

Reading(s) and Writing(s)

Unfolding Processes of Transversal Writing

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'In these constructions, reading and writing approach identity'
*Jennifer Bloomer*¹

This issue of *Writingplace Journal*, *Reading(s) and Writing(s)*, focuses on the complex process of writing itself, and in particular on the question of reading and responding to texts. By presenting not only resulting texts, but discreet readings of works in process integrated with the discussions that unfold, the issue reveals complex modes of writing that move between the scholarly and the fictional. It draws attention to the questions of authorial voice, the voice of the reader, and the voice of the possible protagonists of the text, even if this as an object, space or indeed, place. If the authors could be said to engage in various acts of 'writing place', as per this journal's general thematic focus, what kinds of places do they bring into existence? Furthermore, which modes of writing are deemed most appropriate in order to create both evocative and critical accounts of places?

Driven by a concern to reinvigorate space-related research through the means of writing, the texts in this issue have evolved through the collaborations of a group of affiliated thinkers and practitioners, within a series of reading and writing workshops in the context of the project *Transversal Writing*.² Challenging the means and formats of conventional academic writing, this project sets out to transgress the hierarchies between academic and non-academic knowledge, theory and practice, discipline and profession. Contesting the reification of architecture that maintains that the building is a discrete object – whose values are materialized through real

estate, limits defined by property borders and agency reduced to profit-making – what we call ‘transversal writing’ traces the lines of connection between architectural conceptions and their effects, between decisions and materializations, forms and affordances. The project acknowledges how architecture is shaped by words, imagery and ideas long before it is transformed into bricks and mortar. Recognizing architecture as a product of the collective imaginary – an act of human creation – is to identify the potentiality in how words, images and physical entities have a capacity to proliferate, spread and generate unforeseeable effects, far beyond the intentions of the architect.

Architectural research, at this time, cannot stay immune from the serious challenges that threaten societies today and that, one way or other, are caught up in the entrenchment of science and epistemology that hitherto have been part of their making. The methods, and the objects, of research need to be revised. We frequently forget, for instance, that architecture is a cultural concept that shifts depending on the context. It is not just an aesthetic object, a materialized accomplishment or fact that is possible to evaluate and measure in various registers, depending on the actors involved. Nor can it be reduced to practice, based on a set of tools for concrete environmental intervention – specifications, contracts, drawings, sketches, models and so forth. Architecture must also be recognized as a critical lens for investigating the built environment; a form of knowledge and a means for reflection that is uniquely able to address ‘building’ as both verb and noun. The operative use of this lens allows us to see how architectural practice is productive of affective relations amid specific environments, relations that are contingent and open-ended. The development of the method and politicoethical issues that are implicit in ‘transversal writing’ – drawing in particular on Félix Guattari’s thinking – comes from the group’s insistence on the importance of writing to creatively as well as critically bring forth and *situate* knowledge.

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The contributions in this issue can thus be seen as attempts to write *with* local environments, ranging from an obscure British forest reserve to the politically sensitive environment of the island of Cyprus, from places of historical colonial life to the author's memories of a city. Robin Wilson (with photographer Nigel Green) traces an encounter with landscape delivered through a practice that marries the creative essay with photography, and is based on a series of walks in the areas of Darwell and Powdermill Reservoirs in East Sussex, England. Anne Kockelkorn's diary, written during a research and teaching stint in Cyprus, takes in the island landscape, politics and underlying economic forces that dramatically shape the environment in order to reveal a complex picture across a variety of scales and analytical registers. The contribution of Klaske Havik offers a series of lyrically framed observations of an architectural educator on repeated visits to the city of Skopje. It reflects on the complex histories and processes that shape the city, from the remnants of the Metabolist city to the neoclassical vocabulary of a reconstituted national identity. Marko Jobst's text, composed of two layers, brings together queer auto-fictions with the architecture histories of an illusive Serbian Baroque in the city of Belgrade. Hélène Frichot's contribution offers an approach to decolonizing through fiction, where cross-generational memories of family life in the Seychelles are used to critically illuminate the colonial histories. Kim Gurney's text closely follows the making of a film set in an artisanal workshop in Cape Town, and its onward journeys, to offer an offscreen perspective on the labour of the imagination. Finally, Naomi Stead pursues a theoretical inquiry into the relationship between writing and walking based on her previous fictocritical texts based in Stockholm, Sydney and Brisbane.

In each of these writings of places, the writing approaches have gone beyond mere architectural description, and have included enfolding narrative strategies with discourse analysis, archival research, *in situ* observations, field research and fictional speculation. The texts may include the

voices of protagonists: real or fictive characters, human or non-human inhabitants, even objects. The position of the author is challenged: is the author an insider, participant or an external observer? And is it possible, at times, for the positions of researcher, author and experiencing subject to merge?

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This collection challenges the notion that writing is produced as a mere aftereffect, a means of writing-up, or a report on what has come to pass in a research project. It further challenges the idea that the written word is a transparent medium, available for the transport or communication of clear and distinct voices and distinctive ideas, without the interference of noise, nonsense, material sensations of individual and collective bodies, struggling amid existential territories. Instead, we locate writing in the midst of things, in profound contact with the daily problems we encounter. Approached as a mode of knowledge production, writing foregrounds how the challenges for seeking knowledge in architecture are intimately intertwined with a recognition that 'method' is not only about investigating, but also about pre-empting and staging the world. Writing means searching, losing and finding again, looking for sources and deciding to identify them as such, seeking paths in the undergrowth of everyday experience and the mountain of books, catching a glimpse of a swiftly disappearing precursor. Writing constructs an itinerary that criss-crosses a terrain. It carries resemblances to narratives, because we need to have stories to tell, and stories to tell stories, in order to transform the way we continue to relate with and alter our locations of existence. Understood as a writing methodology, what we call 'transversal writing' engages realigned knowledge practices in architecture through critical, embodied, reflective and situated approaches to research.

In this collection we specifically explore emergent relations between writing and reading, thereby addressing the control system that upholds the paradigmatic notion of 'scientific proof': peer review. Rather than a blind,

hierarchically organized and nevertheless arbitrary function of passing and receiving judgement, for this issue of *Writingplace* we demonstrate an alternative method: one based on sharing and discussing our discreet writing practices, always and delicately acknowledged as works in process. The texts presented here derive from a specific milieu composed around writing experiments, centred on two intense workshops where the emphasis was placed on reading each other's work in an open and associative way, rather than in a conventionally critical or even agonistic fashion. In 2016 and 2018, the Transversal Writing Group took part in workshops whose aim was to discuss writing 'across the registers of disciplines, practices, scales and spatio-temporalities, straddling ethnography (slow) and journalism (fast)'. In a series of writing and reading workshops, the group of eight authors functioned as each other's 'peer readers' (rather than reviewers), responding to the drafts circulated in advance. As a result, every text was read and commented on by seven readers, compared with the usual two in standard academic practice, and rounded off by group discussions.

In this issue of *Writingplace*, selected parts of the essays are presented along with selected readings. While all the readings have been signed by a specific author – the designated reader of the original text in our workshop scenarios – they are influenced by and incorporate elements of the responses of the group as a whole. In preparation for this publication, readings have been treated with equal importance as the samples of writing, elevating the intricacies of transversal relations in and through processes of knowledge production.

The readings function as introductions to the main texts, raising certain issues of writing: structure, voice, perspectives, introducing thematics and suggesting contexts – they offer a primer, a fertile ground for the understanding of the main text. By putting reading and writing on par, we acknowledge them as equally dependent on our skills, attention and care, making the author dissolve into the reader and vice versa, thus muddling

the outlines of identity. As noted by Michel Foucault:

*Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.*³

'Writingplace', then, becomes the place of writing, reading and responding. This mode of working offers an alternative to the conventional production of academic texts and the conventional role disinterested peer-reviewing practices play within it. While academic journals generally employ a procedure in which a draft is reviewed by anonymous experts, whose comments are then addressed by the author and lead to a revised, final version of the text, this issue of *Writingplace* explores alternative ways of reading, reviewing and developing texts: not as acts of authoritative judgement, but as collective, non-hierarchical and deeply open-ended processes. Ultimately, by exposing the various aspects of the process of writing, reading and then redressing the reading in further acts of writing, this issue of *Writingplace* hopes to ignite a discussion regarding reviewing practices. It proposes a more intimate, collective way of learning from peers – all with the aim of further developing architectural knowledge.

- 1 Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)cripts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 146.
- 2 The *Transversal Writing* project has been supported by Vetenskapsrådet (Swedish Research Council) through its funds for artistic research, led by Catharina Gabrielsson with H  l  ne Frichot as a co-researcher at the School of Architecture KTH. This issue of *Writingplace* presents only part of the work, a book about the *Transversal Writing* project, addressing more specifically the notion of transversality, is expected to appear at a later stage.
- 3 Michel Foucault, 'What Is an Author?', in: Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-138.