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#4

Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination

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Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination

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Architecture is by definition an act of spatial imagination, this wondrous capacity to envision possible futures for the built environment. Spatial imagination is essential in order to visualize new constructions taking shape, evolving in time, and partaking of the cultural expression of a place or era. It takes spatial imagination to foresee how architecture can meaningfully contribute to people's lives, providing a sense of belonging, space for their needs and dreams. Nonetheless, spatial imagination is oftentimes hard to trigger or difficult to control. Imaginative ideas often emerge unexpectedly, when seemingly unconnected or contradictory words, images and thoughts are brought together. Spatial imagination, just like the creative act of writing, seems to reside in 'the lightning flashes of the mental circuits that capture and link points distant from each other in space and time,'¹ as Italo Calvino poetically claims.

The topic of this fourth issue of *Writingplace* journal, **Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination**, 'links points distant from each other', by connecting texts from different disciplines with architectural design, in order to study imagination. This issue starts from a paradoxical observation: although we recognize, almost spontaneously, the paramount role spatial imagination plays in the creation of an inspired built environment, there is admittedly limited emphasis on the detailed study of this creative imagination in the field of architectural research. Moreover, a lack of rigorous reflection on the key role of spatial imagination in addressing the urban and architectural issues that are currently at stake in our societies can be detected across all of the design disciplines. For example, there is surpris-

ingly little attention for how specialties *outside* architecture can inform or inspire the proliferation of spatial imagination. It seems, as William Whyte argued, that we have forgotten that 'we are always translating architecture: not reading its message, but exploring its multiple transpositions'.² The issue focuses precisely on different kinds of transpositions between written forms of imagination and architecture, but without defending the popular belief that we should read architecture as a polysemic text and start to think in terms like 'architexture'³ or 'polygraphy'⁴ when analysing architecture culture.

The workshop 'Choices and Strategies of Spatial Imagination as Ways of Knowing' (Brussels, May 2019) from which the majority of the papers in this issue originate, was built on the abovementioned convictions and was a deliberate attempt to address the aforementioned issues. Organized in the framework of the Scientific Research Network (SRN) 'Texts \approx Buildings. Dissecting Transpositions in Architectural Knowledge (1880-1980)',⁵ the participants of this workshop (architects, artists, philosophers and educators) developed the idea that knowledge of architecture grows in the transpositions between (literary) imagination and materiality, theory and praxis, visible customs and unstated assumptions. They agreed on the fact that although an awareness of the multiple layers undergirding architectural imagination has gained currency, an acute understanding of how these layers (inter)act, is still lacking. Moreover, while moving as tectonic plates, often colliding, the crossover effects these layers of imagination generate, and the intellectual record of these effects, are still in need of careful dissection.

With spatial imagination being an intrinsic aspect of architecture and design, but also deeply embedded in fields like literature or the arts, this fourth issue of *Writingplace* focuses on concepts, elements and theoretical foundations from different strands of knowledge that can propel choices and strategies of spatial imagination. The transpositions explored through

the various contributions of this issue are of conceptual, contextual and disciplinary nature, while oftentimes blurring the boundaries between these basic categories. The authors explore how systems of ideas, related to spatial imagination, have been developed and employed by various disciplines, while also been transformed while circulating. The articles investigate how physical and cultural contexts (cities, places, buildings) can be evoked, interpreted or represented in literary and artistic works, thus triggering anew spatial imaginative possibilities. The contributors illuminate how instruments and methods that travel between fields of knowledge can participate fruitfully in the discourse on architecture and the spatial disciplines.

The issue opens with two articles that trace transpositions for spatial imagination through parallel readings between philosophy, literature and poetry. With 'The World and the Cave', Hans Teerds opens the conversation by examining the philosophical thinking of Hannah Arendt and the literary imagination of Jose Saramago, foregrounding the political nature of architecture. His article is based on the observation that Arendt's writings, although not on architecture, are rich in spatial and architectural references, with metaphors and concepts such as 'the space of appearance', which offer us a new way to discuss issues of politics and public space. Teerds explains how such philosophical concepts can be fruitful as a frame to understand the possibilities of architecture. In order to illustrate Arendt's reflections, he selectively discusses passages from Saramago's novel *The Cave* (2000). Based on this connection, he offers the readers conceptual and contextual transpositions that suggest new strategies to think about the political nature of any architectural intervention.

In 'Fidelity and Freedom in the Theory of Adaptive Reuse', Koenraad Van Cleempoel suggests transpositions from poetry and literary criticism to rethink issues of adaptive reuse in architecture. His article sets off with a careful look at the existing bibliography that connects the two disciplines. It then expands the existing discourse by looking into the essays 'The Task

of the Translator' (1921) by Walter Benjamin and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919) by TS Eliot. In doing so, Van Cleempoel draws parallels between translating as an act of re-writing, and adaptive reuse as the act of architectural re-appropriation. He carefully unpacks two paradoxes inherent to the connection between poetry translation and architectural reuse. Working through these two paradoxes, he connects ideas that emerge through the thinking of Benjamin and Eliot with exemplary case studies of adaptive reuse, offering new interpretations to this aspect of the practice of architecture.

The issue continues with two pieces inspired by dystopian literary writings that can prove meaningful in discussing the practices of both architecture and art. Architect Jana Culek proposes a comparative analysis between the dystopian novel *We* (1921) by Yevgeny Zamyatin and the architectural utopian project *Metropolisarchitecture* (1927) by German architect Ludwig Hilberseimer. Following Caroline Levine's expanded definition of form to include patterns of sociopolitical experience, Culek examines the architectural project and literary work on a social and spatial level. Produced in Europe in the same time period, the two pieces discuss similar spatial forms, as she meticulously presents. She concludes her analysis by exploring the fact that while both pieces are based on the same spatial forms, one author viewed his project as utopian while the other imagined a dystopian future.

Maria Finn, on the other hand, offers a different reading of literary utopias and how they might inspire spatial imagination. An artist herself, she sets off from a personal fascination with empty lots in urban environments, pieces of land left undefined and undeveloped. In her attempt to create a vocabulary and a method to approach such unique sites – which she perceives as distinct contemporary utopias – she turns to two novels from the utopian literature genre. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) and Ernest Callenbach's *Ecotopia* (1975) describe natural settings in urban environments, which are more like wild forests or free blooming green areas than perfectly

designed parks. By unpacking relevant quotes and studying conceptual transpositions from literature that can enhance spatial imagination, Finn bases her own artistic work on two undefined terrains in Copenhagen and Malmö.

This issue continues with two pieces that discuss cities and literary language as a way to reconsider architectural imagination. Literary theorist Kris Pint examines how transpositions from literary theory and literature can redefine the spatial imagination of architecture criticism, thus offering alternative readings of established historical views. He questions the prevalent architecture critique of Brazil's capital as one of the most notable failures of modern urbanism, by resorting to the literary text 'Brasilia', written by Clarice Lispector (1974). The text is a fascinating account of the Brazilian writer's visits to the city over the course of a decade. Rich in metaphors linking visual to auditory sensations, the literary piece offers an understanding of the place's multi-layered nature, transmitting both feelings of confusion, anger and fear, as well as admiration, awe and existential transformation. Pint unpacks the many poetic metaphors of the text with fascinating precision, aided by Julia Kristeva's literary theory on the 'semiotic'. He concludes by offering a new architecture critique of the famous modernist urban project.

Moving from Brasilia to New York, Maria Gil Ulldemolins looks into the American metropolis and the topic of domesticity, through a lesser-known work of art by famous French sculptor Louise Bourgeois. It is a little book titled *He Disappeared into Complete Silence* that contains nine parables and nine corresponding prints, all produced by Bourgeois herself. As Gil Ulldemolins demonstrates, the artist manifests a physical and emotional city through the parables, coming to terms with her new domestic identity, while exploring how gender, language and space relate to each other. Through a close look at the short parabolic writings, the author suggests

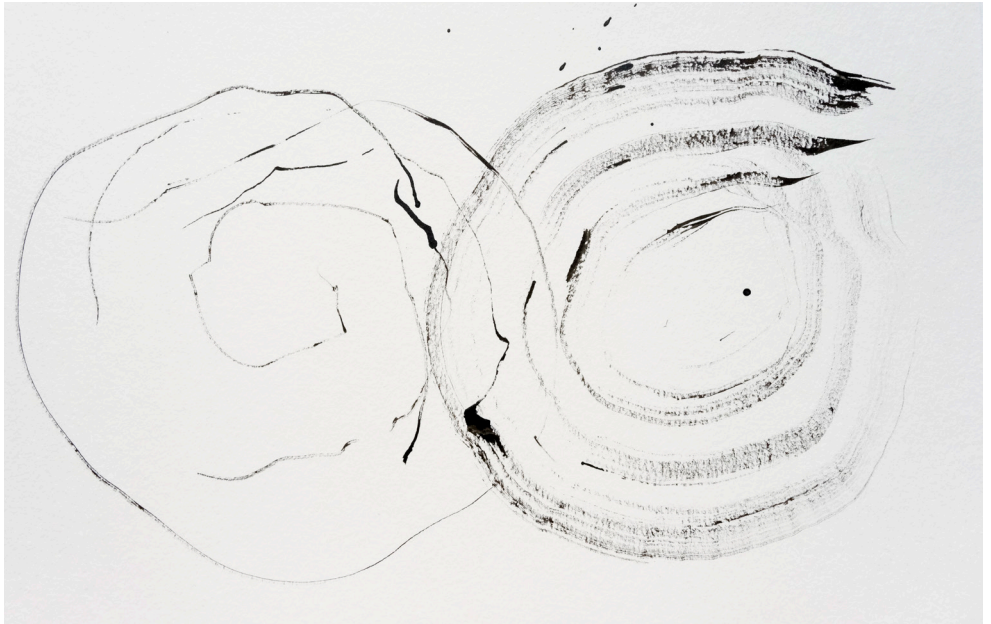
that transpositions of a conceptual nature are fruitful for the development of spatial imagination.

This fourth issue of *Writingplace* journal comes to an end with a piece presenting an insight in choices and strategies of imagination. Architect and educator Jorge Mejía Hernández sets off from the conviction that spatial imagination in architecture involves or envisions the technical knowledge necessary for the materialization of a built project. To highlight the importance of this technical side of spatial imagination, he turns to the art of moviemaking and discusses a little-known essay by Colombian author Andrés Caicedo. In this essay, Caicedo divides moviegoers into four different groups, based on the level of interest in understanding the technical complexities that bring a scene, or a whole movie, into being. Drawing from these categories, Mejía examines the role of technique in the architect's work, and its importance in the way we study and discuss architecture. He moreover employs this cinematographic taxonomy to contemplate his own education as an architect, and to understand the way different types of users engage with architecture and identify possible methods in developing a designer's spatial imagination.

The editors and contributors of this issue, share the conviction that spatial imagination – this elusive muse of creative thinking – deserves our immediate focus and painstaking study. This issue is a step towards what we hope will become a substantially growing body of bibliography on the topic in the near future. In an era when architects and urban designers are being called on to offer viable answers to pressing and time-sensitive spatial conditions, from the overurbanization of the built environment to climate change, spatial imagination is turning out to be one of the most promising ways to engage with the built world in a thoughtful, unique and creative way.

- 1 Italo Calvino *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, translated by Patrick Creagh (London: Vintage, 1996), 48.
- 2 William Whyte, 'How Do Buildings Mean? Some Issues of Interpretation in the History of Architecture', *History and Theory* 45/2 (2006), 153.
- 3 David Spurr, 'An End to Dwelling: Reflections on Modern Literature and Architecture', in: Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (eds.), *Modernism* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2007), 469-486.
- 4 Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 15-38.
- 5 This SRN is funded by the FWO (Research Foundation Flanders). It was launched in 2017 and is hosted by the research groups 'Architectural Cultures of the Recent Past' (ARP) and 'Architecture, Interiority, Inhabitation' (A2I) of the Department of Architecture, KU Leuven (Belgium), acting together as core research unit under the coordination of Rajesh Heynickx (Head), Fredie Floré and Ricardo Agarez. The core team at the Department of Architecture, KU Leuven develops the SRN, together with ten national and international partners. See: <http://www.arp-kuleuven.be/projects/texts-~buildings-dissecting-transpositions-in-architectural-knowledge-1880-1980/>.

Spatial Imagination



'Walking & Flying', drawing by Sanne Dijkstra, 2020, 42 x 21 cm, ink on paper, drawn with a tree branch and a feather. Made for Writingplace Journal #4.

In this drawing by Sanne Dijkstra, two entities with varying density and weight are entering each other's orbit. A universe of new forms looms. The contributions in this issue, all devoted to the interaction between spatial and literary imagination, position themselves in this yet untapped area. They detect and dissect how architecture may be stamped out by insights from other creative fields and how their discourses can be steeped in a built environment. By doing so, they map out the specific ways in which literature, the arts and architecture collide into harmony or dissent.