

# *Views on Delft*

Around 1661, Johannes Vermeer painted what has become one of the most famous city views: the *View of Delft*. The city of Delft is depicted from across the water of the River Schie. We see the city as a collection of brick buildings with lower and higher towers, peaking into the sky, and being reflected in the water of the river. The light looks alive: despite the clouds it is bright, setting the buildings of Delft and the riverbank in the foreground in a palpable warmth.

Delft, an intermediate European city in the province of South Holland, between The Hague and Rotterdam, has featured quite prominently in Dutch city narratives, partially thanks to Vermeer's paintings, which showed fragments of both spatial and social characteristics of the city in the seventeenth century. In the same period, biologist Anthoni van Leeuwenhoek experimented with lenses and built a microscope, which led to the discovery of the micro-world of cells and bacteria. The city's small streets, the canals, the church towers and the market squares still remind us of the times of Vermeer and Van Leeuwenhoek. But Delft today, as a centre of trade, knowledge and art, is a very vibrant city, with the University of Technology as one of its most celebrated contemporary inhabitants. The TU Delft is recognized around the world for educating progressive thinkers and innovators in varied engineering fields, while its Faculty of Architecture has raised, and keeps raising, inspired generations of architects and designers.

As Delft is the city where this *Writing Urban Place* network originated, and where many members of the network have lived, studied or lectured, or are still doing all the above, we have asked our Delft-related colleagues for their views on Delft, painting for our readers, in words, their accounts of the sociospatial characteristics of this city, their relationship with the water, their favourite urban places, their personal *Views of Delft*.

## A View of Delft: Reflections of Memory and History on Water

Fatma Tanış

The lights of the hanging colourful bulbs blend with the smooth waves of the green canal in Delft. This canal is known as the Schie, a waterway that connects the Maas River to the North Sea through the delta, passing by medieval port cities in South Holland. Delft was known for its trade, brewery and pottery industries. Famous Delfts Blauw pottery has been produced since the seventeenth century: porcelain decorated with scenes from the Netherlands, as well as figurative depictions, can be found on Delftware and tiles. These small tiles of 15 x 15 cm have travelled to other cities and can also be seen on the streets of Cherbourg in France, for instance.

The branches of the river give a hint about the historical role of the Schie: Rotterdamse Schie, Delfshavense Schie, Schiedamse Schie and Delftse Schie – where I am now. A barge is perpendicularly tied with braided ropes to the quay. Wooden benches are aligned well together with long tables as an extension of a restaurant. Not only does the boat provide an enveloping atmosphere for those who enjoy their cold drinks on warm summer days, but it also urbanizes the canal, just like the other fancy boats anchored permanently on its sides. In one of them, a family is having their dinner. Being at the intersection of canals, that are in fact streets on water, one could say this is another Delft square.

As I looked across the canal, an old vessel caught my eye. It appeared to have been abandoned here for some time. It was reminiscent of the boats depicted in Vermeer's *View of Delft*. Coincidentally, it was also positioned almost exactly where its predecessor was in the mid-seventeenth-century painting. The painting offers a glimpse into history with its depiction of a

city wall made of bricks (which likely inspired the name of Zuidwal street), a single arched bridge flanked by prominent buildings, and a canal leading to the city centre, where churches can be seen. The towers of the old and new churches, along with the steep red roofs of houses, create the city's skyline. How powerful a frame it is, making you explore further into Old Delft. How was life back in those days? While wandering in the seventeenth century, a voice brought me back to the moment: *Heeft het gemaakt?*

## Around the Schie

Angeliki Sioli

This is what we call the evening walks with our dog, around the long wide canal that connects Delft and Rotterdam. 'Around the Schie', we usually decide when the wind is not hostile, and Caldonia, our Louisiana bluetick hound who braces any kind of weather, follows willingly. We start at Abtswoudsebrug, the bikers' rotating bridge, and head up north facing the city centre. The first green spot on the right of the route dictates a stop. Caldonia takes in as many smells as possible before adding her own olfactory prints to the place. We continue parallel to the canal, with the water on our left, in front of tall, impressive waterfront multiplexes, until we hit Scheepmakerij. Here the lower single-family homes change the landscape. If their lights are on, glimpses of the residents' private lives are reflected on the water, shedding their light on ducks and occasional rowers below. Our next stop is usually Willemijn's house. Caldonia pulls us forcefully towards her and her husband Maurice when they happen to stand at their entrance door. We stop, we chat, we occasionally have a glass of wine, and we keep walking. A few metres further down the road we get a glimpse of Kapelsburg, the harbour and south water-entrance to the old city. There are benches, an overlook for smokers or young lovers.



Fig. 1. We cross the water over Hambrug.

We turn with the canal and head straight, cross the water over Hambrug (Fig. 1), where Caldonia sometimes stops to look at the ducks gathered around the old steel structure.

Then we start circling our way around the harbour. The expanse of the Schie and the horizon soon take over the view on our left (Fig. 2). When there is sun, every pass here is a golden hour to bask in. Caldonia shares the feeling. It is here where she often stops to do her frantic swirls around herself, pausing only to ask for some caressing. We call it the 'loving spot' and we all crouch down and readily indulge.

The impressive building of Huszár protects our embraces from a distance, knowing we will be walking by its side in a few minutes, and then immediately finding ourselves at the Vermeer spot. This is where Vermeer painted his famous *View of Delft*. A contemporary public art installation commemorates the historic location but falls short in communicating the power of the view itself, even more of the painting. So do the garbage and recycling bins besides the location marker. Behind the installation lies an open green



Fig. 2. The expanse of the Schie and the horizon in the evening.



Fig. 3. Nearing the end of our walk we cross Abtswoudsebrug and wave good night to the crooked belfry of Old Jan.



Fig. 4. 'In Delft, 3 March 2020'.

field where Caldonia runs around, unless the weather is too wet or cold. This is our last stop along the way. Soon we find ourselves on the other side of Abtswoudsebrug, where we first met the Schie. Crossing it signals our goodnight to the city, the water, the outdoors. The crooked belfry of Old Jan responds to our waves, or so we want to believe (Fig. 3). The sound of the door locking behind us ends our evening walks. Caldonia discreetly curls up in her bed and soon starts whistle snoring in her unique way. Whether she dreams of the smells 'around the Schie' or her beloved Louisiana back home, is something we will never really know.

## Bridging

Aleksandar Staničić

These days I've developed a routine. The first thing I do after getting up is to go to my window on the second floor of the former Physics Department building – now a DUWO students' residence – and just look at how the Sint Sebastiaansbrug is being rebuilt. Before switching on the coffee pot, or even checking my emails, I just stand there for scores of minutes and observe workers swarming the construction site, heavy loaded trucks coming and going down the Kanaalweg, and the new bridge appearing slowly, slowly, in front of my eyes. It is a sublime experience, like constantly reliving Kafka's *The Bridge*, but in slow motion and in reverse.

The canal that the bridge-to-be is trying to conquer is an equally impressive feat of engineering, linking the two important Dutch cities The Hague and Rotterdam. This particular stretch marks the southern border of the old city of Delft and connects the best ice cream shop in town, 'J.H. Beart ijs' on the north-east bend, with the place on south-west bend, the Zuidkolk, from where Johannes Vermeer painted his famous *Gezicht op Delft* (View

of Delft). Across the canal, humbling fortress-like walls of the former power plant are trying to conceal the old city centre that sprawls beyond it, while on the opposite side I can sense – although I cannot physically see it – the heavy presence of the Faculty of Architecture building.

This particular morning is slightly different, though. It is 9:00 a.m. and I am already in my suit, though I don't wear suits that often. There's also a palpable tension in the air, and not the kind that is caused by dismayed citizens trying to navigate their way through the construction site and congested parking lot in order to reach the Vakwerkhuis for their morning coffee. Today I am having the most important interview of my life, in an effort to make long-term personal and professional bridges of my own. What to expect, how will it go? I take one closer look at the site in front of me: foundations are strong, they reach deep all the way to the solid ground; the material is rich and of the highest quality; the supporting structure is well thought-through; the personnel overseeing the work is skilled and experienced; the goals are set high but achievable. One deep breath before I go. Thank you, Sint Sebastiaansbrug.

## Evenings at the Koornmarkt and Beestenmarkt

**Klaske Havik**

I used to live in one of those old canal houses on the Koornmarkt, with eight other students. We were a close group, sharing much of our lives together for several years. In the evenings, usually someone would come up the three stairs to my attic room – a room with big curved wooden beams and small windows on three sides, offering views of the roofs of Delft – and knock on my door: let's go for a drink in town! We would walk, the three, four or five of us, towards one of the nearby cafés: Wijnhaven or Tango. Late in the evening, there was hardly any traffic, and we would walk next to each other in the full breadth of the Koornmarkt street. Our footsteps on the brick pavement and our voices were the only sounds in the street.

Apart from the university, where we spent most of our time, the cafés were important in our everyday life in Delft; they formed a social structure in the city, as they were the places where we often gathered. Each of them had their own crowd. We enjoyed these bars not only as consumers, but also as employees – we worked in kitchens and served on terraces to support our studies. I used to work at Kobus Kuch at the Beestenmarkt, the square that used to be an animal market. Now, chairs and tables occupy the elevated square between the platanus (sycamore) trees from spring until late autumn, and on summer evenings the sound of the chitter and chatter of people fill the space between the trees. The most notable moments at the Beestenmarkt were those late summer nights. After the closing hour of the bar, after the last guests had departed, I would close the wooden window blinds at the façade and clean the terrace, stacking chairs and tables. Suddenly, that space between the platanus trees was mine alone, the square was silent, breathing night.

## Savouring the Streets

Holly Dale

‘Do you still have some space for dessert?’ I ask, hoping he will say yes.

It is late May, and the young leaves on the trees are unravelling above us. The old trees stand tall between the road and the canal on the Voorstraat, the low evening light dances between the leaves and onto the water.

As we approach the Poelbrug, I can see the queue of people crossing over the bridge. At the front of the line, I recognize the flag of De Lelie blowing gently in the breeze. People wait eagerly, midday or dusk, from May to October for De Lelie’s homemade ice cream. On a hot day, the queue can be so long it would cross the Voorstraat, go over the bridge, extend through the small square beside the Oude Kerk and end down the narrow alley behind it.

It is still early in the year, so we can join the queue in the square at the end of the bridge. We stand encased by brick all around us, the brick of the monumental old church to our back, all dishevelled and wonky. The straight and structured brick patterns on the ground flow over the water to the other side, meeting modest shops with small apartments above. At the base of the shops, the brick folds up the walls in different shades of red, each shade revealing a different moment in time.

There is a calm excitement around; we watch groups of people moving in and out of the city centre. Groups of students laugh and holla as they cycle by, friends piled up on their bikes. The old bike frames shake and rattle as they roll over the brick streets. The sound of rolling suitcases echoes as tourists make their way wearily to the train station. A family carrying sleeping children gently walks home from dinner.

We are nearly at the front of the queue, and I am standing on my tiptoes to read the flavours in the small shop front. ‘Which flavour will you pick?’



## A Garden of Techne

Willie Vogel

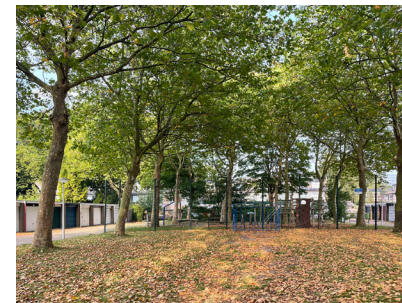
Two palm trees form a gate. While going through, the smell of lavender meets you. A bit further, two old ticketing ladies greet you. Some small ceramic and metal works are exhibited just before you enter the Botanical Garden. The 2.5 hectares of diverse greenery is situated just outside the waterways enfolding the city centre of Delft, between the old university buildings. Initiated as a ‘Cultural Garden for Technical Crops’, it makes me wonder what could be so ‘technical’ about crops. In the greenhouses, a technical invention themselves, a wide variety of cacti and jungle plants are grown. Some of them get a little usage explanation at the end of the route. Reading technical as *techné* – as a craft or making – this botanical garden is the result of a long careful act. I look at the gardeners with their wheelbarrows, spades and shovels as extensions of themselves. Do their craft and knowledge, plus the crops, form the technicity of this cultural garden?

Herbs, flowers, trees and mosses all have nametags. The same goes for a big rosemary plant, some different varieties of sage and some types of mint. Around the little pond, it is serene and some chairs invite you to sit down. This relatively small garden, an oasis during warm summers, does not only teach the gardeners the *techné* of maintenance. Even I learned, while coming here regularly during study hours or on weekends, a certain craft of pause and stillness. Maybe the Garden of Technical Crops initiated by Gerrit van Iterson in 1917 is in fact not merely related to the 'technical' university. Perhaps this cultural garden is the place where technology is not only seen as mechanical equipment, but allows us to reflect on the *techné*, skills and craft, that technology brings in the dynamic interaction of our bodies with our environment. With fresh cheeks and some space in my mind, I leave the garden. I greet the gardeners, the ladies at the entrance and take a little branch of lavender with me.

## A Wooded Spatial Sequence: Verzetstrijdersbuurt

Saskia de Wit

Besides the walk from the train station to the campus, I don't really know Delft that well. So when I visited the Verzetstrijdersbuurt, a large residential area from the 1960s, very similar to any other housing area built in the Netherlands in the same period, I was kind of lost at first. It could have been anywhere. Only when I stepped away from the streets to explore it from the margins, a sequence of loosely defined courtyards at the backside of the low-rise housing, did its unique qualities unfold. I was surprised to discover that I could walk from one green space to the next, only occasionally encountering the formal traffic spaces. This green



structure is the realm of pedestrians and animals, separated from the functionally determined urban space. Surrounded by garden fences and sheds, low and inconspicuous, these spaces are defined by the mature trees inside, which, rather than forming a ubiquitous green blanket, provide distinctive spatial, formal and experiential qualities to each individual space.

In one courtyard I found myself on a field framed by a back street and garages, under a 'ceiling' formed by a regular grid of plane trees. After crossing the Wilhelminalaan, with its short 'colonnade' of alder trees, a second courtyard was framed by a 'bosquet' of dense shrubs below a mixture of trees: a living wall enclosing an introverted outdoor room. Next to it a 'thicket' of mixed trees and tall shrubs forms a closed wall from the outside, but unlike the bosquet it is dense and impenetrable on the inside, providing shelter to blackbirds, sparrows, tits, hedgehogs, mice, spiders and all sorts of other non-human species, complementary to the bosquet in terms of spatial experience, use and accessibility. A narrow bridge crosses the water line that divides this neighbourhood from the next. On the other side of the bridge a line of alders and birches forms a loose and transparent 'curtain', in dialogue with the impenetrable thicket on the opposite bank.

I could still perceive the traces of the original design: an alternation of tree lines and squares of trees around an open centre. But 60 years later this simple spatial construction has diversified into a gradient from clear to ambiguous, from simple to diverse. The (probably unintentional) effects of different expressions of growth and maintenance has led the canopy to close and develop into a roof in the northern courtyard, joining with the underlayer and developing into a wall in the southern courtyard, forming a diverse and specific spatial sequence with a rich palette of social and ecological possibilities.

## Westerkwartier

**Jorge Mejía Hernández**

At first, I thought our next-door neighbour didn't really want to move here. Probably that's why she was a bit grouchy for some time, complaining about our 'Spanish parties', as she called them. Then I noticed she'd become friends with the other old woman across the street, and she never complained again. Now she receives our mail when we're not home. That other older lady across the street takes care of the kid who lives with his mom. Like most children here he goes to school on the other side of the outer canal, as it's called. You see them all leaving around eight to be there on time, quarter past; turn the corner, cross the bridge, left turn again, and into the square in front of the school.

While my mom remembers many things of the year they spent in Delft back in the 1960s, my dad says that his most beautiful memory was seeing how loved Dutch kids were. 'He's right,' I think on that square. Probably that's why it broke my heart to see the woman from a few houses down the street bald after her chemo. 'She's so young, so sweet, so decent,' I thought, 'and her kids are so small.' Her husband is a schoolteacher, I've heard. Not sure what the guy next to them does for a living, but he organized everyone to buy a long ladder to fix the roofs and clean the windows, and then made sure that the municipality did not cut our beautiful trees. This is the only street with trees in the western quarter, as it's called.

Our Chilean neighbours also have long lunches in their backyard on summers, and there's a new, much younger couple at the end of the block who throws real parties at night. The man looks South Asian, so I wonder what our next-door neighbour calls their gatherings. Our street was built in the late 1930s, so almost a century ago, and is named after a Carthusian monk, as there was an old charterhouse here. Recently a few men came and changed the whole sewer system in just a few weeks. They



found some ruins of the old monastery and had to call an archaeologist from the municipality. Now we have brand new brick herringbone pattern pavement on the street, and neatly done sidewalks paved with concrete tiles. While the construction was going on, all the boys in the street stared for hours out their windows. Besides my neighbours' love for their kids, it might be that my most beautiful memory of Delft is seeing men do simple things very, very well.

1536  
1632  
2023

#### Elena Perez Guembe

While waiting for a friend in the enchanted Delft, I read on a façade 1536, and my mind starts flying. I am suddenly transformed into a passer-by, standing in the middle of the street, who curiously looks at the inauguration of a recently finished building. Not without feelings of estrangement I try to understand what I see. Perhaps a bit 'too new', or a bit 'extravagant'? . . . All is fine. There are many forms of being in the world and not all will be known to



me. Thank God! Isn't this side of life fascinating? I look at the corner, trying to find something more familiar that would make my imaginary me feel at home. I see the entrance to the main square, and visualize a market, cows, shit, and mud, wet and cold. I see strong women lifting buckets, pouring milk with love. The same ones Vermeer would have been acquainted with since he was a kid. A little two floor brick building is bowing towards the street, kindly inviting me to enter. His hat is similar to mine. I gently bow my head back at him with a smile, lifting my hat a tiny bit entering into the multitude with joy.

Witold Rybczynski says that during the Dutch Golden Age, people used to dress like their grandparents. Calvinism was the state religion and exercised a major influence on everyday life. They 'admired saving, frowned on conspicuous spending and naturally evolved conservative manners'.<sup>1</sup> So Vermeer, who was born around a hundred years after 1536, might have dressed like my imaginary me. Perhaps he was even my height. The people in his paintings, portrayed with so much love, look small and 'fatty'. Not because they were, but according to Rybczynski, because of the many layers of clothes they used to put on themselves. Dutch people know how to dress for the cold weather. All the same, they look strong and 'squarish', more connected to the earth and most likely to the farming life. Home door-frames from paintings and from my little brick building friend also seem to be much smaller than current Dutch standards. Some men of today are thin and long, like giant reeds flowing in the wind. Now everything seems to be more fluid. I look at what seems to be a self-portrait of Vermeer. He looks quite flamboyant to me though.

The exhibition of Vermeer at the Rijks was sold out months ago. The system crashed when they opened the tickets sale.

*'He's a popular guy,' a Dutch artist friend tells me.*

*'In general, I think Dutch people are very much into art,' he continues.*

*'But Rembrandt died poor!, I replied, amused.  
'Because he was out of fashion. Dutch are very much into fashion.'  
(joyous laughter)  
'You know all about it. You are a very glamorous man.'  
'Haha! Lucky that nobody can smell my underwear'  
(crazy laughter)*

I think I am starting to understand this culture . . .

1 Witold Rybcynski, *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Viking, 1986), 54.

## The Joy of a Sand Street in Delft . . .

**Dorina Pllumbi**

Often, going to the playground means carrying a bag of earthmover toys with us. Lissus, my almost-four-year-old, thinks the little yellow excavators, dump trucks and bulldozers are fun to play with.

'I am a *punëtor*,' he says, in his special language blend, while excited, continuing to dig in a sandpit with his green helmet on. Excavating sand, loading and unloading. What a joy!

On a sunny day of winter, on our way to Olofspark to meet Ariana, his dear friend, we noticed that suddenly, the entire Singelstraat – a typical brick street in Hof van Delft – had turned into a huge prolonged sandpit.

'Wow, what is happening here mom? Wow!'

Other kids that live around are enjoying the exceptional situation.

It is afternoon, and the big excavators are resting after a long workday, but the little earthmovers, operated by little hands, have just started to load and unload some sand here and there. A woman standing on the door of her house looking towards the street tells me that this has been going on already for some days. Her two toddlers are playing with shovels and trucks. She carries her third child in her arms, a cute little baby of a few months.

'They love it,' she says happily looking at her sons. 'I know they will remember these special days. And will miss it when all this will be finished.'

In a city where everything is clean and in order, this is uncommon. Although as a parent, I should normally be concerned with safety first, I must say that I appreciate the openness of this 'construction site'. No impenetrable fences or bold signs to keep us away. It feels as if it was done on purpose; an invitation for all the kids in the neighbourhood to get together. A joyous moment for the little ones to learn and play, and for grownups to socialize while looking at the happy little excavators loading and unloading sand. This brick replacement event, instead of being a burden to the neighbourhood, as one might think, is actually a chance to celebrate change and maintenance as part of life, where kids can participate with their felicity.

'Mom, my three cities are New York, Tirana and Delft,' says Lissus on our way back home.

'In New York, there are big towers and bridges. In Tirana, there are mountains of fruits in the streets. But in Delft there are clocktowers, canals and bricks. And sand streets with big and small excavators.'

## Dear Colleagues,

Jeremy Hawkins

I have to say I was very pleased to have the chance to read your draft of 'Views of Delft', in part because the city has become dear to me over the past couple of years, but also for the pleasure of reading such a collection of personal *Delftse verhalen*. To start with the frame and scope of the overall piece, I think the opening, which superimposes Vermeer's painterly artifact with the lived experience of contemporary Delft, is both vibrant and effective. As a reader, it allowed me to consider a projection into the past, a feeling for representation and aesthetic appreciations of the city, as well as the use of perspective as a device that would carry me through the text. Thanks to this frame, a text in many voices seemed not just as one possible approach among others, but as perhaps the necessary one. What if Joyce had written *Dubliners* about Delft instead?

The range and variety of perspectives throughout the ten sections are broad, but I felt guided by recurring motifs and juxtaposed images that lend to a supple connectivity in the text between sections. I'm thinking, for example, of the frequent appearance of brick, from the ambiances it sets against an evening walk among students in Klaske's recollection, to the mineral flows in Holly's walk, down to precise design patterns, such as when Jorge admires fine workmanship materialized in a herringbone pattern. Oh, and let's not forget how Dorina's piece brings us to what lies beneath the brick!

Of course, it may come as no great surprise that the most prevalent apparent building material in Delft would play a strong role in a text, even if there wasn't a single architect among us. But part of why I think it works well is due the fact that I was not reading about the Platonic form for 'brick', but rather that each mention is specific, situated and embodied, giving a sense of the particular where otherwise it might just be a material category. This connects to my main thought: the strength in this text is the way

that each section offers up particularities of the lives and practices that make you all *Delvenaars*.

I read with a particular thrill for the moments of surprise, the particularities and eccentricities, and the details that make each section unique and individual. Because, in the end, I recognize the Delft I have recently come to love in each and every part of the text, but in a way that has everything to do with these being your specific experiences rather than my own. It's the texture of your experiences that allows me to relate my own. Or maybe another way of putting it is in George Saunders's words, where he says, in discussing a story by Donald Barthelme, that 'the real work of the story' is to 'give the reader a series of pleasure-bursts'. Naturally, you do much more than that in this text – you open up a sense of today's spatial practices in Delft, you share the ways in which you understand and live the city, you make an argument for its relevance in the (European) imaginary, you add to the aura of Vermeer's painting, you start to populate the city's landscape, you construct meanings that don't make it into either the guidebooks or the history books – but I'd like to underline the importance of the pleasure your stories bring, especially with that pleasure being almost entirely coextensive with knowledge production. Whatever I may have known before about Delft, the pleasure of discovering the unexpected-and-yet-familiar situations through your particular visions has definitely informed my understanding of the city. I never stopped for ice cream!

So, if I have any constructive criticism, it would only be to say I could even imagine a few more of these kinds of personal, individual, particular, eccentric and even weird perspectives emerging. Oh, and an observation rather than a criticism, is that I found it really intriguing that so many of the sections make it implicit (and sometimes explicit) that the speaker is from an 'elsewhere' that would stand in strong contrast to Delft, but that the *mise-en-mirroi* was scrupulously avoided. This text brought me back to Delft but in ways that were new to me, and which felt generous in how they share your experiences, your favourite haunts and your thinking. A 'loving spot' indeed!