

writinG urban places

Klaske Havik and Susana Oliveira

'Cities were always like books to me, each street a page, each building a sentence, and the people, the characters who populated the pages, bringing the story to life with their hopes and dreams.'

Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind*

The special issue of *Writingplace Journal*, *Writing Urban Places: New Narratives on the European City*, marks the culmination of an international research network that delved into the intricate interplay between communities, urban spaces and narratives. At its core, this endeavour introduced an inventive approach aimed at deepening our comprehension of urban communities, their dynamics and their rootedness, all through the lens of narrative methodologies. As chairs of this network, we are thrilled to present a collaborative publication that reflects and reimagines the ways we perceive urban spaces and narratives. This collection gives an account of the dynamics of this network of academics, which consists of over 175 individuals from 35 different European countries and a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. As such, the issue offers a conclusion to the *Writing Urban Places* COST Action while also, hopefully, providing a springboard for further reflections and discussions on urban narratives, and the role these could play in spatial developments in the European city.

Central to this network is the acknowledgment of the value embedded in local urban narratives. These narratives, brimming with insights into the sociospatial behaviours, perceptions and aspirations of citizens, serve as a wellspring of knowledge. This initiative endeavoured to articulate a range of literary techniques that harmonize with various spatial disciplines. By weaving together scholarly investigations from the realms of literary studies, urban planning, architecture and other related practices, the project sought to align its findings with the progressive urban revitalization policies that are

currently unfolding in medium-sized European cities. *Writing Urban Places* drew from a legacy of rigorous investigation within diverse preoccupations – including those of our network members, whose work on the meeting point between architecture and literature has been the point of departure for this initiative.¹ By uniting the realms of literary studies with the domains of urban planning and architecture, this network hoped to offer another reading of the contemporary city, and to highlight the nuances of local urban cultures in a European context. Through a range of activities – which will be addressed in detail in this volume – the network aimed to bring together various concepts related to urban narratives, to examine reading and writing techniques for urban narratives, and to apply, test and evaluate these techniques in concrete urban realities of a diverse series of European mid-size cities. By these means, we hoped to gain a nuanced, locally relevant understanding of urban settings that would consider the viewpoint of residents and users – local communities with their own relationship to places and their own customs, memories and dreams about their surroundings. Our premise was that such a perspective could be incorporated into spatial policies and urban and architectural design, and eventually help shape cities in more locally specific and socially meaningful ways.

The first part of this volume presents the outcomes and reflections of the four working groups in which this network was organized: communication, theory, methodology and fieldwork. While this basic structure led our activities, the four teams worked together within a thematic framework, which provided a starting point for our investigation into this vast field of urban narratives. This *Writing Urban Places* framework was built upon three themes: meaningfulness, appropriation and integration.² The dimension of *meaningfulness* endeavours to equip local communities and professionals with the tools to enhance their comprehension of their built environment. By tapping into narratives that illuminate the significance of urban spaces, this facet enriches our understanding of the spaces we inhabit. At the heart of the second theme, *appropriation*, lies the idea of empowering communities

to project their emotions and experiences onto their physical surroundings. By doing so, communities establish a profound connection with their urban environment, fostering a sense of ownership and agency. The third theme, *integration*, is centred on the capacity of narrative strategies to create common ground among communities. Based on the principles of meaningfulness and appropriation, spatial strategies derived from the study of local narratives may bridge divides and cultivate shared spaces within the urban fabric. In the working groups, these themes were addressed in theoretical and methodological discussions, and were further explored through a series of case studies in European cities.

The series of reflections by the working groups opens with the article ‘Placing Urban Writing’, by Jorge Mejía Hernández and Onorina Botezat, leaders of the working group dedicated to communication. Pondering on the role of stories as a means of exchange, their contribution brings forward the hypothesis that narrative means could bring together the aspects needed to strive for such meaningful, appropriable and integrative built environments, and goes on to question with whom the knowledge that is present in such narratives could be shared, and how. The realization that all participants in the network are not only scholars in their distinct fields, but also users and inhabitants of urban places who have their own stories related to their environment, opens up a potential for stories to be shared on different levels: both academically, and towards a general public. Conversations with network members about their personal urban experiences led to a reflection on narrative techniques, such as sense, sequence and proportion, and their importance for the development of urban places.

The core objects of our study were European medium-sized cities, as we provisionally called them, with their blend of historical significance, contemporary innovation and community intimacy. Cities that may be overlooked in urban studies and in literature, but still accommodate many local narratives that are less widespread and internationally known. The contribution by

working group 2, led by Sonja Novak, Angeliki Sioli and Giuseppe Resta,³ critically addresses this notion of the ‘mid-size’ city, and proposes the term ‘intermediate’ instead. The chapter introduces, through descriptions by different members of the working group, a series of conditions of intermediate cities, such as ‘the parochial realm’, ‘perceptual coherence’, ‘walkable distances’ and ‘fragmentability’.

Writing Urban Places envisioned a process that paired investigation with implementation. Working group 3, bridging theoretical exploration and fieldwork, conducted an exploration of narrative techniques articulated within spatial and literary practices. The contribution by Carlos Machado e Moura and Dalia Milián Bernal⁴ narrates the process towards a repository of methods, a collaborative project that took multiple forms, and resulted in the Repository book,⁵ presenting a range of methods and assignments to reveal, understand and construct urban narratives. The article shares how, along this process, the understanding of two key terms used by this working group, narrative and method, was deepened and further elaborated. The authors conclude by sharing their observation that many of the methods proposed and discussed in relation to urban narrative dealt with the complex and rich dimensions of human experience, related to places and communities.

The specificity of the different urban places studied by this network was addressed through fieldwork, as conceptualized, discussed and conducted by working group 4, led by Slobodan Velevski and Luís Santiago Baptista. Through a series of fieldwork events, carried out in the second part of our Action, we uncovered the nuanced dimensions of urban community environments – from sociocultural practices to the intricacies of situatedness within the urban fabric. The article ‘Fieldwork for Writing Urban Places’ discusses fieldwork as a research experience and an experimental spatial practice, and embeds this multifaceted understanding in an overview of fieldwork practices.

This reflection on fieldwork forms the introduction to the next series of articles that delve into the reality of a number of intermediate cities in Europe. The itinerary of activities among European locations – Almada, Limerick, Porto, Tallinn, Osijek, Tampere, Çannakalle, Skopje, Delft, Kamaza and Tirana – transcends the boundaries of academic discourse. Through fieldwork events, training schools and on-site meetings carried out in these cities, they became places of investigation as well as places of our network’s collective experience – a physical common ground. The accounts from these cities, collected in this publication, is a celebration of the collective curiosity and wit that emerge when individuals from diverse backgrounds come together to contemplate, reflect upon and act on urban experience. Each author’s voice – and the reader will encounter them in different narrative formats: poetical, literary, graphic, photographic and cinematic – adds a layer of richness to our understanding of these cities, revealing insights that are as affectionate as they are analytical.

The accounts of urban experience offered here may be seen as evidence of the power of collective exploration, the vitality of storytelling and the significance of places that forge connections between the past, present and future. We extend our gratitude to the contributors, colleagues and friends who have shared their expertise, experiences and passions, making this project a reality. It was truly a surprising effect, that this project caught the attention of and captivated such a diverse group of people, of different ages, backgrounds, countries and circumstances – who reacted with enthusiasm and creativity to many of the challenges of this project. We envisage that the results of these researches and the convergence of the long, turbulent and creative lifetime of our network, its experiences, events, publications and, above all, people, will build a ground and a framework to think and plan for the future. This collection is an invitation to the young scholars in the network to initiate spin-offs and new projects. The knowledge and energy that we’ve been producing together can be used to inform future projects and initiatives, which can help further build and shape cities.

Finally, this publication is not merely a conclusion to a research network; we hope it stands as proof of the potential of narratives to shape our urban environments, enrich our experiences and foster cohesion within the communities that inhabit them.

- 1 The team of proposers consisted of scholars in architecture and literature who had already been working on the topic extensively. Two conferences were crucial in establishing collaborations that led to the *Writing Urban Places* COST Action. Susana Oliveira organized, with Pedro Gadanho, the first conference on architecture and fiction *Once Upon a Place*, in Lisbon in 2010. At Delft University of Technology, Klaske Havik organized, with Jorge Mejía Hernández, Mark Proosten and Mike Schäfer, the conference *Writingplace, Literary Methods in Architectural Research and Education*, in Delft in 2013. See: Susana Oliveira and Pedro Gadanho (eds), *Once Upon a Place: Architecture and Fiction* (Lisbon: Editora Caleidoscópio, 2013); and Klaske Havik et al. (eds), *Writingplace: Investigations in Architecture and Literature* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2016). For an extensive list of publications on the topic by the network members, please refer to the bibliography page of the network's website: writingurbanplaces.eu/library/bibliography/.
- 2 These three lines of investigation were proposed by Jorge Mejía Hernández. See also the introduction to these themes in the chapter 'Placing Urban Writings' by Jorge Mejía Hernández and Onorina Botezat in this issue. See also: Sonja Novak, Susana Oliveira, Angeliki Sioli and Klaske Havik (eds.) *Writingplace#6 City Narratives as Places of Meaningfulness, Appropriation and Integration*. (Rotterdam: nai010, 2022).
- 3 In the first period of the Action, working group 2 was led by Svava Riesto and Henriette Steiner. In 2020, Sonja Novak and Angeliki Sioli took over their task, later joined by Giuseppe Resta.
- 4 In the first period of the Action, working group 3 was led by Lorin Niculae and Mark Proosten. In the course of the Action, Carlos Machado e Moura replaced Mark Proosten; in a later stage, when Lorin Niculae had to withdraw, Dalia Milián Bernal joined as group leader.
- 5 Carlos Machado e Moura, Dalia Milián Bernal et al. (eds.), *Repository: 49 Methods and Assignments for Writing Urban Places* (Rotterdam: nai010, 2023).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The *Writing Urban Places* COST Action Network has grown over the past 4.5 years to include almost 200 participants – scholars, architects, urban designers, researchers, artists and authors – from 35 European countries. Many of these participants have contributed to the network in one way or another at some point during its existence. The impressive body of work we have produced, and of which this special issue is only a sample, reflects the knowledge, expertise, experience, creativity and collaborative capacity of the participants in *Writing Urban Places*, to whom we are immeasurably grateful. Without the effort and work of all the dedicated contributors, this special issue would not exist. Thank you also to all those who gave us permission to use their images, drawings, photographs, travelogues and quotes, which now illuminate these pages.

While the present publication gathers contributions from a group of participants, as previous *Writingplace* journal issues did, the network could not have been built and kept alive without the input and collaboration of many. First and foremost, our gratitude goes to our excellent Core group, with whom we have developed all our activities, engaged in lively discussions during our many meetings, face-to-face and many more online, and whose energy and dedication endured even through the challenges of the Covid pandemic: Jorge Mejía, Onorina Botezat, Sonja Novak, Angeliki Sioli, Giuseppe Resta, Carlos Machado e Moura, Dalia Milián Bernal, Slobodan Veleviski, Luís Santiago Baptista, Kinga Kimic and Marcel Pikhart.

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Having an idea and turning it into a book is as hard as it is exciting. Turning it into several books, webinars, films, drawings, workshops, meetings, training schools and conferences within a huge international network has been as challenging as it has been rewarding. We would like to personally thank all the people we have had the opportunity to meet, work with, talk to, discuss, collaborate with and witness their creative growth – thank you for being the inspiration, power and substance of our network.