Design Proposals

The three storylines were developed independently, without any intention of addressing design problems. After sharing and re-thinking the collected poem-drawings among the team of authors, we recognized the following site-specific urban values: the dialogue between the lake and the city, the vertical topographical layering of houses, the vividness in different scales, the harmonious interlacing between the forest and the human dwellings, the maples as filigree-domes above neighbourhood squares, the intimacy

between dwelling units and public cores: the ancient theatre, the Byzantine remnants and the medieval fortress. Our discussions transformed the collected 'passive' observations into a design question: how can we re-define historically blessed urban merits? How can we create a sensitive 'urban imprisonment'?

Based upon the previous exercises, we formulated the following goals for design. First of all, design proposals should offer a form of healing of the *whole* urban fabric. For this goal, architecture could be considered a form of infrastructure, offering punctual intervention in wounded places such as structures in decay. Second, the designs should exhibit the *mahalle* neighbourhoods as Ohrid's secret inner cities. This spiritual heritage was recognized as a site-specific lifestyle. A glimpse into the hidden beauty of the *mahalla* streets would re-direct attention away from the urban landmarks. Third, we aimed for ephemeral interventions: organic, transient and changeable. Such interventions could be related to fragmented walks among the trees, cottages for birds, cradles, porches or colonnades or a viewing tower.

### **Creational Observation through Re-Drawing and Re-Writing**

Finally, we immersed ourselves into a closer scale of lyrical re-thinking of three chosen *mahalla* streets: hidden and rarely visited sites in Ohrid. Each of these wounded places was represented through a poem-drawing with a transformed (desired) atmosphere. Lines of vulnerability were mapped on one layer of tracing paper, whereas the upper layer exhibited perspective views of the transformation. Each design proposal aimed to expose the *mahalle* as an urban fragment where the visitor can re-connect with the wondrous city through the eyes of a citizen.

*Look at the Tower  
in the distance  
and walk towards Her;  
She longs to exalt  
the plane  
and to discern the  
breath of the hills.*

*A trembling shade,  
a mystical framing,  
holiness and peace  
whispering to the Lake.*

*A rhythm which  
frames the greenery,  
ordering and  
leading its spread.  
Slow down.  
Listen  
to the voices  
of the Forest.*



Fig. 3. Design Proposal 1: A tower as a marker behind the hill + perpetual inland colonnades (Spasevska).

**Design Proposal 1:** Ilindenska Street starts at the small urban port. It flows through the city, climbs the hill, runs through the forest and descends into agricultural land. Its ending flows back into the lake, where the last 500 metres are hardly accessible, in neglected condition. A new porous wooden viewing tower at the foot of the hill is imagined as a new second small port of Ilindenska, opening the dead end street to the water's edge. Inland, along the street, wooden porches mark wounded places as permeable colonnades, framing views between streets at different altitudes.



Fig. 4. Design Proposal 2: Tracing papers overlapped (Bogdanova)

**Design Proposal 2:** Fig. 4a represents a map of the second street of research. Black surfaces mark structures in decay, whereas pink 'amoebas' represent fragments of the forest and trees framing the pedestrian promenade. The proposal aims at re-thinking the wounded places as small *mahalle* squares: neighbourhood 'markets' and semi-open structures as nodes of socialization among neighbours. Fig. 4b exhibits transformations of the nodes through desired atmospheres: hanging cradles oriented toward the cityscape and the lake, pergolas holding creepers, vines and roses creating a filigree shadow above the benches, bird cottages in the treetops, urban yards and craft markets visually connecting the promenade with the lower city. Nodes are physically connected with threads above ground level. These threads lead the visitor through the street. They are an untouchable orientation marker for human beings and at the same time a promenade for the birds. The poem-layer in Fig. 4c names and expresses feelings we wish to elicit: *floating temporary creatures above ground tracks...an invisible corporeality . . . he took me through a filigree embroidered by porous treetops.*



*Connecting fragilities:  
floating temporary creatures  
above ground tracks...  
An invisible corporeality:  
vulnerable voids becoming  
living opulent organisms.*

*He took me by hand  
through  
a filigree  
embroidered  
by treetops*

*Enlightened cavities  
-shadows, through  
a displaced glance*

*A devastated hovering square  
- the horizon is much more  
than an image*

Fig. 4c. Perspectives/Panoramas/Verses/Axonometries.



Fig. 5. Design Proposal 3: Frames/gates and threads addressing different senses (Nikova).

**Design Proposal 3:** Although a hidden *mahalle* line, the third street touches few public urban markers ('Sv. Bogorodica Perivlepta' Church, fragments of the medieval wall, the Upper Gate, a square with a fountain and maple trees). The interventions are punctual wooden gates connected with above-ground threads in different colours. Each colour signals to the visitor which sense to awaken. The fragrance of roasting chestnuts, a seafood restaurant, a bird's whisper, hidden memorials, silent surfaces waiting to be caressed. The colour riddle makes the visitor slow down and pay attention to joys usually bypassed.

### Processual Summary

The three design proposals were constructed upon a common aim of repairing wounded places with a sensitivity to Ohrid's inherent site-specific qualities. Through poem-drawings, we experienced, imagined and compared experiential urban phenomena: feelings, memories, atmospheres, desires. Starting with an inner dialogue, we filtered our emotions through discussions, cultivating an empathy with the place(s) and the Other. After re-reading and discerning 'permanent inherent values' we re-created them as Ohrid's *uncompromising essentials*. The resulting design proposals exhibit different examples of how sensitive ephemeral installations can enliven the fragile urban organism by silent appearance – without threatening its inner peace.

- 1 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love: Architectural Longing After Ethics and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 192.
- 2 Zivko Popovski, 'Ohrid School (of Architecture)', *Arshin*, 2 (1996), 25.
- 3 *ibid.*, 23, 22-29.
- 4 Ludwig Hevesi, quoted in 'Gustav Klimt's Hope 1 by Johanes Dobai', available online at <http://www.phlogma.com/aporia/wein/hope.html>, accessed July 2018.
- 5 Aleksandra Shekutkovska-Dokoska, *Koncept Mama: A Contemporary Handbook for Pregnancy, Birth-Giving and Beginning of Motherhood* (Skopje: publisher, 2018), 45.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 37.
- 7 Pérez-Gómez, *Built Upon Love*, *op. cit.* (note 1), 56.
- 8 'You can only get into something if you understand or are willing to', John Hejduk interviewed in Michael Blackwood's film *Education of an Architect: Voices from the Cooper Union School of Architecture* (Michael Blackwood Productions, 1993).
- 9 Popovski, 'Ohrid School (of Architecture)', *op. cit.* (note 2), 28.
- 10 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eight-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1949).